

Dragons haunt the Silk Road

When the artist Hock-Aun Teh sought inspiration in the Chinese desert, not only nature was inhospitable

LOUDON TEMPLE

MANY before him had travelled the perilous stretch of the old Silk Road in north-west China, searching for an on-the-edge taste of otherworldly adventure, but Glasgow-based abstract expressionist Hock-Aun Teh was well equipped, he believed, to tackle the testing six-week journey alone. A black belt sixth dan in Tae Kwon Do, he felt content that he could handle himself adequately in even the most hazardous of situations.

It was in September last year that he set off alone on what was to become a long, gruelling, and life-changing trek through the remote and inhospitable territory. The 2500-mile journey, much of it on rough terrain, was completed by camel, donkey, bus, and sometimes on foot, leading him to the legendary fringes of the Takla Makan, where shifting sands sweep and mould constantly, invoking strange sounds said to represent the spirits talking.

It's the kind of place that does not take too kindly to inquisitive visitors.

Mistrusted by the fiercely independent Uighur tribesmen – descendants of the nomads who controlled this section of the trade route between the eighth and twelfth centuries – he discovered his ancestry was a distinct disadvantage.

Long since converted to Islam, and today resentful of their Chinese masters, the tribesmen live in isolation, scattered throughout the region and hardened by their constant battle with the merciless elements.

Only weeks before, one group had slain some Chinese incomers. Although born in Malaysia, Hock-Aun Teh is by background and upbringing essentially Chinese, and when his face arrived

on the scene, they did not understand or care when he tried to explain, through use of sign language, that he was an artist from Scotland who only wished to make some sketches.

Colleagues at the university in north-west China, where he regularly lectures, warned him it was "the last place on earth" where any native Chinese would choose to travel.

Failing to grasp the warning for what it was, he trained for the trip by jogging in sand with heavy packs strapped to his back and starved himself, preparing for the worst.

When reality hit, he found himself sleeping rough, enduring extremes of searing heat and chilling cold, and struggling with isolation and fear. When he was not being taunted, he found himself instead alone in the windswept wilderness, sometimes with no human contact for days on end, with all the unexpected terrors that existence brings.

Overwhelmed by the combination of the silence and the landscape – and moved so deeply by the experience – the work which flowed from the trip was more dynamic and revealing than he ever dreamed possible.

His painting, too, will never be the same, says Teh. He usually paints in one session. Once started, there is no going back. Each completed piece is an attempt to harness physical and emotional energy to reveal the essence of an experience.

He had gone to China's most northern province in search of solitude and big, wide-open spaces. That was to have been in contrast with the experience he had two years earlier when he was sent to India to study tigers as part of a commission from Glasgow's Gallery of Modern Art, which has five of his works in its collection.

His time there, he says, sur-



■ TERRIFYING TREK: Hock-Aun Teh was spooked by the legendary Takla Makan desert, where the shifting sands invoke strange sounds said to represent the spirits. He also felt in mortal danger from the native tribespeople

Picture: MARTIN SHIELDS

rounded by such masses of people, made him yearn for the lipside.

"I thought at first that I might go to the North Pole. It was a loss up between that and doing the Silk Road. Before I went I had simply this in mind – riding on the top of a camel watching the sun set on the sand dunes. It was all very romantic.

"When I went, of course, it was nothing like that. It was a million miles away from what I had imagined.

"The first really daunting incident happened when I was taking photographs in a desert village and this guy jumped out from nowhere and put a knife at my throat. He accused me of taking photographs of his family and I tried to explain that I had not; that I was an artist and was only making sketches."

THE most chilling incident occurred in another settlement where, heavily outnumbered and ostracised by the entire community, he was convinced his life was in danger.

"It was the most tricky situation of them all. In another Uighur village, I discovered that, just a month before, they had killed all of the Chinese people. When they saw me they thought, 'oh, another Chinese has dared to come over here', and everyone was looking at me with a hostile attitude.

"In the evening I knocked on every door hoping I would find someone who would put me up for the night. They all slammed the door against my face.

"Later, they sent the children out to steal my things. It was a very uncomfortable few hours. All the big guys were standing watching, laughing.

"What could I do?"

The paintings which emerged on his return, a series entitled *Walking With Ghosts*, have been

delivered in a much bolder and more direct manner than anything he had done before.

Still firmly set against the background of traditional Chinese calligraphy in which he was carefully schooled, they are none the less more explosive and dramatic achievements.

"After coming back from the experience in the desert I found that everything which had been important to me beforehand was suddenly not important any more. I see life differently – it's as dramatic as that – quite profound, in fact.

"It was very tough going and one thing I learned was that I only have one enemy throughout my whole journey, my whole life... me, myself. In the evening when I was exhausted and drained of energy, I told myself 'that's it, I cannot go any further'."

"Then in the morning I would wake up and find the urge had returned to keep on going."

Alone with his troubled thoughts, and forced to contend with the eerie silence, he realises in retrospect that he came back with rich rewards gleaned from the extremes.

"Constantly I was fighting within myself. I am not scared of many things, but in the desert, the silence was quite terrifying. I began to hallucinate late in the morning. I saw dragons in the clouds. It is a difficult thing to explain."

There is no need. The deeply-charged painting which came from that episode, *Seeing a Mirage*, will be shown together with the others inspired from the epic journey when *Walking With Ghosts* opens at the Air Gallery, 32 Dover Street, London W1, on Sunday.

■ The exhibition runs until the end of the month. The work featured can also be found online at www.davies-tooth.com