

Documenting the Buddhas of Aynak

— Written by *John Parrot* On 6th August 2012

Great stories lie in the most unexpected places, but surely a large mining project must be one of the most unlikely. Who would have thought that an area so matter-of-fact, so recondite, so lacking in gloss would produce a real corker. When Brent Huffman read a news report about the copper mining project at Mes Aynak in Afghanistan, a bell started ringing.



The New York Times article suggested that the US military was working to protect the interests of the China Metallurgical Group (MCC), a huge Chinese mining corporation, who were starting new copper mining project in Logar Province of Afghanistan. Huffman is a documentary maker and writer whose work concentrates on social and environmental issues missed by the mainstream media, especially related to China and the country's economic expansion. Here was another under-reported issue that dealt with similar issues to Huffman's 2010 film, *The Colony*, which looked at the Chinese economic immigrants in Senegal.

It soon became clear that there was more at stake than an unusual cooperation between US armed forces and a Chinese corporation. Mes Aynak is one of largest copper deposits on earth, comparable to those in the vast **Zambian Copperbelt** in Central Africa, and it could be a valuable source of wealth for one of the poorest countries in the world. This money could help reduce the country's child mortality rate which is the third highest in the world, increase access to safe drinking water which only 23% of the population currently have access to, and improve the current literacy rate of 24%.

However, resting on the top of these riches is a Buddhist archaeological site of incomparable value. Excavations are revealing a whole city from the Buddhist Kushan period (1st century AD – 3rd Century AD), which includes a fortress, commercial and residential areas as well as several monasteries. As the dig reaches lower levels, they are also finding Bronze Age copper smeltings.

"This whole project is like an onion, you peel back layers and discover new things; it's very complex," Huffman says of his new film, *The Buddhas of Aynak*, over Skype. Just as the archaeologists are revealing more and

more history, Huffman is finding more stories. "When I started this project, I thought the film would be a document of the site. So, at least it exists on film after it's destroyed," he says. However, the film has since increased in scope.

The sheer existence of the site is special in itself. "Also of great interest is just the fact that this ancient Buddhist site has survived so much turmoil. At one point it was actually the site of a Taliban camp. The site's been looted... countless times probably."

Looking at the issue of Chinese economic expansion in the developing world that he examined in his earlier films, Huffman explains that, "Afghanistan represents a really unique example because, especially this area, it is so dangerous." Logar Province is 'Taliban Country' as he puts it, and far too dangerous for any Western company to operate in. One could also add that the involvement of a Western company would also be open to criticism of benefiting from NATO's presence in the country.

"China overall is interested in what the New York Times called 'a trillion dollars of natural resources' in Afghanistan... and Mes Aynak sort of represents their first step." They need the site to work, he says, "so that they can go after resources in other parts of Afghanistan." The scale of the project however means that local people inevitably suffer. They have already forcibly relocated seven villages, which has led to violence. Huffman returns to his colonialism theme, "With colonies, the relationship sours eventually and I think that is already happened."



This brings the up the tricky issue that any documentary maker, especially one who concentrates social issues, has to face: bias. Huffman is clear, "My film is not an anti-Chinese film." He explains that "the Chinese are the easy villains here, for obvious reasons, but what the Chinese are doing is capitalism as usual. They are only interested in the copper as any Western company would be. I think the difference is that they've got the money to do things that the United States could never do in these terrible economic times."

Presenting a balanced perspective is made harder by the fact that the Chinese are reluctant to talk on camera. Finally Huffman managed to film comments from Liu Wenming, a manager for MCC, however it did not come

easy. After being turned down many times, a high ranking official pretty much forced the Chinese to talk and let him film inside their compound. Chinese archaeologists are similarly reluctant to speak.

“You do have very passionate Chinese archaeologists who would like to work at Mes Aynak and would love to help save it,” Huffman explains. Sadly, this is not a simple matter. “Because the MCC is state-owned, to support the site and the archaeological excavations, Chinese archaeologists would have to wage war with the government. In China, that is usually an unwinnable war, and there could be grave consequences.”

Afghanistan, after all, plays a key role in the history of Chinese Buddhism. According to Professor Max Deeg, Buddhist scholar and director of the Centre of the History of Religion in Asia (CHRA) at Cardiff University, the country was especially important because it was the route through which Buddhism entered into Central Asia and from there into China. Some Buddhist teachings made their way into China through Burma and the south western provinces of China – the so-called ‘Southern Route’ – but mostly it flowed in through Afghanistan. Later, Chinese Buddhist pilgrims, such as the famous [Xuanzang](#) (accompanied by [Monkey](#) on the fictional version of his travels), travelled through the country on their way to India.

The ancient kingdoms in what is now south and western Afghanistan, as well as north and eastern Pakistan, are known by scholars as the Greater Gandhara Area. From the 1st Century to the 3rd Century AD, the area was an eclectic mix of peoples and cultural attitudes. In addition to the Buddhism from India (not to mention Persian and Central Asian influences), it is possible to see a clear Greek influence from the successors of Alexander the Great.

Archaeology is especially important for understanding these Gandharan kingdoms. Conflict in Afghanistan has meant that archaeology has been very difficult for the past thirty years. Indeed, the fighting has often led to the destruction of sites, not only by Taliban zealots, but also by thieves hoping to sell looted artefacts on the international art market. The best known example of this are the Buddhist monasteries at Hadda, which in 1970 were described as the most splendid of all the country’s Hellenic and Gandharan sites by British travel writer and archaeologist Peter Levi. Hadda is now largely a series of empty holes.



Philippe Marquis, the French archaeologist leading the dig at the site, [told the Daily Mail](#) that Mes Aynak is “probably one of the most important points along the Silk Road”. According to Dr Cheryl Benard, excavating the site should grant “deep insights into the lives and the cultural and economic development of the inhabitants of this region and their participation in trade, manufacture and the flow of ideas and inventions,” Benard is president of [ARCH International](#), a Washington DC-based NGO working to preserve Mes Aynak and other cultural heritage sites in war-torn areas.

Dr Benard goes on to mention the possibility of really significant finds in the future: “Experts expect that at lower levels – where looters did not yet have access – they will find not only treasure, but also invaluable manuscripts that will explain about the administrative and historic aspects of the city.” So far, no Gandharan manuscripts such as these have survived. Equally tantalising would be the prospect of discovering Buddhist scriptures.

During the 1990s a series of extremely rare [Buddhist scriptures written in Gandhari](#) started cropping up in Western institutions and collections. The British Library acquired the largest group in 1994. It is believed that some of these scriptures were looted from Hadda, while another group was found in Bamiyan. According to Professor Deeg, “these are the oldest Buddhist manuscripts we have.”

The prospect of finding new collections would be extremely welcome. Professor Deeg elaborates on the prospect of new discoveries, “If they find manuscripts, we textual scholars are always jumping up and down if such a thing comes up again. Especially because it gives really new insight into the history of Buddhism.” These manuscripts are finally allowing scholars to see how the earliest Indian Buddhist writings influenced later, predominantly Chinese, Buddhist texts.

“Nonetheless, it isn’t really the Buddhist portion that is the most important,” according to Dr Benard. She goes on to explain that “What is unique here, and would be tragic to destroy, are the more ancient levels below. These hold information about the early history of mining, metallurgy, and about earlier eras of commerce, manufacture and trade routes.”

So, what happens in the UK when an open-pit mine is planned? Because the country is littered with sites of interest to archaeologists, mining companies must take this into consideration. First they have to carry out pre-planning investigations to find out what archaeological remains maybe present on any site they might mine.

At the 342-hectare Shotton Opencast Coal Mine in the north of Northumberland run by the Banks Group, this involved looking at records and aerial photographs and then surveying the site using a magnetometer and digging trenches. Evidence of Iron Age, Anglo-Saxon, and Medieval settlements was found, as well as mining in the 18th and 19th centuries, but these were not judged to be of sufficient importance to stop the development of the mine. However, this process can take several years and if the site is judged to be sufficiently important, it could be given legal protection as a [‘scheduled monument’](#).



In addition to archaeological investigations, mining companies are obliged to run an environmental impact assessment too. Of course, Afghanistan has nothing like the amount of regulation – or density of population – as the UK, (although the country is being given help to improve its environmental monitoring capacity). If they did, it may be that an assessment of the environmental impact of the mine at Mes Aynak would prevent it going ahead. Huffman explains that open-cast mining for copper is destructive to the environment and that “it’s very likely that the site will become a [Super-Fund site](#) – a site that is so toxic that it is advised against even setting foot there.” This opinion is not shared by all mining experts however, who believe the risk of pollution is low.

There is some hope for the Buddhas of Aynak. In order to mine a mineral deposit of this size, an enormous amount of infrastructure is required. A smelter is required to turn the ore to copper, this in turn requires a power station to run it. A railway will also be needed to bring coal to the power station and shift the tons of copper out of the country. Dr Cheryl Benard and ARCH International are hoping that all this preparation will give Dr Marquis and his team enough time to excavate the site.

MCC have said that they will step up their work on the site next year, and it is feared that this will mean archaeology will be halted. If so, Huffman’s film will be completed next year, if not he will continue filming. In the meantime, he will be returning to Afghanistan on 19th August this year.

The documentary has been challenging enough, even without the clock ticking ever louder. To visit Mes Aynak, Huffman has to get permission from a series of Afghan government and police officials. Travelling to the site is also very dangerous. “It’s about a 90 minute drive to get to the site from Kabul and the rocky road has a long history of either angry people in Logar or the Taliban placing landmines overnight and firing rockets at people travelling there.” Now Huffman has a 7-month-old daughter waiting at home, these dangers are even more potent.

The history contained in the ruins at Mes Aynak may have resonance across Asia and even to Classical Europe, but financing the documentary has proved to be difficult too. Huffman explains that, “Western audiences aren’t terribly interested in the cultural heritage of this site; it’s a hard sell to get people to care about it.” He has managed to raise just enough money to fund each trip, and run the project on sheer enthusiasm for the place.

Can a country as poor and war-torn as Afghanistan really afford to preserve Mes Aynak? Insight can be gained from the veteran Afghan archaeologist, Dr Zamaryalai Tarzi, who is currently working at Bamiyan. [Speaking to Al Jazeera](#) he said that, "In Afghanistan archaeology is a luxury, the country needs schools, homes, hospitals, and of course, security. But for a country to complete its national identity, it needs to know about its past glories, and in that sense archaeology is essential." Presumably, when that national identity has taken such a battering for the past thirty three years, this is doubly important.

Meanwhile, Huffman slogs on with his research powered by fascination with a subject. The tussle between the various interests and stories at Mes Aynak is the sort of perfect conundrum that makes for a fascinating documentary. He seems to have struck documentary gold, or rather copper, whether the Buddhas survive or not.

See [The Buddhas of Aynak Facebook page](#).

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Update: If you're interested in supporting the Buddhas of Aynak documentary project, you can contribute using the [Buddhas of Aynak Kickstarter page](#), as featured on [The Washington Post](#) and [Past Horizons](#) websites, also sign the [petition to prevent the destruction of this valuable site](#).