A NOSTALGIC TOUR
ALONG XIJING ANCIENT POSTAL ROAD

Fall is here and with it lingers a hint of memory-evoking nostalgia. Observing the beautiful and magnificent splendor that nature has to offer during this transitional season might make us feel more tranquil and comfortable while looking back on old memories, which are easily roused by the bittersweet atmosphere of autumn.

RICH in historical customs and poetic flavor, the ancient postal roads have something more to offer than just exquisite natural scenery. They have many stories to tell.

A postal road is a road designated for the transportation of postal mails. In past centuries, only major towns had a post office and the roads used by post carriers or mail coaches to distribute mails were particularly important due to their significant societal role.

Ancient postal roads in Guangdong date back to the Qin (221-206 B.C.) and Han (206 B.C.-A.D.220) dynasties. They transported many immigrants and demoted officers, bringing the advanced ideas, technology and culture of Central China to the then-desolate and regressive southern regions.

Xijing Ancient Postal Road in Ruyuan Yao Autonomous County, Shaoguan, is the earliest such road through which the culture of central China entered the Lingnan region. It is also the earliest and longest ancient road that linked Lingnan with the then-capital city according to the historical text “Shiji” (“The Records of the Grand Historian”), the earliest known record of the road.

Xijing Ancient Postal Road was the expressway that linked the ancient capital city with Lingnan. During the Eastern Han (25–220), Sui (581-618) and Tang (618-907) dynasties, they also have a symbolic function, and the very followers of the Buddha (the Dharma) are called a bridge; the acts of compassion by the Buddhist monks was the building of bridges. In the simplest terms, the building of a bridge was an act of compassion, allowing local people to avoid ferry fees or crossing dangerous waters.

Secondly, engineering such a project, especially if pilings needed to be placed in the water, required skill and training, and monks were often better-educated than the general populace. In addition, bridges could be costly, and monks were able to generate cash by performing ceremonies or providing medical and other services, as well as draw upon the resources of their temples.

We find many accounts of travelers in pre-modern China describing bridge projects undertaken by monks.

But beyond all these practical considerations, bridges had a symbolic function. The world as we know it, with all its suffering and confusion, is termed “samsara” in Buddhist teachings. That other state, of unending bliss (or perhaps extinction, or release from suffering) is known as “nirvana.” And between the two stands a river.

And so the teachings of the Buddha (the Dharma) are called a bridge, the acts of compassion by the Buddha’s followers (the Sangha) are also bridges; and the very followers themselves, especially those who achieve the status of Bodhisattvas, are also called bridges.

Perhaps this is why so many temples feature bridges at the entrance, sometimes crossing nothing at all. While these may just be decorative, they also have a symbolic function, as they carry the pilgrim or visitor across from this world into the Buddhist realm of the temple.