

Marga Kreckel & Reinhard Kreckel



Xinjiang and the Eurasian Silk Road

**Historical and political perambulations – in the hope for
better times**

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This translation is dedicated to Marga Kreckel, my beloved wife and co-author, who died in 2024 after a common life of 62 years.

I shall miss her for ever.

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Note on language usage

The Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, located in the far north-west of the People's Republic of China, is an area which, over the centuries, was ruled by many powers. A wide variety of languages and dialects were spoken there and have replaced one another. New ethnic groups have immigrated several times. Existing cultures were partly overlaid by them, partly merged with them. Thus, many languages and writing systems have come and gone in Xinjiang over the course of its long history.

Currently, Uyghur and Chinese are the two dominant (and competing) official languages of the region (see Chapter 10). For most place names and proper names used in Xinjiang today, there are two versions – one Chinese and one Uyghur. However, their transcription into the Latin alphabet is not clearly regulated and has changed several times. As a result, there is a great deal of arbitrariness in German- and English-language text about Xinjiang, on maps, in travel guides, scientific texts and press reports, as well as on the internet. There is no standardized usage.

The exact linguistic transcription of Chinese and Uyghur place names, proper names or terms would be possible, of course. However, it would be completely unsuitable for this book, which was originally aimed at German- and English-speaking audiences. Instead, we have attempted to make the text as reader-friendly as possible, using the expressions and spellings that are most common and understandable to Western readers today. Occasionally, other readings or designations are indicated in brackets.

For example, we refer to the regional capital as Urumqi, not Ürümqi (Uyghur) or Wulumuqi Shi (Chinese), to the Uyghur oasis city of Kashgar, not Kāxgār (Uyghur) or Kashi Shi (Chinese), but we do refer to the predominantly Chinese-speaking city of Shihezi (Chinese), for which no alternative Uyghur name is known. On the other hand, we use the Chinese word Xinjiang, which is now internationally accepted, rather than Sinkiang, which was previously used.

We use the name Mao Zedong for the founder of the People's Republic of China in the currently accepted Pinyin transcription of Chinese, rather than Mao Tse-tung. However, we retain the familiar form for older names, e.g. Chiang Kai-shek, rather than Jiang Jieshi, as he would be called in modern Pinyin transcription.

We do not use diacritical marks in Pinyin spelling (accents for different pitches). They would tend to confuse readers who are unfamiliar with Chinese.

We hope that our readers will understand this pragmatic approach.

This also applies to our pragmatically generic approach to gender differences,. We are, of course, well aware of the manifold forms of discrimination associated with this, and we do not want to infringe on any sensitivities connected with it.

Personal foreword

This book had been planned for a long time. So had our extended trip to Xinjiang in the far north-west of China in autumn 2018. We were well aware of the political sensitivity of our undertaking. We knew that the Uyghur population living in Xinjiang had been under strict surveillance since the bloody clashes in Urumqi in July 2009 and was going through difficult times. Nevertheless, we wanted to go there to see with our own eyes what was actually happening. Above all, we also wanted to write about Xinjiang – a fascinating region that we had studied intensively.

In recent years, anyone interested in politics in Western Europe has read or heard a lot about Xinjiang and the fate of the Uyghur population living there. This is because the Chinese province of Xinjiang has been closely monitored and critically commented on in the Western media for some time now – albeit not always in a very knowledgeable manner. Here, we learn very little about the history, culture and real living conditions in Xinjiang. It therefore made sense to continue Marga Kreckel's series of informative books on politically 'difficult' Islamic travel destinations with this book on Xinjiang, which is informative and critical, but also fair.

At the beginning of 2018, we received reports of a renewed escalation of the political situation in Xinjiang, particularly regarding the internment of hundreds of thousands of Uyghurs in state re-education camps. Knowledgeable friends with good contacts in Xinjiang confirmed this disturbing information. The existence of the camps is no longer disputed by the Chinese government, but is justified on the grounds of the need for terror prevention, vocational training and civic education for the Uyghur citizens of Xinjiang.

Due to the problematic human rights situation, which is leading to increasingly heated public controversy between Western and Chinese media and governments, we were advised not to travel to Xinjiang, as independent reporting would not be possible.

We went anyway in September and October 2018. Police surveillance and digital systems were almost omnipresent there. In the cities, shops and pavements were barricaded with railings, and there were roadblocks everywhere. However, our own safety during the trip was not compromised – perhaps precisely because of this.

We were able to move around fairly freely and take photographs without restriction. However, anything to do with military, police and 'security-related' matters remained strictly prohibited: We couldn't see or photograph anything we weren't supposed to see. That's why we weren't allowed to visit the old royal city of Yarkand. Our local contacts were always cautious. We couldn't talk to them about sensitive topics.

In view of these circumstances, it might have been reasonable to abandon the planned book altogether. Marga Kreckel had faced a similar decision a few years ago with her book on Iran. At that time, too, independent research on the ground was difficult. Nevertheless, she decided to write the book. It met with great interest.

We have now decided to do so again. What we were able to see and experience personally in Xinjiang we supplemented with the wealth of information available to us in the media, on the internet and in international specialist literature. This is documented in detail in the numerous notes and extensive bibliography.

A return trip to Xinjiang planned for autumn 2020 could not take place due to the coronavirus travel restrictions. This book cannot therefore deal with the effects of the corona crisis on the situation in Xinjiang. Nor can we address the effects of Russia's protracted war of aggression against Ukraine, which broke out in February 2022. This war has probably brought to an end three decades of open trade and unhindered travel from Western Europe via Russia to China, and vice versa. This period began with the opening up of China's economy in the 1980s and the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991.

The Chinese 'New Silk Road', which is so important for Xinjiang and connects the Asian Far East with Western Europe by land, is a product of this relatively peaceful era of increasing global integration. At that time, the Iron Curtain that had divided Eurasia for decades had disappeared. It remains to be seen whether it will close again after the 'turning point' in world politics triggered by the war in Ukraine. If that is the case, the newly established overland connections of the 'New Silk Road' between Europe and the Far East are also likely to be affected.

We cannot know all this yet. Our book is therefore a snapshot from the time before the recent major crises. It aims to make the multifaceted history of Xinjiang, with its checkered relations with China and the Western world, understandable and vivid for a Western readership. We are confident that what we have compiled in the following fifteen chapters will remain worth knowing and considering beyond the present day.

In this book, which focuses on the Chinese border region of Xinjiang, we have not only looked at things through Western eyes, but have also tried to take the Chinese perspective into account. We did not want to repeat the old mistakes of the Cold War era, when it was impossible to say anything positive about one's political opponents. The history and culture of China and the people living in Xinjiang are too rich and complex for that. We have respect and curiosity for both.

The recurring political controversies surrounding the situation of the Uyghurs in Xinjiang are not ignored in this book. But they should not dominate the picture to such an extent that there is little else left. Ultimately, our readers must decide for themselves whether, even under the current circumstances, they are interested in forming as independent and nuanced a picture as possible of Xinjiang and its history, or whether they would prefer to wait for 'better times'.

For anyone willing to engage with the complex situation in Xinjiang, the most important political fact is, of course, that Xinjiang, as the 'Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region', is now an integral part of the powerful People's Republic of China, for better or for worse. The Uyghurs are the largest ethnic group in Xinjiang. But there are almost as many Han Chinese living there, most of whom have settled there since the 1950s. It would therefore be wrong to simply view Xinjiang as an Islamic, Turkic-speaking country. That would be like ignoring the fact that the Italian 'Autonomous Province of Bolzano-South Tyrol' belongs not only to the German-speaking Alpine countries, but also, and above all, to Italy.

In other words, Xinjiang today is a land with two cultures but a single nationality. We have tried to explain this in our book without taking sides, but also without glossing over anything. We have therefore taken an interest in all the inhabitants of the region and their living conditions, both indigenous populations and later immigrants and their descendants.

Above all, we have also dealt intensively with the historical background and global political context of Xinjiang, without which it is difficult to understand the current situation. This book therefore not only contains a wealth of information about Xinjiang and its Uyghur inhabitants, but also about China and the Han Chinese who now live in Xinjiang. In addition, the book recounts in detail the two-thousand-year history of the Silk Road, which has always crisscrossed the country. It reports on the checkered

relationship between China and this region, but it is equally interested in China's relations with the Western world, in which Xinjiang now occupies a particularly key geopolitical position.

The book also discusses China's economic miracle of recent decades and, above all, China's political and economic opening towards Central Asia and Europe. This culminates in the Chinese-inspired New Silk Road Initiative, in which Xinjiang acts as China's gateway to Eurasia. Eurasia, the geographical area that has connected Europe and China since ancient times via the Silk Road routes, is therefore also part of the subject matter of this book. Special attention is therefore paid to the effects of the 'New Silk Road' on Xinjiang, but also on Europe and Germany.

However, the focus is on the past and present living conditions of the inhabitants of today's Xinjiang, especially the Uyghurs and Han Chinese living there, in words and pictures. The book is intended to be easy to read and visually appealing, but at the same time to provide a wealth of historical and political information and further reading suggestions.

As far as we know, there is hardly any public academic debate about these issues in the People's Republic of China. It is conducted primarily by Western social scientists, humanities scholars and sinologists who have their own research experience in Xinjiang. It rarely takes place in German, but almost exclusively in English, occasionally also in French or Italian. We have reviewed and evaluated this research literature to the best of our ability.

The two co-authors of this book have been working together for many years and have spent a fascinating life together. They are neither Sinologists nor Turkologists, but they have travelled extensively throughout China and Turkic-speaking Central Asia for many years. Both are experienced authors with a background in social sciences, psychology and history, able to critically assess the publicly available specialist knowledge about this exciting region of the world and to distinguish between bias and objectivity. With this book, they have painted a committed but unemotional historical and political picture of Xinjiang and the Eurasian Silk Road that bears their own signature.

The authors would like to thank their numerous friends and colleagues who read and commented on parts of the manuscript at various stages of development, or even the entire text. They are also grateful to the University and State Library of Saxony-Anhalt and the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology in Halle for their generous support in their often difficult search for literature.

Chapter One

In place of an introduction: A brief history of political concepts and structures

Xinjiang (pronounced Shin-Dzjang), the much-discussed region with a Uyghur majority population in the far north-west of China, was for centuries one of the most inaccessible and unfamiliar areas on earth for Europeans. Xinjiang is characterized by vast deserts, inhabited by peoples little known in Europe and surrounded by forbidding high mountains, whose glaciers feed mighty desert rivers – foremost among them the Tarim River, which eventually seeps away into the ground after more than 1,300 kilometres.¹ Politically, Xinjiang is part of the People's Republic of China. At the same time, the region belongs geographically to Central Asia and culturally to the sphere of influence of Islam.

The province² Xinjiang covers approximately one sixth of the total area of the People's Republic of China. In contrast to the Chinese heartland, Xinjiang is very sparsely populated. Today, the province bears the official name 'Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region' (Xinjiang Weiwu'er Zizhiqu). Xinjiang is a desert, steppe, oases and high mountains, and according to official figures is currently home to just under 26 million inhabitants, including around 10.9 million Han Chinese (42.2%) and 11.6 million Turkic-speaking Uyghurs of Islamic faith (45%), as well as around 10% belonging to various smaller state-recognized minorities (*minzu*).³

Within the People's Republic of China, with its population of around 1.4 billion, Xinjiang accounts for only 1.8 per cent of the total population. The proportion of Uyghurs living in Xinjiang is only 0.8 per cent of China's population.⁴ In contrast, around 2 million statistically recorded inhabitants of Xinjiang were not officially registered as citizens of Xinjiang under the Chinese hukou system. The majority of them are likely to be Han Chinese (Xinjiang Statistical Yearbook 2019, Tables 3-1, 3-5, 3-7 and 3-8). The Xinjiang Statistical Yearbook 2020 no longer provides detailed information on the ethnic composition of Xinjiang's population.

¹ Calculated from the city of Aral to the point where the river disappears into Lake Taitema. If the Yarkand-Darya (which does not carry water all year round) is included as the longest tributary, the total length of the Tarim river system is over 2000 kilometers (Cyffka et al. (2021, p. 6).

² For simplicity's sake, we sometimes refer to Xinjiang as a '*province*'. However, the official administrative structure of the People's Republic of China is more complex. At the provincial level, it comprises 22 *provinces* (plus Taiwan, which is claimed as the 23rd province), five *autonomous regions* (including Xinjiang, Tibet and Inner Mongolia, the three huge border regions in northern and western China), four *municipalities directly under the central government* (the megacities of Beijing, Shanghai, Chongqing and Tianjin) and two *special administrative regions* (the former colonies of Hong Kong and Macao). Source: https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Verwaltungsgliederung_der_Volksrepublik_China, accessed on 17 January 2021).

³ Results of the last census in autumn 2020. According to data from the Statistics Bureau of Xinjiang: <https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/ce/cgtrt/eng/news/t1884310.htm>, dated 16 June 2021.

⁴ Statistical data on the detailed ethnic composition of the resident population in Xinjiang is last available for 2018. At that time, a total of 24,870,080 inhabitants were counted. There are 13 statistically recorded ethnic groups (*minzu*) in Xinjiang. Among the citizens of Xinjiang registered in 2018 (22,834,200), around 60% were Turkic-speaking (51.1% Uyghurs, 6.9% Kazakhs, 0.9% Kyrgyz, 0.1% Uzbeks and some others). The Han Chinese ethnic group accounted for 34.4% of the population, while 4.4% belonged to the Hui (linguistically assimilated Chinese Muslims) and various smaller population groups with percentages of less than 1%.

92% of China's citizens (1.3 billion) belong to the Han Chinese ethnic group. This means that there is an extreme imbalance in China between the densely populated and economically developed Han Chinese regions in the centre, east and south of the republic and the sparsely populated, significantly poorer Xinjiang with its predominantly Uyghur population in the far north-west.¹

However, Xinjiang's political significance for the People's Republic of China today is far greater than one might expect given the region's geographical remoteness and comparatively small population. This is not only due to the abundant mineral resources found there, but also to Xinjiang's key geographical position in China's 'New Silk Road'-megaproject. Not least for this reason, Xinjiang has recently been the subject of intense scrutiny by the international media.

The increased media interest is also based on the fact that two large population groups with different languages and cultures meet in Xinjiang – the Turkic-speaking, Islam-influenced Uyghurs and the Han Chinese, who are now politically and economically dominant and who have immigrated in large numbers, especially since the 1950s. There are obvious contrasts between the two ethnic groups, which are closely followed and critically commented on in Western countries. We will discuss this in more detail later.

After a long period of isolation, China only opened its borders to international trade and foreign travelers in the 1980s. The increase in Silk Road tourism since that time has also contributed to the growing global awareness of today's Xinjiang.

However, more than a hundred years ago, this remote province in north-western China had already attracted international attention, albeit under its former name *of Sinkiang*². At the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th centuries, European and, above all, German geographers, archaeologists and Oriental scholars took a keen interest in this area:

The foreign scientists were initially concerned with mapping and exploring the unknown land north of the Himalayan massif. The Russian general Nikolai Prschewalskij and the English colonial officer Francis Younghusband were at the forefront of these efforts. The Swedish geographer Sven Hedin, who will be discussed in detail in Chapter 5, became particularly well known in Germany, where he had studied.

It was during this period that the term 'Silk Road' was coined by the German explorer and geography professor Ferdinand von Richthofen (1833-1905), Sven Hedin's academic teacher. Richthofen used the term to describe a network of ancient desert tracks and mountain paths along which silk and other luxury goods and everyday products were transported from the Chinese Empire to the Roman Empire in ancient times, mainly on the backs of donkeys, horses and camels.

Richthofen's research on the Silk Road (or *Silk Roads*)³ of antiquity took place in the second half of the 19th century. This was a time when the colonial policies of the major international powers were at their peak. In a manner of speaking,

The Han Chinese population in Xinjiang has grown significantly in recent decades. According to the results of the first census in Xinjiang in 1953, 74.7% of the population at that time were Uyghurs and 11.5% were Kazakhs and Kyrgyz, but only 9.2% were Chinese-speaking Han and Hui, with a total population of 5 million at that time (Toops 2004, p. 246).

Since the founding of the People's Republic of China, 87% of Xinjiang's current Han population have moved there from other Chinese provinces or are descendants of immigrants (Cliff 2016, p. 13).

¹ The same applies to Tibet and Inner Mongolia, the two other sparsely populated border regions of China.

² Xinjiang (Xīnjiāng) is the current Latin transcription of the Chinese word 新疆, written according to the Pinyin method introduced in 1958 (see below, Chapter 10). The previously common name *Sinkiang* is based on the Latin transcription according to the Wade-Giles method, which is no longer in use.

³ Richthofen (1977a, b). Richthofen also used the term in the plural, referring to silk *roads* to indicate that this was not a single route but a network of connections

The 'race between nations' for political influence in Central Asia and the claim to the cultural heritage of the Silk Road was primarily a competition between European powers: archaeologists, art historians and linguists such as Friedrich Wilhelm Radloff and Dmitri Alexandrovich Klementz (Russia), Aurel Stein (Great Britain), Paul Pelliot (France), Albert Grünwedel and Albert von Le Coq (Germany) travelled around the country from the turn of the century until the outbreak of the First World War to make sensational discoveries about previously unknown cultural legacies and secure the right of first access. Numerous expeditions uncovered manuscripts, artefacts and murals of inestimable value that had remained hidden for centuries. They were found in ruins and caves on the edge of the Taklamakan Desert and acquired or stolen, sometimes using questionable methods, to ultimately enrich the museums in St. Petersburg, London, Paris and Berlin. These 'discoveries' took place within the context of the inhumane practices of the colonial era. Nevertheless, what was unearthed at that time created the conditions for the preservation of a previously unknown world cultural and natural heritage (see Chapter 6).

Anyone who begins to study this region in more detail will inevitably encounter a number of recurring keywords¹: '*Central Asia*', '*Silk Road*', '*Xinjiang*', '*Uyghurs*', '*Han Chinese*'. These keywords¹ shape public perception of the vast border region in north-western China today and influence the fate of its inhabitants. They are used quite naturally in everyday language and the media, or are considered "natural." And yet these terms are colored by their historical significance, by specific political perspectives and interests, cultural traditions and historical circumstances, which one should be aware of. To set the scene for the subject matter of this book, they will now be examined in more detail and given substance.

Central Asia

Where is Xinjiang located – in Central Asia or East Asia? Answering the question to which region of the world Xinjiang belongs is by no means an unimportant formality. It is hotly debated among geographers and historians, but above all among journalists and politicians.²

However, there is no need to get involved in this complicated dispute, which is riddled with political interests and animosities. One can admit that Xinjiang belongs to both regions of the world, East Asia and Central Asia. This is precisely what makes it so appealing to take a closer look at it:

- Due to its political affiliation with the People's Republic of China, Xinjiang is clearly located in East Asia, as are Japan and North and South Korea, for example. All of these distant East Asian countries are largely unfamiliar to us Europeans due to their unique history and culture. They present us with a particular mystery simply because they write in Asian characters that are difficult for us to understand and eat with chopsticks.

¹ In the sense of Raymond Williams' famous book "Keywords" (1976).

² For the term "Central Asia", see, for example, Stadelbauer (2004), Fagner (2006), Paul (2012), Gorshenina (2012), Kunze (2018). For the the location of Xinjiang and the Uyghurs between China and Central Asia, see Bellér-Hann et al. (2007). Vietnam, where Chinese script was abolished in 1945, is usually considered part of Southeast Asia.

- The situation is different for the predominantly Turkic-speaking population of Xinjiang province, with its own culture and script. After almost a thousand years of Islamic influence and a long history of connections to the West via the Silk Road, Xinjiang is culturally very close to its neighboring Central Asian countries Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan which are also Islamic and Turkic-speaking. This also applies to the predominantly Islamic neighboring states of Tajikistan and Afghanistan, where Iranian languages are spoken. As Culturally closely related landlocked countries without their own access to the sea, all these states (joined by the more western countries of Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan) therefore belong to Central Asia together with Xinjiang (colored purple on the map).¹



The Chinese province of Xinjiang between China and Central Asia (shaded purple)²

¹ Two other landlocked countries, *Mongolia* and the Chinese province of *Tibet*, are often also counted as part of Central Asia. However, due to their Buddhist influence and their own languages, they occupy a special position and are not considered here.

² Source: https://staticr1.blastingcdn.com/media/photogallery/2018/5/15/660x290/b_1200x630/unrest-in-xinjiang-uyghur-pro-vince-in-china-al-jazeera-center-aljazeera.net_1989377.jpg (Accessed: 1 June 2019, own editing).

With our decision to include Xinjiang not only in East Asia but also in Central Asia, we have opted for a primarily cultural-historical perspective. This is close to the approach taken by Ildikó Bellér-Hann and Chris Hann as the subtitle of their latest book on Xinjiang: 'Uyghurs between Civilizations'.¹

This assessment touches on political sensitivities. It could be understood as casting doubt on Xinjiang's affiliation with China. This is expressly not the case.

Our book is not about political statements, it tries to present and understand the interconnectedness of a both national and international constellation. That is why we have included 'Eurasia' in the book title, an overarching geographical classification that refers to Xinjiang's location at a geopolitical hinge point between 'East' and 'West'.

Silk Road

A special feature of Eurasia is the ancient Silk Road, a network of trade routes and desert tracks leading from China through the vast expanses of Eurasia to Europe. Its legendary heart lies in southern Xinjiang, in the Tarim Basin surrounded by high mountains and the Taklamakan Desert. To bypass this desert, the Silk Road splits into a northern route via Aksu and a southern route via Khotan (Hotan). Both routes meet again in the famous trading city of Kashgar.

The term 'Silk Road' became widely known to the general public through Ferdinand von Richthofen's five-volume work on the geography of China, published in 1877.² Originally, von Richthofen had used this term only to describe the historical network of ancient trade routes that existed between approximately 150 BC and 150 AD, connecting China and the Roman Empire.³

¹ Bellér-Hann / Hann (2020): The Great Dispossession. Uyghurs between Civilizations.

² For the sake of simplicity, we refer to the 'Silk Road' in the singular throughout, rather than the 'Silk Roads', which would be the more correct but unusual formulation. This can also be found in von Richthofen (1877b), who refers to the "Central Asian Silk Roads until the 2nd century AD" in a specialist publication. Incidentally, von Richthofen probably adopted the term 'Silk Road' from Carl Ritter, a well-known older German geographer who had already used it in his multi-volume standard work on geography, published between 1822 and 1852 (cf. Höllmann 2022, p. 19).

³ Richthofen's ancient Silk Road is depicted on a map in the first volume of his monumental five-volume work on China (Richthofen 1877a, p. 500). As a German geographer, Ferdinand von Richthofen himself also pursued geopolitical interests. Among other things, he was interested in exploring the possibilities for a railway connection from China through Xinjiang to Central Europe, following in the footsteps of the ancient Silk Road. Similarly, between 1933 and 1935, his student Sven Hedin undertook an expedition from central China to Xinjiang on behalf of the then ruling Guomindang government to explore the possibility of building a motorway along the old Silk Road to Urumqi and Kashgar. See Hansen (2012, p. 7f.), Chin (2013, p. 208ff.), Hedin (1936), Salomon (2013).



Ancient Silk Road: Main and secondary routes¹

Soon, however, the term became increasingly generalized and was also applied, for example, to Marco Polo's medieval travel routes.² At the latest with the publication of Sven Hedin's widely read book 'The Silk Road'³ in 1936, the word became part of common parlance.⁴ Today it refers quite generally to sea and overland routes between the Far East and the Western world, from ancient times to the present day.⁵ In a narrower sense, however, the term "Silk Road" refers to the *land connections* between China and the West that run through Central Asia, to which Richthofen originally referred. It is this *Eurasian Silk Road*, the core of which runs through Xinjiang, that we are concerned with here.

However, the term "Silk Road" has evolved from a sober technical term in historical geography to a rather vague political slogan and advertising medium, primarily for three reasons:

- In today's age of long-distance tourism and reverence for evidence of the past, the idea of the existence of a *historical Silk Road* stimulates many desires. It promises legendary destinations and the fascination of unimagined treasures and adventures. Silk Road tourism, where Chinese and Western travelers meet peacefully, has become a significant economic factor for Xinjiang since the border opened in the 1980s. However, due to increasing political tensions and the effects of the Corona and Ukraine crises, international Silk Road tourism has stalled.

¹ Source: https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/f/f1/Silk_Road_in_the_1_century_AD_-_en.svg/1159px-Silk_Road_in_the_1_century_AD_-_en.svg.png (Own editing, accessed: 1.6.2019).

² The doubts expressed by Frances Wood several years ago as to whether Marco Polo actually visited China have now been dispelled (cf. Wood 1996, Vogel 2013).

³ Sven Hedin attended lectures given by Professor Ferdinand von Richthofen at Berlin University and later corresponded with him (Richthofen 1933, Montety 2015).

⁴ Since the 1970s, the term "Silk Road" (*sichou zhi lu*) has also been common in China, and today it has become a buzzword (Whitfield 2007, p. 202f.).

⁵ The sea routes from East and South Asia to the West, which are often considered part of the Silk Road network (and are sometimes referred to as the "*Spice Route*"), are not discussed here

- Every relevant travel guide emphasizes the outstanding artistic and cultural significance of the historic Silk Road. This is easy to market and a major attraction for Chinese and foreign tourists alike. Since 2014, the Eastern Silk Road has even been designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site.
- In addition, for several years now there has been the idea of a 'New Silk Road' (xin sichou zhi lu), which until recently was the subject of much debate before being pushed into the background by new issues such as the geopolitical "turning point": In 2013, China launched its Silk Road initiative (official name since 2016: Belt and Road Initiative, abbreviated BRI).¹ It has become the hallmark of China's new opening to the West. This Chinese initiative involves enormous infrastructure investments and foreign loans, which have raised economic and geopolitical hopes and fears around the world and sparked international debate. The 'New Silk Road' will be discussed in detail below (Chapter 14).

The gradual shift in meaning of the term 'Silk Road' from a scientific technical term to a conceptual projection screen for dreams of the past and future is not merely a product of interest-driven fantasies.² It is based on an idealization or mystification of actual events and contexts that can contribute to an understanding of the region as a whole. The following section therefore compiles some real facts from the history of Eurasia:

It is important to start from the basic historical fact that the Silk Road experienced significant periods of prosperity and long phases of stagnation over the centuries, until it finally lost much of its importance with the beginning of the era of colonial world domination by European maritime powers. In this sense, one may distinguish six historical stages of development of the Silk Road from antiquity to the early modern period:

- (1) Since *antiquity*, there have been not only conquests and migrations between the Far East and Europe, but also trade and cultural exchange. A widely ramified network of caravan routes, desert tracks and mule trails has always existed on the Eurasian mainland, which later came to be known as the "Silk Road" (or "Silk Roads").

The oldest historically documented political contact between Europe and the Far East arose in the 4th century BC, when the Macedonian conqueror Alexander the Great established a short-lived Eurasian empire in just 11 years (334 to 323 BC).

At its greatest extent to the east, Alexander's domain stretched from Greece through the Near East and Iran to Afghanistan and the Ferghana Valley on the border with present-day Xinjiang, and finally to the Indus in present-day Pakistan. Greek culture left traces in Central Asia at that time, which can still be seen today (see below, Chapter 6).

¹ The Chinese term for the New Silk Road Initiative (yidai yilu) was initially officially translated into English as "*One Belt, One Road*" (abbreviated OBOR). "Belt" refers to the Eurasian land connections, while "Road" refers to the sea routes. As this led to misunderstandings, the official English translation has been "*Belt and Road Initiative*" (abbreviated to BRI) since 2016.

² See Heilmann (2020), Kreutzmann (2021).



*King Alexander of Macedonia (356-323 BC)*¹

- (2) The *first golden age* in the history of East-West relations in Eurasia was the period of the Chinese *Han Dynasty* (206 BC-220 AD). Ferdinand von Richthofen was particularly interested in this period because it was the first time that regular trade contacts between the Chinese and Roman empires could be specifically documented. With regard to the history of Xinjiang, it is important to note that at that time, a number of Chinese garrisons existed from the ancient Chinese imperial city of Chang'an (today Xi'an) to the Tarim Basin in present-day Xinjiang, which controlled trade to the west.

Emperor *Han Wudi* (156-83 BC) was the first to seriously pursue a policy towards the "Western Regions" (*xiyu*) beyond the empire's borders. To this end, he sent his scout Zhang Qian there. After completing his long exploratory journey, Zhang Qian wrote a detailed report of his experiences. This report was included in the historical work of *Sima Qian* (c. 145-90 BC), the official chronicler of the Chinese Empire. Zhang Qian's report thus had a lasting and widespread impact. From then on, it served as the imperial court's authoritative source of information on the conditions in the "Western Regions".¹

¹https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/5/59/Alexander_and_Bucephalus_-_Battle_of_Issus_mosaic_-_Museo_Archeologico_Nazionale_-_Naples_BW.jpg. Ancient mosaic, Pompeii (accessed: 20 September 2021).



Emperor Han Wudi (156-83 BC) ¹

Famous travelers on the Silk Road, such as Zhang Qian in ancient times or Xuanzang, Marco Polo and Benedikt Goës centuries later, also left behind widely read accounts. They were all travelling as pilgrims or envoys on important missions. They will be discussed in detail in chapters 2 to 4. Their accounts were in high demand among the literate of the time. However, these were rare individual accounts. Normal travel on the Silk Road was quite different. It was usually undertaken by individual merchants or trade caravans and their armed escorts over shorter distances. They travelled from oasis to oasis, from market to market, from bazaar to bazaar, where goods were traded and resold. In this way, goods were eventually able to reach Europe from China and vice versa. They usually passed through many hands and completed countless stages before arriving at the other end of the Silk Road after a long journey. There are no publicly available travel reports from these anonymous traders, only customs documents, business letters, lists of goods or similar items that have been handed down by chance.

An important prerequisite for trade on the Silk Road to flourish in ancient times was the security of transport routes. During the Han Dynasty, this was ensured by the presence of Chinese troops and garrisons in the Tarim basin.

¹ Illumination from the Qing dynasty. Source: <https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/e/e9.jpg>. (accessed: 20 November 2021)

- (3) After the decline of the Han Dynasty around 200 AD, today's Xinjiang experienced an *interim phase* lasting several centuries *with precarious power relations*¹ – similar to Europe, which at that time was marked by the so-called 'Age of Migration' (Völkerwanderungszeit). Robberies and violence made travelling on the Silk Road particularly dangerous, as there was no clear authority to maintain order. The desert tracks, watering places and mountain passes of the old Silk Road were hardly maintained, and lodgings and caravanserais fell into disrepair. Nevertheless, exchanges between China and the West never completely ceased.¹
- (4) After centuries of external invasions and internal Chinese rivalries and wars, the political situation in China only began to stabilize again with the rise to power of the medieval Tang dynasty (618-907). In the early days of the Tang dynasty, the transcontinental Silk Road experienced its second heyday, its "golden age", as Peter Hopkirk called it.² At that time, the Buddhist monk Xuanzang (c. 602-664) travelled the Silk Road and wrote his famous account of his "Journey to the West", which we will discuss in more detail in the following chapter 2.

During the reign of Taizong, the first great Tang emperor (r. 626–649), the Chinese Empire succeeded in re-establishing its rule over the entire Tarim Basin in present-day Xinjiang. Once again, Chinese garrisons and guard posts were maintained there to secure and control travel and trade. Payments and goods flowing from the Chinese heartland to the military settlements led to an upswing in the region.

Much of the spectacular archaeological finds and murals that have established the art-historical fame of the Eastern Silk Road date back to the long reign of the Tang Dynasty, which lasted until 906. The rich written documents that have survived from this pre-Islamic period convey the image of a multi-religious and multi-ethnic culture in this oasis, desert and mountain landscape.

In addition to Buddhism, which dominated during this period, there were also traces of Western religions such as Zoroastrianism, Manichaeism and Nestorian Christianity. Sogdian, the Middle Iranian language of the Sogdians, who originally came from the Samarkand region, seems to have been the most important lingua franca on the eastern Silk Road at that time. In addition, the Chinese and Old Uyghur languages and scripts played an important role. Traces of Indian languages can also be found, especially in the oasis cities of Khotan and Kucha on the edge of the Tarim Basin. All of this is evidence that the medieval Silk Road was a place of transit and encounter between different peoples, cultures and religions.³

¹ According to official Chinese historiography, this was the period of the 'Three Kingdoms' (220–280), the 'Jin Dynasty' (265–420), the 'Southern and Northern Dynasties' (420–581) and the 'Sui Dynasty' (581–618), whose rule did not extend into the territory of present-day Xinjiang (cf. Vogelsang 2021).

² Hopkirk (1986, p. 42).

³ See in particular Hansen (2012, p. 235ff.).



*Emperor Tang Taizong (599-649)*¹

- (5) However, from the middle of the 8th century onwards, Tang dominance in the Tarim Basin came to an end and Chinese influence declined. In what is now Xinjiang, a *second interim phase of prolonged confusion and unstable power relations* began in present-day Xinjiang. Travel on the eastern Silk Road became dangerous again. The Sogdian merchant families, who had previously set the tone, gradually disappeared.² The Iranian-Sogdian lingua franca, which had dominated for centuries, was gradually replaced by ‘Turki’ as *the new lingua franca*, an early form of the various Turkic languages that have survived throughout the region to this day. From around the year 1000, the *gradual Islamization* of the Tarim Basin began from west to east. Buddhism gradually disappeared from the area that is now Xinjiang. From then on, Turkic-speaking Muslim princes ensured a more or less precarious balance of power in the Tarim Basin.³

¹ https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/0/0b/Sui_Yangdi_Tang.jpg/330px-Sui_Yangdi_Tang.jpg. Contemporary portrait of the court painter Sui Yangdi (accessed: 29 November 2020).

² Linguists and historians disagree about the significance of the *Tocharian* language, which is known to have been spoken in the Tarim Basin until around 800 AD. Tocharian is an Indo-European language similar to the languages of Western Europe. This has given rise to various speculations, such as the idea that the Tarim Basin was once settled by people from Europe. The red-haired mummy finds from the Taklamakan Desert are said to prove this (see below, chapter 2).

³ ‘The inland Silk Road was reduced to a very small path from c. 750 to c. 1100’, writes Étienne de la Vaissière (2014, p. 105). See Millward (2007, pp. 30-39) for more on this.



*Mongol ruler Genghis Khan (c. 1160-1227)*¹

- (6) This confusing situation took a surprising new turn in the 13th century with the establishment of the Mongol Empire by *Genghis Khan* (reigned 1206-1227). The global empire that emerged under him and his sons encompassed the entire catchment area of the historic Silk Road, including *the territory of present-day Xinjiang*.

At its greatest extent around 1280, the Mongol-ruled territory stretched from the Pacific coast in the far east to the borders of Poland in the west. All of Central Asia, present-day southern Russia, Iran, Mesopotamia and large parts of Anatolia up to the Mediterranean were under Mongol rule at that time (see overview map in Chapter 3).

The grandson of Genghis Khan, *Kublai Khan* (reigned 1260-1294), ultimately succeeded to conquer the entire territory of present-day China and personally ascended the imperial throne of China in 1271. After the death of the last representative of the Song dynasty in 1279, he became the founder of the Mongol-led Yuan dynasty (1279-1368) in China. The Venetian merchant and adventurer Marco Polo, whom we discuss in more detail in Chapter 3, stayed many years in the imperial city of Beijing (*Khanbalik*), newly built by Kublai Khan. His famous report 'Il Milione' became one of the most influential sources of Western knowledge about China.

¹ https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/4/4e/Genghis_Khan.jpg?uselang=de. Illumination, 14th century (accessed: 29 November 2020).

Despite the poor reputation that the Mongols¹ had in the West for a long time, historians today describe the period as an era of 'Mongolian peace', the *Pax Mongolica*. For long-distance trade and travel routes between East and West, this Pax Mongolica led to a *third golden age*. Not only famous long-distance travelers such as Marco Polo travelled along the Silk Road, which was secured by military presence, post stations and caravan-serais, but also many anonymous merchants, soldiers, adventurers, missionaries and pilgrims. The exchange of goods and ideas reached a new peak during this period.



*Caravan on the Silk Road (around 1375)*³

After Genghis Khan's death, the division of the vast Eurasian empire among his four sons and their descendants soon led to discord. In the late 13th century, the empire gradually disintegrated into separate Mongolian territories, some of which fought each other. The Pax Mongolica began to crumble.

Finally, tribal leader *Timur Lenk* (1336-1405) succeeded in reviving the Mongol Empire for several decades. After his death, however, the Pax Mongolica quickly came to a complete standstill. The overland traffic between East and West associated with it, as depicted in the idyllic illustration from the Catalan World Atlas of 1375, began to lose more and more of its importance, partly due to the great plague epidemic that ravaged the whole of Eurasia at that time.

¹ On the medieval origins of fear of the Mongols in Europe, see Bezzola (1974) and Schmieder (1994).

² For the current state of discussion on the Pax Mongolica, see Paul (2012, p. 299 ff.), Favereau (2018). See also below, Chapter 3.

³ From: Catalan World Atlas, by Abraham and Jehuda Cresques, Mallorca 1375 (https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/2/24/Katalanischer_Atlas_01.jpg?uselang=de, accessed: 19 November 2020).

At the dawn of the modern era, the history of the historic Silk Road came to a definitive end. The 16th century marked the beginning of an era of *colonial world domination by European powers*, which was to last until the middle of the 20th century. For relations between Europe and East Asia, this meant that sea routes, rather than continental overland transport, now played the leading role. After *Christopher Columbus'* unsuccessful search for a western sea route from Europe to India in 1492, the decisive breakthrough came in 1498: the Portuguese *Vasco da Gama* opened the sea route from Europe around Africa to East Asia. Soon afterwards, the first Portuguese trading colonies were established in India, followed shortly afterwards by British ones.

The land route along the historic Silk Road was never completely abandoned, but it lost its geo-strategic importance. The European colonial powers that now established themselves by force in East Asia and controlled long-distance trade – Portugal, England, the Netherlands, and later France – were predominantly *maritime powers* that relied on the military superiority of their fleets. They had no interest in the land routes of the ancient Silk Road. Their aim was to dominate the seas and overseas trade. With the opening of the Suez Canal in 1867, the imperial supremacy of the European maritime powers was finally sealed.¹

The land corridor between Europe and East Asia, which runs through the northern steppe landscape and was formerly ruled by Mongolia, developed into Russia's sole domain. Between the 16th and 19th centuries, the Russian Empire gradually conquered the entire Siberian north of Asia up to the Pacific coast, which it reached in 1636. In the 1860s and 1870s, in the course of Russia's "Great Game", the Central Asian countries were also annexed up to the borders of Afghanistan, Iran and Ottoman Empire and incorporated into the Tsarist Empire (see below, Chapter 13). The old overland routes of the Silk Road thus fell largely under Russian rule.²

After 1917, they were taken over by the Soviet Union. Between 1917 and 1991, the year the USSR dissolved, the former Silk Road lay behind the Iron Curtain and remained virtually closed to global trade and travel. Only then could ideas for a "New Silk Road" begin to take shape again. But more on that later (see below, Chapter 14).

¹ The Suez Crisis of 1956, in which Great Britain and France lost control of the Suez Canal under pressure from the USA, marks the symbolic end of this colonial phase of "European world domination".

² This also applied to the *TRANS-Siberian Railway* further north, which connected Vladivostok on the Pacific Ocean with Moscow and St. Petersburg on the Baltic Sea. Its construction began in 1891 and was completed in 1916.

Xinjiang

The territory characterized by high mountains, steppes, deserts and river oases, which today bears the name "Xinjiang" (according to, only received this Chinese name in the middle of the 18th century. Since 1955, its official name has been 'Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region' (Chinese: Xinjiang Weiwu'er Zizhiqu; English: Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, abbreviated XUAR).



Xinjiang – Topographical map with main transport routes and historical sites¹

Today, a distinction is usually made between northern and southern Xinjiang. Both parts of the province have roughly the same number of inhabitants. However, there are considerable historical differences between north and south:

- Northern Xinjiang is the desert, steppe and mountain region north of the Tianshan Mountains up to the Altai Mountains, often referred to as *Dzungaria*. A clear majority of the population living there today are Han Chinese, approx. 57%. Around 20% are Turkic-speaking Kazakhs, and only about 11% of the inhabitants of Northern Xinjiang are Uyghurs, many of whom live in the city of Gulja in the Yili Valley. Just under 9% of the inhabitants are Muslim Hui Chinese.² The most important cities in the north are the capital Urumqi and the major cities of Shihezi, Gulja (Yining), Karamai and Altai. The two border towns with Kazakhstan, Korgas in the Yili Valley and Alashankou, are important in terms of transport policy today, as they handle most of the rail and road traffic on the New Silk Road.

¹ Source: <http://www.mappery.com/maps/Xinjiang-Region-of-China-Tourist-Map.mediumthumb.jpg> (accessed: 1 June 2019, own adaptation).

² Calculated according to Xinjiang Statistical Yearbook 2019 (Tables 3-5, 3-7, 3-8).

- Southern Xinjiang is the heartland of the Uyghurs. It encompasses the part of the country south of the Tianshan mountain range – the *Tarim Basin* with the large oasis cities of Korla, Kucha, Aksu, Kashgar, Yarkand and Khotan on the edge of the vast Taklamakan Desert, as well as the *Turfan Depression* further east with the cities of Turfan and Kumul (Chinese: Hami). Approximately 85% of the Uyghur population of Xinjiang now lives in southern Xinjiang.¹ They make up just under 80% of the resident population here.²

The traditional Turkic name for southern Xinjiang is *Altishahr*, which means "six cities" in English. However, it is not entirely clear which cities are meant by this.³ What is clear, however, is that the term "Altishahr" refers to the Islamic oasis and desert region south of the Tianshan Mountains, on the edges of which the ancient routes of the historic Silk Road run. We will continue to use the word in this sense. Xinjiang (新疆, Uyghur: شىنجاڭ) can be translated into English as 'New Frontier', 'New Borderland' or 'New Territory'.⁴ The term first appeared between 1755 and 1759, precisely at the time when the troops of the powerful Qing Emperor *Qianlong* (reigned 1735-1796) conquered the entire territory of present-day Xinjiang. At that time, comprehensive Chinese military and civil administration was introduced in Xinjiang. However, China initially had little presence in the Turkic-speaking south. Local nobles and clergy largely regulated the daily lives of the people there.⁴

Early on in China's long history, there were attempts to extend Chinese rule westward to what is now Xinjiang. As we have already seen, however, this was only successful for limited periods of time, with centuries-long interruptions.⁴ It was not until the mid-18th century that the often attempted permanent annexation of Xinjiang to the Chinese Empire was actually realized. In 1884, Xinjiang was finally declared a regular province of China within its present borders and fully incorporated into the Chinese state.⁵

After the fall of the Chinese Empire at the end of 1911, there was a long period of turmoil and civil war within China, culminating in the invasion of Japanese troops, who advanced from Manchuria into the Chinese heartland (1937-1945). The victory of Mao Zedong's Communist People's Liberation Army in 1949 ended this traumatic phase and established the one-party rule in the People's Republic of China that continues to this day.

In 1949, the People's Liberation Army also took power in Xinjiang (called the 'peaceful liberation'). Since 1955, the province has been officially named the 'Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region of the People's Republic of China'. From the perspective of the Chinese state party and central government, however, Xinjiang has been considered an inalienable part of China 'for over two thousand years'.⁶

¹ Hamut / Joniak-Lüthi (2015, p. 112).

² The '*resident population*' includes not only those officially registered as residents of Xinjiang under the hukou system, but also all 'migrant' who have been living there for at least six months but are registered elsewhere. Calculated according to Xinjiang Statistical Yearbook 2019 (Table 3-7).

³ Thum (2012b, p. 628) writes: 'In its normal usage, 'Altishahr' includes all of the oases of the Tarim Basin, including Turfan.'

⁴ See Bellér-Hann (2008, p. 39f.).

⁵ See the informative overviews of Xinjiang's history by Millward (2007), Rippa (2015) and Alpermann (2021, Part I) for more on this and the following.

⁶ See, for example, the official account of Xinjiang's history, which was published in German by the State Council of the People's Republic of China in 2003 (State Council 2003) or the updated version (State Council 2019b). See also Li (2005).

There is no generally accepted non-Chinese name for the area that is now Xinjiang. Even Uyghurs use the Chinese word 'Xinjiang'. This is understandable, because in earlier times Xinjiang was never a clearly defined political domain. Over the last two millennia, there have been many local and foreign rulers who controlled individual areas of this region. Not only the Chinese, but also Tibetans, Mongols and, above all, Turkic-speaking tribal leaders and khans exercised sovereignty over more or less large parts of present-day Xinjiang at different times. Before the 18th century, no one was able to assert their authority in the long term. In earlier times, the more or less independent city-states that formed around the large, widely scattered oases were more important. They gave the oasis dwellers their own identity and often their own name.¹ Perhaps the best-known example of this was the well-travelled *Mahmud al-Kashgari*, famous author of a dictionary of ancient Turkic languages, who lived in the 11th century and is said to be buried in the village of Upal near Kashgar (see illustration in Chapter 11).

In the writings of European travelers in the 19th and early 20th centuries, today's Xinjiang was referred to not only as 'Sinkiang', but also as 'Tatary', 'Chinese Turkestan' or 'East Turkestan' (as opposed to 'West Turkestan', which was annexed by Russia). However, these are all foreign names. Only during the brief reign of the Muslim military leader Emir *Jakub Bek* (1867-1877), who ruled over almost the entire territory of present-day Xinjiang from Kashgar, did the name 'Kashgaristan' come into use. However, it did not catch on.

In the turbulent interim period between the fall of the Chinese Empire in 1911 and the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, the term *East Turkestan* first appeared as a political antonym to the Chinese Xinjiang. In 1933-1934, an attempt was made under the leadership of Khoja Niyaz to establish an independent '*Islamic Republic of East Turkestan*' with Kashgar as its capital. It was violently suppressed, partly with Soviet support.

For a short time, between 1944 and 1949, a socialist-oriented second '*Republic of East Turkestan*' existed in northern Xinjiang under Ehmetjan Qasimi, with its capital in Gulja (Chinese: Yining). However, the reach of this foundation, which was created under strong Soviet influence, remained limited to parts of northern Xinjiang.

Since that time, the idea of 'East Turkestan' has become a political slogan for dissidents, independence fighters and such like. The term is often used by human rights activists to express their distance from Chinese politics.

¹ In this sense, Rudelson (1997) speaks of 'Oasis Identities', which, in his estimation, continue to have an unusually great significance for the Uyghur inhabitants of Xinjiang.

² The 'World Uyghur Congress', an exile organization based in Munich, advocates for a state of "East Turkestan" with its own National flag (white crescent moon with star on light blue background).



Emir Jakub Bek (1820-1877)²

Uyghurs

The official name 'Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, in use since 1955, is composed of two parts: The word 'Xinjiang' (*New Frontier*) clearly reflects the Chinese perspective, while the word 'Uyghur' reflects the local context. For the government of the People's Republic of China, the Uyghurs are the legitimate majority population of Xinjiang; they are considered one of the indigenous ethnic groups (*minzu*) of China.

¹ <https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/4/4f/YakubBey.jpg>. Contemporary photograph (accessed: 16 June 2021).

The Uyghurs see themselves as the long-established inhabitants of Xinjiang. However, this consensus is only recent. Until the beginning of the 20th century, no one referred to the Turkic-speaking population of Xinjiang as 'Uyghurs' or called their language 'Uyghur'.

However, in the early Middle Ages, over a thousand years ago, there was a horse-riding people called the 'Uighurs' who spoke an archaic Turkic language: In the 8th/9th century, Uighur princes ruled over a vast steppe region in what is now Mongolia. After the collapse of this ancient Uyghur empire around 840, some Uyghur tribes advanced south into the fertile Turfan Depression in what is now southern Xinjiang. There they established the Uyghur principality of Gaochang, which lasted until the 13th century. The Turkic-speaking population living there was predominantly Buddhist. However, the royal family seems to have professed Manichaeism, a religion that has since disappeared, which had arrived here via the Silk Road from Iran. Due to the many preserved archaeological and art-historical treasures and linguistic documents, ancient Uyghur Kucha is considered an important part of the cultural heritage of present-day Xinjiang.



Ancient Uyghur princes and princesses. Murals from Bezeklik near Turfan (9th century, now in the Humboldt Forum, Berlin)³

The Uyghurs of that time have long since disappeared and were completely forgotten by the public for centuries. Buddhism, Manichaeism and Nestorian Christianity have also long since disappeared from Xinjiang. Since the 11th century, these religions have been gradually replaced by Islam throughout Xinjiang. The ancient Uyghur language has also died out.¹ Since the 15th century, *Chagatai Turkish*², the precursor language of today's New Uyghur and Uzbek, has become the common lingua franca in Central Asia.

¹ For information on the Kingdom of Kucha and the early Uyghurs, see Gabain (1961), Scharlipp (1992), Millward (2007, pp. 42–54), Rippa (2015, pp. 100–103), Brose (2017).

² See below, chapter 6.

³ Source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Museum_f%C3%BCr_Indische_Kunst_Dahlem_Berlin_Mai_2006_064.jpg and https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Museum_f%C3%BCr_Indische_Kunst_Dahlem_Berlin_Mai_2006_063.jpg (Zugriff: 16.6.2021).

Until the end of the 19th century, there was no clear distinction between Uyghur, Uzbek and the other Turkic languages and dialects spoken throughout Central Asia and Xinjiang. There were numerous names for them, the most general and common being ‘*Turki*’.³ This term covered a whole variety of related Turkic languages. The nomads living in the region and the settled inhabitants of the country were able to communicate with each other relatively easily because of the similarity of their languages and dialects.⁴ At that time only linguists and Turkologists were interested in the subtle differences between the languages and dialects of the Turki. Today, however, the distinction between Uyghurs, Kazakhs, Kyrgyz, Uzbeks, Tatars and Turkmen and their respective languages has become a politically highly charged issue with nationalistic undertones. The Uyghurs (and the Kyrgyz, for that matter) now see themselves in their official self-image as an ancient people with their own glorious history. How did this come about?

Even if neither Han Chinese nationalists nor pro-Uyghur patriots, human rights activists or dissidents like to hear it, the fact is that the perception of the Uyghurs as a distinct people with their own language dates back to *recent* political developments that originated in the Russian Empire and the early Soviet Union:⁵

- It is well known that, from the 1850s and 1860s onwards, the troops of Tsarist Russia conquered and annexed the entire, predominantly Turkic-speaking Central Asian region west of China.⁶ In 1868, the Russian *Governorate-General of Turkestan* was created there and incorporated into the Tsarist Empire. At that time, Russian Turkestan comprised the entire territory of the present-day Central Asian republics of Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, but without distinguishing between these countries. To the north of it, the Russian General Government *of the Steppe*, which included present-day Kazakhstan. The Turkic-speaking territories in Xinjiang, which had been under Chinese rule since 1759, were not affected by Russia's imperial expansion in the second half of the 19th century. Instead, at around the same time (1884), they were fully incorporated into the Chinese Empire as *the province of Xinjiang*, thus removing them from Russian influence. From then on, the dividing line that still exists today between the territories conquered by Russia west of the Chinese-Russian border and Chinese Xinjiang on the eastern side became a geopolitical reality (see the historical maps at the beginning of Chapter 13).
- After 1917, as a result of the Russian October Revolution, the Soviet Union (‘Union of Soviet Socialist Republics’, USSR) inherited the legacy of the fallen Tsarist Empire. Its Islamic-influenced territories in Central Asia thus became an integral part of the USSR. Within the Soviet Union, fifteen ‘Socialist Soviet Republics’ (SSR) were created in 1924, which were granted limited autonomy within the Russian-dominated USSR. At that time, it was decided to create not one but five Soviet republics side in Central Asia – Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan and Tajikistan. It was considered too dangerous to unite these Islamic and (with the exception of Tajikistan) Turkic-speaking countries into a single Soviet republic. For this reason, each of the five Central Asian republics of the USSR was given its own ‘*titular language*’ as a second official language alongside Russian: Kazakh, Kyrgyz, Turkmen, Uzbek and Tajik. These languages and the corresponding nationalities and borders between them had previously been defined and established in complicated political and linguistic

¹ For similarities and differences between the Old and New Uyghur languages, see Mirsultan (2016).

² Hamut / Joniak-Lüthi (2015, p. 112).

³ See Bellér-Hann (2008, p. 51), Thum (2018, pp. 2f.).

⁴ Today, Kazakh and Kyrgyz are particularly close to each other on the one hand, and Uzbek and Uyghur on the other.

⁵ See Roy (2000), Gorshenina (2012), Paul (2012, p. 384ff.).

⁶ Only the Emirate of Bukhara and the Khanate of Khiva in present-day Uzbekistan formally continued to exist until the collapse of the Tsarist Empire, but only as powerless Russian protectorates.

- debates. Given the mixture of languages and dialects spoken in Central Asia, with their fluid transitions, this was a difficult process, but one that ultimately led to clear, politically decreed and legally established distinctions.
- However, there were also language groups that did not succeed in this process in gaining recognition as independent nationalities within the Soviet Union. These included Turkic-speaking ethnic groups, some of whom lived on this side of the Soviet-Chinese border, but the majority of whom lived on the other side. For example, numerous Members of the Tarantschi people, who were mainly based in the Yili Valley in northern Xinjiang, in Soviet Kazakhstan¹ and many Kashgarliks from southern Xinjiang lived in the part of the then Soviet Ferghana Valley that now belongs to Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan. Their respective languages and dialects were closely related, but not identical. However, the two language groups joined forces to obtain the status of a recognized 'titular language' and thus the right to autonomy within the Soviet Union: representatives of the Tarantschis and the Kashgarliks agreed at a conference in 1921 in what is now Tashkent, Uzbekistan, to put aside their differences and jointly refer to themselves as 'Uyghurs'.² With this name, they tied in with the long history of the ancient Uyghur princes of the Middle Ages. In the Soviet Union itself, however, this initiative was not successful, and the Uyghurs were never recognized as a separate nationality of the USSR.
- However, what failed on this side of the Soviet-Chinese border fell on fertile ground on the other side of the border, in Xinjiang. During the period of civil war turmoils in China, which lasted until 1949, Xinjiang had increasingly come under Soviet influence. From the 1930s onwards, the idea gradually gained acceptance in Xinjiang that the Turkic-speaking and Muslim Tarantschis, Kashgarliks, Khotanliks, Turfanliks and whatever else they might be called were all descended from the medieval Uyghur people and therefore still belonged to a common ethnic and linguistic group known as the 'Uyghurs'. A grammar of the new Uyghur language and the first Uyghur schoolbooks were published. By being grouped together into one single ethnic group, the Uyghurs now became the recognized majority population of Xinjiang. In the 1950s, the Uyghurs were then included in the list of culturally protected 'minorities' (minzu) of the People's Republic of China. A unified New Uyghur written and educational language, which has little to do with the language of the Buddhist Uyghurs of the Middle Ages, was introduced. In the Chinese 'Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region' founded in 1955 (New) Uyghur has finally taken on the role of the 'titular language' and became the second recognized official language there alongside Chinese.

¹ On the Russian and Soviet side, the *Tarantschis* lived primarily in what is now Kazakhstan's Seven Rivers region (*Semi-retsche*) in the area around present-day Almaty. On the Chinese side, the Tarantschis were concentrated in the neighboring Yili Valley around Gulja (Yining). Today, the Tarantschis living in Xinjiang are considered Uyghurs.

² This historicizing choice of name was inspired by, among others, the influential socialist Tarantschi writer Nazarghoja Abdusemätov, who had adopted the symbolic pen name *Uyghur Balisi* (Child of the Uyghurs). See Roberts (2009, p. 367ff.).

³ The complex historical processes that ultimately led to agreement on a unified Uyghur language, are described in detail in Roberts (2009), Brophy (2018) and Thum (2018).

⁴ The development of the new Uyghur language suffered from repeated changes between the Arabic-Iranian, Latin and Cyrillic alphabets. Currently, the Arabic-Iranian script is once again dominant in Xinjiang (see below, Chapter 10).

Looking back, it can now be said that the cross-border and vaguely defined Central Asian ethnic and linguistic group of Muslim Turks of the 18th and 19th centuries in the Soviet Union of the 1920s and 1930s was transformed into a politically organized coexistence of several separate Turkic peoples, each with their own language. Today, however the national differences between them are emphasized rather than their cultural similarities. Four Central Asian Turkic languages – Kazakh, Kyrgyz, Turkmen and Uzbek – have become the official languages of the now independent republics of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan since 1991. The Uyghur language, the fifth in the group, was established in Xinjiang. In contrast to the four other recognized national Turkic languages of Central Asia. However, Uyghur has only attained the status of a minority language within China.

This development becomes immediately understandable when one recalls that only 0.8% of the 1.4 billion inhabitants of the People's Republic of China today belong to the Uyghur language and ethnic group, while approximately 92% belong to a single ethnic group, namely the Han Chinese, who also clearly dominate the entire country politically and culturally.

In Xinjiang itself, the majority ratios are quite different: in the first official census in 1953, three quarters (74.7%) of the population living in Xinjiang were Turkic-speaking Uyghurs and only 6.1% were Chinese-speaking Han.¹ Due to ongoing immigration from mainland China, the figures have shifted significantly since then.² According to official figures, the latest census in 2020 showed that Uyghurs now make up just under half (45.0%) of the population in Xinjiang, while the number of Han Chinese has risen to 42.2%.³ This can be explained, among other things, by the fact that a large proportion of the Han Chinese population living in Xinjiang today has moved there in the last seven decades or already belongs to the second or third generation of immigrants.

In this situation, attachment to a common Uyghur language and culture promotes the commitment of Xinjiang's long-established population to an independent Uyghur identity that is clearly distinct from that of the Han Chinese. The widely recognized cultural distinctiveness and Islamic character of the Uyghurs has thus become a potential thorn in the side of the increasing Han Chinese dominance in Xinjiang, which many Uyghurs experience as oppressive.

This is the context in which the ethnically motivated protests of recent decades must also be viewed. On the one hand, since the 1990s, the example set by the newly independent Central Asian neighboring states has had an impact, leading to increased independence efforts in Xinjiang. At the same time, the rapid transformation and market-oriented restructuring of the entire Chinese economy and society also began to gather pace in Xinjiang. Economic development in Xinjiang has been intensively promoted since 2000 as part of the Beijing central government's *"Open Up the West" strategy (xibu da kaifa)*, which has brought billions in investment to Xinjiang's economy.

While the Chinese government and the majority of Han Chinese living in Xinjiang see this process primarily as a long-overdue modernization of backward Xinjiang, from the perspective of the Uyghurs it appears above all as externally imposed Sinicization and oppression. Many members of Xinjiang's Uyghur majority population therefore consider themselves to be politically and economically discriminated again.

¹Toops (2004, p. 246).

² See Joniak-Lüthi (2013) on the immigration of Han Chinese to Xinjiang.

³ With Xinjiang's total population growing from 5 million to almost 25 million between 1953 and 2016 (Xinjiang Statistical Yearbook 2019, p. 73). According to official figures, 87% of Xinjiang's current Han population have moved there from other Chinese provinces since 1949 or are descendants of these immigrants (Cliff 2016, p. 13).

Han Chinese

It is clear, then, that anyone who wants to talk about Xinjiang and the Uyghurs living there today cannot ignore their powerful counterpart, the giant country of China and its majority population, the Han Chinese. As mentioned above, they now make up over forty percent of Xinjiang's population. If we add all unregistered persons or those living in Xinjiang only temporarily (soldiers, migrant workers, etc.), the proportion of Han Chinese is likely to reach about half.

Historically, the term 'Han' or 'Han Chinese' is much older than the other keywords discussed so far – 'Central Asia', 'Silk Road', 'Xinjiang' and 'Uighurs'. But it was not until the second half of the 19th century that the word 'Han' gradually acquired its current meaning. The term formally refers to the Han dynasty (206 BC to 220 AD) and the people who lived in the central Chinese heartland of the empire at that time. As far as we know, however, they themselves did not use this term for a long time. It was not until the 6th century that the first references to certain ethnic groups living in China being called 'Han' appeared. Much later, from around the 15th century onwards, it became common to refer to Chinese-speaking people in general as 'Han'.¹ Today, almost 92% of Chinese nationals are considered Han Chinese. The reason for this is the official *Minzu classification* used in the People's Republic of China:

- Since the 1950s, the identity cards of all citizens of the People's Republic of China have recorded not only their Chinese citizenship but also their affiliation to a specific *minzu* (roughly translated as 'people', 'nationality' or 'ethnic group'². This was when the state-led 'Ethnic Classification Project' (*minzu shibie*) began, which was finally completed in 1979 with the formal recognition of a total of 56 'peoples' within the People's Republic of China.³ China therefore sees itself as a multi-ethnic state. However, what is unique about the Chinese *minzu* system is its pronounced asymmetry: as mentioned above, almost 92% of China's citizens (around 1.3 of the country's 1.4 billion inhabitants) belong to a single ethnic group, the Han Chinese (*hanzu*).
- The remaining 55 *minzu* are thus relegated to the role of ethnic minorities within China.⁴ China wanted and wants to prevent comparable secessionist tendencies at all costs, especially with regard to Xinjiang and Tibet, the only two provinces in China where ethnic 'minorities' de facto constitute the local majority population. Unlike in the Soviet Union, minorities in the People's Republic of China have therefore never had the right to secession. Instead, 'separatism' is still ostracized and harshly combated in China as a particularly serious political offence.

¹ See Keil (2011), Goodman (2004).

² Bellér-Hann / Hann (2020, p. 6).

³ On the state "Ethnic Classification Project" and the involvement of social scientists: Fei (1981), Mullaney (2011), Zang (2016).

⁴ In everyday language, only the 55 minorities are usually understood as "*minzu*", but not the Han. This is also the case in China's official population statistics, which differentiate between *minority nationalities* and *Han* in their English-language version (see, for example, Xinjiang Statistical Yearbook 2019). The formally correct Chinese term for these ethnic minorities is "*shaoshu minzu*" (small people).

⁵ This was based on the definition attributed to Joseph Stalin from 1913, according to which nations are distinguished from one another by their *common language, territory, economic life and culture or national character* (Stalin 1952, p. 31f.). The actual originator of the idea of the nation state was probably the Austrian politician and later Chancellor *Karl Renner*. In 1899, he wrote a treatise on "State and Nation" in which he suggested transforming the then Habsburg Empire – also a multi-ethnic state – into a nation state with several equal peoples. Stalin was also particularly influenced by the theories of the Austrian social democrat Otto Bauer (1907) on the question of nationality.

In the first Chinese Republic, founded in 1912 under Sun Yat-sen, the nationality issue was initially resolved differently: five peoples, namely the Han, Manchus, Mongols, Muslims (or Hui) and Tibetans, were then regarded as equal members of the Chinese nation (Vogelsang 2014, p. 316ff.).

- The Chinese Minzu system, created in the 1950s, was directly linked to the nationality system established by Josef Stalin in the multi-ethnic Soviet Union. In both cases, a single ethnic group was or is clearly dominant – in the USSR it was the Russians,¹ in the People's Republic of China it is the Han Chinese. In the USSR, too, each inhabitant was assigned their own nationality (Russian, Ukrainian, Lithuanian, Georgian, Uzbek, Kazakh, etc.) in addition to Soviet citizenship. Accordingly, the Soviet central state was divided into 15 socialist Soviet republics (SSR): Russia, Ukraine, Lithuania, Georgia, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, etc.), for which certain nationality protection rights, limited autonomy rights and their own 'titular language' applied.² Above all, each individual Soviet republic had the constitutional right to secede from the Soviet Union. This clause became a decisive factor in the break-up of the Soviet Union after 1990.³

Most of the 55 minority minzu living in China are small population groups who live in a Han Chinese environment, are fully assimilated linguistically and have no thoughts of secession. The state's minority policy primarily promotes the cultural traditions and folklore of these minzu and expects their loyalty to the Chinese central government. There are also a number of protective provisions for minorities, to ensure that minority languages are preserved or revived and that members of minorities are adequately represented in politics and administration, in professional life and in education. A number of minority universities (minzu daxue) were also established to promote educational opportunities for members of minorities. During the period of China's one-child policy (1979-2015), special regulations were also in place that allowed minority families to have a second child. On the other hand, the strict legal division of China's population into minzu with partially different rights promoted and cemented ethnic stereotyping and discrimination. There are reports of 'Han chauvinism', which assumes the superiority of the Han and labels minorities as uncultured, in need of development or even dangerous.⁴

¹ In 1989, around 51% of Soviet citizens were of Russian nationality. If we add the Ukrainians, who at that time were hardly distinguishable from the Russians (Stalin's two most powerful successors, Khrushchev and Brezhnev, were known to be Ukrainians), the figure rises to 56% (<https://de.statista.com/statistik/daten/studie/944617/umfrage/bevoelkerung-der-udssr-nach-nationalitaeten/>).

² Other recognized national minorities only attained the status of an Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic (ASSR) as a subdivision of an SSR. This was also the case, among others, with the "Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic of *the Volga Germans*" (ASSRdWD). It existed from 1924 to 1941. During the Second World War, it was dissolved and its German-speaking inhabitants were forcibly resettled to the east, mainly to Siberia, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, as potential collaborators.

³ On the Soviet multi-ethnic state and its collapse: Stölting 1990, Roy (2000), Gorshenina (2012).

⁴ Leibold (2007, 2013), Ma (2010, 2017), Chen (2019), Sommer (2020).

Viewed from afar, the existence of China's many small minorities is normally hardly noticed. To outsiders, 'the' Chinese appear to be a linguistically and culturally homogeneous bloc, with a few small ethnic sprinklings and marginalized peoples. From the perspective of the People's Republic of China itself and its ruling Communist Party (CCP), the situation is not much different: Despite their strong regional and dialectal differences, the Han Chinese are considered the defining people of the People's Republic of China. The official language and script they use today (*Mandarin Chinese or Putonghua*) is authoritative throughout China, including for members of the minorities living in China (more on this in Chapter 10).

But who are these Han Chinese? For many readers in Germany, the term Han Chinese is likely to be unfamiliar. What people are familiar with are 'Chinese' – that is, people whose mother tongue is Chinese and who write in a syllabic script difficult to understand. The vast majority of them live in the People's Republic of China, approximately 1.3 billion, and there are also an estimated 60 million 'overseas Chinese', mainly in South-East Asia, but also in the USA.¹ Most people also know that the ancestors of today's Chinese lived in Imperial China. And you may have heard that Chinese men used to wear long braids, unlike today.

It is precisely here, with *the pigtail*, that it becomes clear why in today's China so much importance is attached to not simply referring to the majority population living there as Chinese, but as "Han" or Han Chinese. Wearing a braid is by no means an ancient Chinese custom, as a look at history shows:²

- In the 17th century, foreign conquerors overthrew the Chinese Ming dynasty (1368–1644). They came from the north, from Manchuria. They defeated the last Ming emperor, conquered his territory and founded the Manchu Qing dynasty in China. The new Manchu ruling elite was conspicuous for its hairstyle – a shaved forehead and a long braided *pigtail*, which soon took on a special symbolic meaning. From then on, all male subjects living in the Chinese Empire were required by law to wear the Manchu braid. This sign of their submission to Manchu rule became a customary practice over time, which was observed throughout China until the end of the empire.
- The Qing dynasty proved to be very long-lived (1644-1911) and was also extremely successful for a long time. Above all, it gained the most important Manchu emperor³, added vast new territories to the Chinese empire in the north and west.

¹ The question of whether the approximately 23 million Chinese-speaking inhabitants of *Taiwan* should be counted as domestic or overseas Chinese is politically controversial.

² See the following: Eberhard (1980, pp. 330-373), Crossley (2002), Ebray (2008, chap. 9), Vogelsang (2014, pp. 259-275), Pieke (2016, pp. 121-143), Mühlhahn (2021).

³ Vogelsang (2021, pp. 410ff.).



*Manchu Emperor Qianlong (1711-1799)*¹

- By the middle of the 18th century, the troops of the Manchu Emperor Qianlong occupied vast territories outside the previous borders of the empire – Tibet, Mongolia and Xinjiang, as well as parts of present-day Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan. This marked the maximum geographical expansion of the empire.²

¹Official contemporary portrait. Source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?title=Category:Qianlong_Empperor&uselang=en (accessed 20 September 2021). The emperor's original name was Aixinjueluo Hongli. 'Qianlong' was the official motto of his reign. For simplicity's sake, the emperor himself is usually referred to as Qianlong, not as 'Emperor Qianlong'. We follow this example (as does Osterhammel 1989, p. 447).

²Perdue (2005).



China's greatest expansion (around 1820), compared to the current borders of the People's Republic¹

- At the same time, however, China had become a *multi-ethnic state* with the acquisition of new territories. The Tibetans, Mongols and Turkic-speaking Muslims living in these sparsely populated areas did not belong to the Han Chinese language and cultural sphere and could not be easily integrated into it. They were therefore regarded as separate ethnic groups that differed from the Han Chinese.

On the other hand, the Manchu conquerors themselves began to adapt to their new environment. They adopted Chinese customs, especially the Chinese language and writing system. Manchu script, an alphabetical writing system, failed to gain acceptance in China. Manchu died out as a colloquial language during the 18th century, even in the Manchu provinces, where only Chinese was spoken from then on. Only in official documents was Manchu used alongside Chinese throughout the Qing dynasty, although hardly anyone except experts understood it.² However, Manchu continued to serve as a kind of secret means of communication for the 'eight banners', the Manchu ruling class of the Qing dynasty which was separate from the rest of the Han Chinese population.

¹ https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/c/ca/Qing_Dynasty_1820.png (accessed: 10.1.2020; own editing).

² The situation was similar in the old German Empire, where Latin remained the official language and language of science for centuries.

In the first half of the 19th century, China began its gradual decline as the undisputed world power. The 'Middle Kingdom' was now paying the price for having focused on itself for centuries and no longer acting as an international maritime power. As a result, China was helplessly at the mercy of the Western colonial powers advancing across the seas and was increasingly forced onto the defensive. The empire's increasing loss of power finally culminated in the so-called *Opium Wars* (1839-1842 and 1856-1860), which were lost to the militarily superior Western colonial powers, led by Great Britain.

China was forced to accept opium as payment for Chinese export goods. It was a profitable business for opium producers in British India and at the same time had the effect of making large sections of the Chinese population drug-addicted and passive. In addition, the weakened Chinese Empire was forced to enter into "*unequal* treaties"² with the victors, which placed the most economically important Chinese port cities – such as Tientsin, Qingdao (Tsingtao), Shanghai, Canton (Guangzhou) and Hong Kong – under the control of foreign powers. At the same time, China was shaken for years by an extremely costly civil war, the Taiping Rebellion (1850-1864), which was directed against Manchu rule. It could only be suppressed with foreign help, which made the empire's great loss of power and prestige generally visible. Other internal unrest followed.

As a result, China lost large parts of its territory in Central Asia and Manchuria to Russia in the 1850s to 1870s, and later also Outer Mongolia. In addition, the empire was defeated in the war against Japan (1894-95) and had to cede Taiwan. In the course of the suppression of the anti-imperialist "Boxer Rebellion" of 1900-01, Beijing was even occupied and plundered by an international intervention army, with the German expeditionary force participating in the action distinguishing itself through particular ruthlessness.⁴ To this day, these events are seen in China as severe humiliations inflicted on the country by foreign powers.

¹ See Crossley (2002).

² See, for example: Vogelsang (2021, p. 442 ff.).

³ The territories conquered by the Manchus in the Central Asian Ferghana Valley and the Kazakh Seven Rivers region fell to Russia in the second half of the 19th century. Parts of the former Manchuria, including the port city of Haishenwai, also fell to Russia in 1860, which founded the Russian Pacific port of Vladivostok there. Outer Mongolia, conquered by the Manchus, was also lost later and became a Soviet satellite state in 1924 as the People's Republic of Mongolia. The affiliation of Taiwan, annexed by the Chinese Empire in 1683, which lost its seat on the UN Security Council to the People's Republic of China in 1971, remains controversial to this day.

⁴ Vogelsang (2014, p. 303) writes: "*Fueled by Kaiser Wilhelm II's infamous 'Hun speech' – 'No mercy will be shown, no prisoners will be taken' – the Germans committed terrible massacres against the Chinese population.*"

With the rise of *Chinese nationalism* since the second half of the 19th century, the Manchu ruling dynasty and its policies were increasingly blamed for the empire's unmistakable loss of power. The Qing dynasty was branded by its nationalist opponents as Manchu foreign rule and the source of all evil.

The ubiquitous *queue* was now seen as a visible sign of Manchu rule. It is no coincidence that since then the proverbial 'Chinese queue' has become a symbol of backwardness, mismanagement and bureaucracy. In the eyes of Chinese nationalists, however, this queue was by no means Chinese, but Manchu. It had to be cut off. Even though the Manchus had long since assimilated in terms of language and customs, they were still not accepted as 'real' Chinese – they were foreigners, not 'Han' Chinese.

In this way, the blame for China's decline in the 19th century could be attributed to the 'foreign rule' of the Manchus.¹ They were blamed for China's increasing weakness, which had led to the humiliating "unequal treaties" with the imperial Western powers and Russia. The earlier successes of Qianlong and other important Manchu emperors, which had led to the enormous expansion and prosperity of the empire, were, on the other hand, considered an integral part of Chinese history.² Once the old Manchu braid had been abolished, a self-determined "Han" Chinese order could take its place and restore China to its former greatness – or so nationalist circles thought at the time.

At the beginning of 1912, after the forced abdication of the last Manchu emperor, Puyi, a new Han Chinese order 'without pigtails' actually saw the light of day. However, it did not become a peaceful order for a long time. The Republic of China, proclaimed after the end of the empire, was shaken by decades of grueling civil wars. Added to this was the long struggle against the invasion of Japanese troops and the Japanese satellite state of Manchukuo in Manchuria (1937-1945).

In 1949, Mao Zedong, who is said to have worn a pigtail as a child, finally emerged victorious with his Communist-led 'People's Liberation Army'. He assumed control over the entire territory of the empire that had been overthrown in 1911, with the exception of Taiwan, Hong Kong and Macao.

¹ Crossley (2002, pp. 4ff., 192ff.), Dabringhaus (2006, pp. 11, 205).

² Wolfram Eberhard (1980, p. 341) writes: '*The Chinese quickly forgot what it meant that they themselves, like the Mongols, Tibetans and Turkestanis, had been conquered by the Manchus. And so the Chinese began to regard Mongolia, Tibet and Turkestan (Sinkiang) as parts of China. (...) So it came to pass that when the Manchu dynasty abdicated in 1911, the Mongols and Tibetans, but also some of the Turkestanis, considered themselves independent, while the Chinese regarded these countries as parts of China.*' See also Perdue (2005, p. 506ff.), Dabringhaus (2006, p. 12f.).



*'Chinese braids', then and now:
Working lunch around 1880,
visit to the barber with opium pipe around 1905,
boy with practical trousers, 2005¹*

¹ Sources: https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/4/40/Chinese_Meal_by_Lai_Afong%2C_c1880.JPG?uselang=de; https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Street_hairdressers.jpg?uselang=de; https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Chinas_Jugend.jpg (accessed: 20 November 2020).



Mao Zedong (1893–1976)¹

The newly established People's Republic of China under Mao Zedong's communist rule was also initially shaken by major crises. The 'Great Leap Forward' (*da yue jin*, 1958–1961) resulted in famine and death for millions of people. The 'Proletarian Cultural Revolution' (*wuchan jieji wenhua dageming*, 1966-1976), initiated a few years later by Mao Zedong himself and supported by radical Red Guards, left countless victims and caused enormous destruction throughout the country.

¹ Portrait, Kashgar Museum. Foto: Marga Kreckel, Card 3, P1010 465.



Deng Xiaoping, with US President Jimmy Carter in the background, 1979¹

It was only after Mao Zedong's death in 1976 that Deng Xiaoping (1904-1997) came to power in 1978 and initiated radical economic reforms, leading to a second, this time successful, 'Great Leap Forward' at breathtaking speed. Since then, the People's Republic of China has become an economically strong and awe-inspiring world power, under the leadership of Xi Jinping since 2012.

¹[https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/1/16/Deng_Xiaoping_and_Jimmy_Carter_at_the_arrival_ceremony_for_the_Vice_Premier_of_China. - NARA - 183157-restored%28cropped%29.jpg](https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/1/16/Deng_Xiaoping_and_Jimmy_Carter_at_the_arrival_ceremony_for_the_Vice_Premier_of_China_-_NARA_-_183157-restored%28cropped%29.jpg) (accessed: 10 October 2020).

With the end of the Manchus as China's "foreign rulers", however, the crucial question of who exactly should be considered the actual *people of China* (*zhonghua minzu*) remained unanswered and continues to smolder to this day. There are different interpretations of this¹:

- Do *all* citizens of the multi-ethnic state of China belong to the Chinese people – including the unpopular Manchus, Mongols, Uyghurs and Tibetans, who often do not even speak Chinese (the 'citizenship' variant)?
- Or are only the *Han Chinese* to be regarded as 'real' Chinese ('ethnic' variant)?
- Or are all *Chinese-speaking* citizens considered Chinese – which would then also include the Manchus, who have now become completely Sinicized ('linguistic and cultural nationalist' variant)?

The first *option*, simply recognizing all citizens living within the borders of the People's Republic with Chinese nationality as fully valid Chinese, regardless of their origin, language or religion, was not realistic in the 19th and early 20th centuries, the age of 'ethnic' or even racist nationalism.² After all, the national identity of modern China had emerged in opposition to the Manchu Qing dynasty, which was perceived as foreign rule.

The second, '*ethnic*' *variant*, led to all sorts of misconceptions. In the Han Dynasty (206 BC to 220 AD), from which the name Han derives, many peoples lived and many languages were spoken. This made it difficult to identify a distinct group of historical Han Chinese from whom all present-day Han Chinese are descended. This led to a wide variety of attempts at explanation:

Even the mythical Yellow Emperor, who is said to have ruled China in the 3rd millennium BC and was half god, half man, was considered to be the forefather of the modern Han.

The equally legendary hero Yu, to whom the Xia dynasty (c. 2000–1600 BC) is attributed, was also considered by many to be the founder of Han identity.

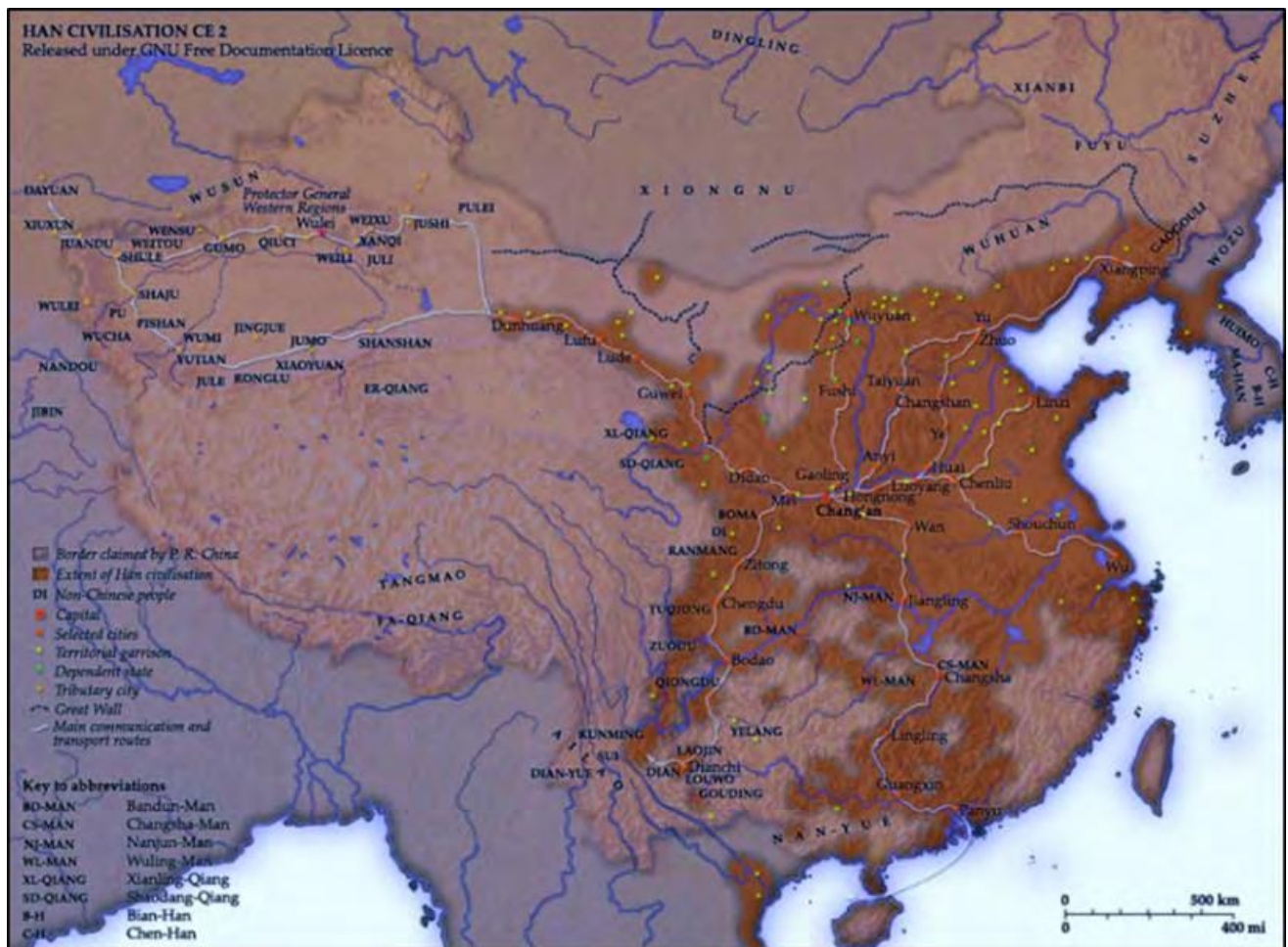
Another theory of ancestry even declared the prehistoric 'Beijing Man', whose 400,000-600,000-year-old fossil bones were found in the 1920s, to be evidence of the historical existence of a distinct Han people.

In addition, there was also the view that the Han tribe had migrated from Babylon in ancient times and settled in central China, in the plains around the Yellow River and the Yangtze River.

¹ See the following: Gladney (2004), Mullaney et al. (2012), Leibold (2012), Joniak-Lüthi (2015), Ma (2017).

² Sun Yat-sen, the founder of the Republic of China, attempted to do just that, but without lasting success: five ethnic groups were distinguished – Han, Manchu, Mongols, Tibetans and Muslims (Hui). Together they formed the "Chinese people" (*zhonghua minzu*), the national people of the Republic of China.

³ See Leibold (2012) for more on these theories of ancestry.



Spread of Han civilization: situation in the 2nd century AD¹

None of these constructions and speculations could hold up in the long run. They have been replaced by a third, '*linguistic and cultural nationalist*' variant, which has now largely become the official view of history in the People's Republic of China.² It is based on the conviction that the densely populated central plains of China were something like the historical 'cradle' of the Chinese language and culture. This is where the Shang dynasty (c. 1570-1045 BC) ruled, from which the first tangible evidence of Chinese syllabic writing has been discovered. It was also the centre of power of the first historically documented emperor of China, Qin Shihuangdi (221-210 BC).³ The basic idea here is that since the founding of the empire by the Qin dynasty (221-207 BC) and the Han dynasty (206 BC to 220 AD) to the present day, China has been held together by the common Han Chinese written language and culture – even during the long periods of foreign rule, fragmentation and anarchy. Despite all the changes, this authentic core of China is assumed to have been preserved across space and time.

¹ Source: https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/3/32/Han_Civilisation.png (accessed: 10 January 2020).

² Mullaney (2012, p. 12).

³ The tomb of Emperor Qin Shihunagdi near the ancient imperial city of Chang'an (today: Xi'an) has been guarded for over 2000 years by the famous Terracotta Army, which was only rediscovered and excavated in 1974.

Over the past millennia, this 'authentic core' is said to have spread like a *rolling snowball* from its relatively small area of origin in central China, as did the Chinese Empire. The many peoples living in the domain of the imperial throne assimilated over time and became Han Chinese themselves, thus becoming an integral part of Han civilisation.¹

This 'snowball theory' differs significantly from the self-image of China's main rival in global politics today, the United States. The United States of America, a country of immigration for centuries, sees itself as a '*melting pot*' of many peoples and cultures.

While this melting pot is said to have given rise to a completely new American society and culture, the Chinese snowball theory assumes that the ancient core of Han culture has spread further and further like a snowball. In doing so, it has absorbed many new cultural influences, but its core has remained unchanged to this day.

The Chinese snowball myth was largely developed by the internationally renowned Chinese sociologist *Fei Xiaotong* (1910–2005)². The historical picture painted by Fei is, of course, a gross simplification. However, even modern Western sinologists, who describe Chinese history in a much more nuanced way than Fei Xiaotong, accept the basic idea of the extraordinary longevity and expansive capacity of Chinese writing and ruling culture.³

¹ See Duarte (2009, chap. 5), Zhao (2020, chap. 2).

² After completing his university studies in China, *Fei Xiaotong* (1910–2005) earned his doctorate in England under the renowned ethnologist Bronislaw Malinowski (1938). After returning to China, he published several studies on Chinese society and the ethnic groups living there. Although Fei himself did not espouse communist ideas, he rose to become an influential politician and prominent university professor in Beijing in the early years of the People's Republic of China. His folklore research made him one of the intellectual fathers of the Chinese Minzu system. See Fei (1981, 1988, 2017), Xu (2012) and the report on a high-profile symposium in honor of Fei Xiaotong (Liu 2018).

In 1957, Fei was attacked and publicly humiliated as a 'bourgeois deviant'; he was banned from teaching and publishing. During the Cultural Revolution, he was temporarily interned and personally harassed. It was not until 1978, after more than twenty years, that Fei Xiaotong was fully rehabilitated. Until his death, he was able to work at Peking University as the highly respected doyen of Chinese sociology and an advocate for China's international opening (Pasternak 1988, Hamilton/Wang 1992, Feuchtwang 2005).

³ See, for example, Vogelsang (2021).



Professor Fei Xiaotong in London, 1986¹

However, since 1949, the communist-ruled People's Republic of China has seen itself as an anti-imperialist state that rejects all forms of colonial rule and advocates for the independence of colonized peoples.² This self-image is difficult to reconcile with the view that today's Han Chinese dominance in China is primarily due to the fact that the Chinese Empire once conquered neighboring peoples and cultures and 'Sinicized' them more or less by force. For that would mean that China itself has acted as a colonial power that subjected its entire empire to its own 'civilizing mission', synchronizing the entire country and bringing it into line.

¹ <https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/8/87/Xiaotong.jpg>. Taken during a visit to the London School of Economics in 1986, where Fei Xiaotong had received his doctorate in 1938 (accessed: 20 January 2020).

² See, for example, Pan (2018)

This is where Fei Xiaotong's thesis of China's *unity in diversity*¹ comes into play, which has become the official interpretation² in today's People's Republic of China: Fei did not deny that the Chinese Empire had expanded to its present borders primarily through military conquests throughout its long history. He also emphasized that foreign powers had repeatedly ruled China, starting with the legendary Xiongnu, against whom the emperors of the Qin and Han dynasties (221 BC to 220 AD) had built the first Great Wall, followed later by the Mongols (Yuan dynasty, 1279-1368) and finally the Manchus (Qing dynasty, 1644-1911). All of them were originally nomadic and pastoral peoples from the north who eventually settled in the Chinese heartland. They all freely adopted the language and culture of the Han, but at the same time enriched it with elements of their own culture.

Fei Xiaotong attributes this voluntary 'self-Sinicization' of the originally nomadic conquerors to the superiority of the highly developed farming and irrigation culture of the Han, which had led to the efficient organization of the empire since the earliest times. He emphasizes that *superior cultural techniques* had already been introduced under the first Qin emperor, which continue to shape China to this day, and highlights the following points:³

- Under Emperor Qin Shihuangdi (221-210 BC), the actual founder of the empire, sustainable conditions for the *emergence of a common Chinese transport and economic area* were developed. In particular, a uniform system of weights and measures and the standardization of the track gauge of all transport vehicles throughout China were enforced.
- Similarly, the *principle of a multi-level political structure* for the country, divided into provinces, districts and prefectures, all subject to a common central government and bureaucratic administration, was established at that time and has remained in effect to this day, although it has been modified repeatedly over the years.

The basic prerequisite for this was the unification and standardization of a common writing system, the Chinese characters. They had become established throughout the country as a binding communication system that enabled understanding across language and dialect boundaries and also ensured the spread of Han Chinese education and culture. Xu Jieshun, a modern proponent of Fei's snowball theory, writes that 'without Chinese characters, there would be no Han Chinese culture.'⁴ The influential Beijing state philosopher Zhao Tingyang speaks quite naturally of the "Han culture carried by the characters".⁵

- After all, literate merchants, local dignitaries and high-ranking government officials in the emperor's vast multilingual and multi-ethnic domain had formed a gigantic *Han Chinese network* that had ensured the gradual unification of the pluralistic multi-ethnic empire. Fei Xiaotong does not deny that pressure to assimilate was also exerted in the process.

¹ See Fei (1981, 1988, 1992, 2015).

² See, for example: Xu (2012), Zhao (2020, p. 122ff.).

³ Fei (1988, pp. 179, 212).

⁴ Xu (2012, p. 104)

⁵ Zhao (2020: p. 175).

This explains why, according to Fei Xiaotong, over ninety per cent of China's population today identify themselves as Han Chinese – despite the fact that there are approximately eight mutually unintelligible Chinese languages and dialects with numerous sub-dialects in China.¹ This is because these languages are indistinguishable from one another in written form due to the uniform Chinese syllabic script. Furthermore, since the 1950s, Mandarin Chinese (Putonghua), spoken in Beijing, has been established as the common Chinese high and administrative language throughout China. Today, it is taught in schools everywhere and disseminated in the media (see below, Chapter 10).

Above all, school lessons throughout China also convey a *common national view of history*, in which China's development over more than two thousand years is presented as the history of a country continuing to the present day. This unified view of history can be traced back to the imperial court historian *Sima Qian* (c. 145-86 BC). It presented the entire history of China from mythical prehistoric times to the end of the empire in a standardized timeline organized according to ruling dynasties, which was later continuously updated. Sinologist Kai Vogelsang writes:

*It is not easy to escape the suggestive power of this view of history. After all, Chinese historians have been conveying the image of a homogeneous, advanced civilization that developed within the framework of a powerful, unified empire for over 2,000 years. Although its rulers may have come and gone in the cyclical rise and fall of dynasties, and borders may have shifted here and there, the unity of tradition remained unshakeable.*²

But for Fei Xiaotong, there is something else that has connected all Han Chinese since ancient times: it is the *agricultural way of life and culture* that has spread from the Han heartland in central China over the centuries. According to his assessment, most of the 55 ethnic minorities (*minzu*) still existing in China today live primarily in sparsely populated mountainous, desert and steppe areas. They have largely preserved their cultural characteristics, but have now become linguistically integrated – with the exception of the Tibetans, the Uyghurs and part of the Mongolian population.

The enlightened patriot Fei Xiaotong was far removed from any Han chauvinism, as well as from any tendency to mystify history. He was well aware that China had by no means always been a united country throughout its long history, but had also experienced extended periods of political fragmentation. Today, however, he believed that preserving the unity of the Chinese state was absolutely essential.

Fei, who had conducted ethnological research in China himself, was also convinced that ethnic minorities, especially in the vast, inaccessible border areas, were less well equipped than the Han Chinese for the industrialization and economic opening of China that had been gathering momentum since the 1980s. This is because the minorities are *'are generally inferior to the Hans in the level of culture and technology indispensable for the development of modern industry.'*³ Fei argues that to catch up or to compensate for this deficit, the Han Chinese majority society must support the minorities – especially Mongols, Tibetans and Uyghurs.⁴

¹ For example, Cantonese, which is the colloquial language spoken in the south, in the region around the major cities of Guangzhou, Shenzhen and Hong Kong, differs significantly from Mandarin, which is spoken in the capital *Beijing* and has become the basis of Standard Chinese (*Putonghua*). The number of Chinese regional languages, sub-languages and dialects distinguished by sinologists varies. Some of them are as different from each other as Italian and French. Karlgren (1989, p. 18) even speaks of a 'Babylonian confusion of languages' between the numerous Chinese dialects. Gladney (2004, p. 7f.) distinguishes eight Chinese regional languages: *Mandarin, Wu, Yue, Xiang, Hakka, Gan, Southern Min and Northern Min*.

² Vogelsang (2014, p. 7).

³ Fei (1988, p.218f.).

⁴ Fei considers the Muslim *Hui* (or Dungan) people, who are also considered "Minzu" and have lived throughout China for centuries and are fully integrated linguistically, to be a special case.

However, In his eyes attempts to force their assimilation are misguided. Of course, mastery of the Chinese standard language and script as a common means of communication must be promoted and enforced everywhere, and the findings of modern science should also find their place in all schools in China. At the same time, however, the preservation of the Mongolian, Tibetan and Uyghur languages and cultures must also receive active state support. He emphatically concluded his famous 'Tanner Lecture' in 1988 with the words:

*,Through the spirit of unity and mutual assistance among all ethnic groups, we can achieve the purpose of common prosperity, and continue to develop a higher level of unified multi-ethnic integration. To use a metaphor, at this level, the Chinese nation will be like a large, beautiful garden made up of one hundred different kinds of flowers.'*¹

The allusion to Mao Zedong's famous slogan from 1956, '*Let a hundred flowers bloom, let a hundred schools of thought contend*,' is unmistakable in Fei's formulation.

Fei Xiaotong's choice of words stands for a relatively cautious integration of all ethnic minorities into the modern Han Chinese nation state. This 'soft' political line was also largely pursued in Xinjiang in the 1980s, after the end of the repressive Cultural Revolution.

However, the tide turned again in June 1989 with the violent suppression of the student protests at the *Tiananmen* Square in Beijing. At that time, the Chinese Communist Party and government began to intensify their fight against the so-called 'three evils' (terrorism, separatism and religious fundamentalism). From then on, the political course hardened, including against the Uyghurs.²

However, even an author such as Fei Xiaotong, who appealed for tolerance and welcomed diversity, agreed with political hardliners and Han chauvinists on one point: They are all ultimately convinced of the *superiority* of the Han Chinese majority society and its culture. From this perspective, '*minorities are considered backward per se while the Han are considered the sole bearers of modernity*'³

¹ Quote from the "Tanner Lecture on Human Values," which Fei Xiaotong delivered in English at the Chinese University of Hong Kong in November 1988. There are three slightly different printed versions of this lecture (Fei 1988, Fei 2015, pp. 77-108, and Fei 2017). The 2017 version (p. 30) is quoted here, in which Fei's allusion to Mao Zedong's famous slogan from 1956, "*Let a hundred flowers bloom, let a hundred schools of thought contend*," is particularly clear.

² See, for example, Tobin (2020) and Alpermann (2021).

³ Alpermann (2021, p. 67).

Fei also shared the view of the Chinese party and state leadership that China's national borders are *inviolable*, however they may have come about. Separatist aspirations must therefore be combated – a position that is known to be taken by most states in the world and is also enshrined in the UN Charter.

Whether one finds Fei's 'snowball' theory convincing or not, the fact is that over ninety percent of China's huge population is now considered 'Han' and sees itself as belonging to *one people* with its own culture and a long dynastic history. The Han Chinese are naturally regarded as *the* dominant ethnic group of the People's Republic of China, continuing this historical tradition.

Incidentally, the Chinese hardly differ from the Americans in this respect. In order to justify the common affiliation of many peoples and cultures to *one* nation, China refers to the snowball myth, while the USA refers to the melting pot saga. In both countries, however, the same rule applies: those who do not belong to the 'actual' national population, whether as a minority or as migrants, have a difficult time.

Unfortunately, this bitter truth can be found today in most nation states around the world, not only in the People's Republic of China and the United States of America, currently the two most powerful countries on earth. They all adhere to a kind of '*territorial nationalism*'. All territories within their own borders are considered indispensable components of their nation state, to be defended by force of arms if necessary. The people living there must respect this *raison d'état*.

Against this backdrop, if one wishes to better understand the unique situation in the Chinese border region of Xinjiang, it is important to remain mindful of this context. In today's Xinjiang, this almost inevitably leads to tensions between the Han Chinese and the Uyghurs, the two largest ethnic groups in the Chinese Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region. We will address the important question of what *special* characteristics Han Chinese and Uyghurs have, to what extent they differ from each other and how they actually live together in Xinjiang in more detail in later chapters (see especially chapters 9 and 12).

But first, let us return to the historical beginnings of Xinjiang. We will begin by looking back to a time long ago, when people in China first became aware of the existence of the "western regions" (*xiyu*) on the edge or outside the Middle Kingdom. We will then take a closer look at the different phases in the history of present-day Xinjiang, which at times was characterized by a strong Chinese presence, but for long periods also by an almost complete absence of Chinese influence.

¹ This is the title of Dabringhaus (2006), 'Territorial Nationalism in China'.

These centuries of ups and downs only came to an initial conclusion in 1759 with the final conquest and subsequent gradual integration of the whole of Xinjiang into the Chinese Empire. Until then, the people living in Xinjiang had largely remained a 'historyless and faceless'¹ and even nameless people, who did not appear on the world stage and in whom little interest was taken.

Initially, Xinjiang's political integration into the Chinese Empire did little to change this. After all, China itself had increasingly become a pawn of the imperial great powers since the mid-19th century. They forced China to sign '*unequal* treaties', which meant a bitter loss of face for the proud empire, the effects of which are still felt today.

After the fall of the emperor in 1911, China was weakened by civil wars for many decades. Added to this was the struggle against the Japanese invasion from 1937 onwards. After 1949, the turmoil of the communist revolution followed, which lasted until the death of Mao Zedong and also affected Xinjiang.

It was only at the turn of the 21st century, since China has once again become a self-confident world power, that Xinjiang, with its Uyghur majority population, has been taken seriously by the international community. Ironically, this is precisely because Xinjiang now belongs to the People's Republic of China, which has become a powerful rival to the "Western powers" that had previously set the tone.

In the following chapters, we will take the renewed public interest in Xinjiang and the Uyghurs in the Western world as an opportunity to provide a more detailed historical overview of this region and its population. However, we do not want to do this in the form of a condensed summary of the 'history of Xinjiang', as would otherwise be customary. This is because there is no consensus between Chinese and Western historians on the appropriate representation of Xinjiang's history on which to base such a summary: the former tend to view Xinjiang as a very small, subordinate piece of the puzzle within two thousand years of Chinese unity, while the latter emphasize the Muslim roots and ethnic distinctiveness of today's majority population in Xinjiang, with its own unique Central Asian history. We want to avoid this conflict by selecting five prominent examples from Xinjiang's past in the first part of our book selecting five prominent examples from Xinjiang's past – we call them '*historical highlights*'.

All of the examples from Xinjiang's history presented below have something to do with the Silk Road. Chinese, Western and Uyghur historians are almost unanimous on one point: They all assume that the Silk Road has been the most important overland connection between China and the Eurasian West since ancient times and that one of its key locations were the desert tracks that ran along the edges of the Taklamakan Desert in what is now Xinjiang. We can take advantage of this fact. We will attempt in the following chapters to explain and illustrate how Xinjiang, as the hub of the Silk Road, has repeatedly come to the attention of the world. Over the centuries, the region has retained many of its unique characteristics. At the same time, however, it has also undergone fundamental changes time and again.

¹ Reference to the monumental work *Europe and the People Without History* by Eric R. Wolf (2010, first edition 1982), in which the author corrects Friedrich Engels' idea of 'peoples without history'.

Part One

Historical spotlights: The multiple 'discoveries' of Xinjiang and the Eastern Silk Road

Chapter Two

China 'discovers' the Western Regions: Xuanzang and the multicultural early history of Xinjiang

Discoverers and discoveries

When one says that a country, a people or a culture has been discovered, then as a rule, the 'discoverers' are not locals, but strangers. Typical explorers are well-travelled personalities who, upon their return, report on unknown things and events that they claim to have experienced themselves in distant lands or heard about.¹ But only if they succeed in attracting public attention to their discoveries in their own part of the world can these discoveries become an integral part of generally accepted knowledge there. If public attention is lacking or wanes, discoveries fall into oblivion.²

This was the case, for example, with *Leif Erikson*, the Viking from Iceland who 'discovered' America around the year 1000, without this being noticed or remembered by the wider European public at the time. It was not until 1492 that the Genoese *Christopher Columbus* became the recognized European discoverer of America – even though he himself was not aware of this.³ Since then, America has become an integral part of public consciousness. Columbus himself, with his voyages of discovery to Central and South America, has become a renowned explorer who lives on in memory.

The same applies to the "explorers" of Xinjiang and the eastern Silk Road, who will be discussed in the following chapters. Not the simple travelers on the Silk Road are considered to be its discoverers, but only certain famous personalities who reported on their travels and discoveries in a way that attracted public attention.

¹ One should not be overly guided by the modern question of the genuineness and authenticity of such explorer reports and perhaps even seek to expose them as plagiarism. It goes without saying that in the famous medieval texts by *Marco Polo* or *Ibn Battuta*, the authors' own experiences are mixed with mere hearsay and various superstitions, and that reports by other authors have also been incorporated. Copyright issues were not yet a concern at that time. What mattered was the novelty or sensational value of what was reported (for general information on the reliability of medieval travel reports, see Schmieder 1994, chap. II, and Euben 2006, chap. III).

² The Icelandic "Vinland Sagas", which were only passed down orally, tell of Leif Erikson's voyages to America. They were not written down until centuries later. There is now also archaeological evidence of the Vikings' presence in North America.

³ Christopher Columbus himself never accepted that he had not reached India, but rather a new continent called 'America', which does not owe its name to him, but to the now almost forgotten Florentine navigator Amerigo Vespucci.

From today's perspective, however, it is problematic that the encounters between the great explorers and the people who lived in the countries they discovered rarely took place on an equal footing. Since Columbus's time, explorers have almost always been representatives of militarily and economically superior powers. Above all, they were members of Western culture, who naturally considered their own values to be the measure of all things. Because of their supposedly superior culture, their white skin color or their Christian religion, most of them considered themselves to be superior. Columbus, for example, regarded the indigenous population of Central America as "savages" who could be despised, enslaved and converted to Christianity.

However, this was not always the case. The early explorers, who will be discussed first, the Chinese monk *Xuanzang* (c. 602–664), the Venetian merchant *Marco Polo* (1254–1324) and also the Portuguese Jesuit *Benedikt Goës* (1562–1607) – all of them were rather reserved, unlike the many pompous Westerners of later times. These early explorers approached their host countries not only with reservations, but above all with curiosity and great respect. They all travelled through southern Xinjiang and recounted what they experienced and found there. In doing so, they left us three valuable historical snapshots that allow us to take a direct look at the desert tracks and oasis towns on the edge of the Tarim Basin before they were subjected to a strongly Eurocentric view by Western explorers.

In the 19th and early 20th centuries, European explorers painted a completely new picture of Xinjiang. Geographers from Europe such as *Nikolai Prschewalski* (1839-1888), *Francis Younghusband* (1863-1942) and *Sven Hedin* (1865-1952), and archaeologists such as *Dimitri Klementz* (1847-1914), *Aurel Stein* (1862-1943), *Paul Pelliot* (1878-1945), *Albert Grünwedel* (1856-1935) and *Albert von Le Coq* (1860-1930) systematically surveyed the Tarim Basin and its surroundings in the years before the First World War and reported on their findings to great public acclaim.

They all worked during the heyday of European colonialism, whose view of humanity was still close to that of Christopher Columbus: As representatives of a 'superior culture', it was considered legitimate to appropriate exotic countries and their treasures. The 'natives' living there and their way of life were considered backward. According to their understanding, the European explorers in Xinjiang found themselves in a kind of cultural 'no man's land' whose treasures needed to be found and saved. This will be discussed in more detail in chapters 5 and 6 below.

But first, let us go back fourteen hundred years to the early Middle Ages and accompany the Chinese monk *Xuanzang* on his journeys through what is now southern Xinjiang.

Xuanzang and Marco Polo

Xuanzang (also: *Hiuen-Tsiang*, 602 - 664), a Buddhist monk from central China, is often referred to as the 'Marco Polo of the East'¹. From a Western perspective, this is a title of honor. However, Marco Polo (1264-1324), whom we will discuss in more detail in the next chapter, could just as well be called the 'Xuanzang of the West': Both spent decades travelling, Xuanzang for 16 years and Marco Polo for as long as 24 years. They got to know the areas they travelled through very well. Both Xuanzang and Marco Polo also described southern Xinjiang, the hub of the ancient Silk Road, from first-hand experience. Both were outstanding personalities who knew how to present themselves in the media of their time.

Today, every schoolchild in China knows Xuanzang, and in Europe, Marco Polo. However, there are significant differences between these two legendary travelers: not only are they separated by more than 600 years, but their respective missions were also very different in nature. Marco Polo, the son of a Venetian merchant, travelled to China on a mission of the highest importance: his father and uncle, whom he accompanied, were said to be the bearers of an official letter from Pope Gregory X to the Emperor of China.

Xuanzang, on the other hand, was a Chinese monk who is said to have set out on his journey to the West for purely religious reasons. In doing so, he is even said to have defied the express prohibition of the Tang Emperor Taizong to cross the borders of the Chinese Empire. Many years later, after his spectacular return from his great journey, Xuanzang is said to have been welcomed back with open arms. As a highly honored guest and advisor to Emperor Taizong, and at his express request, he was commissioned to write an official travelogue about his experiences.

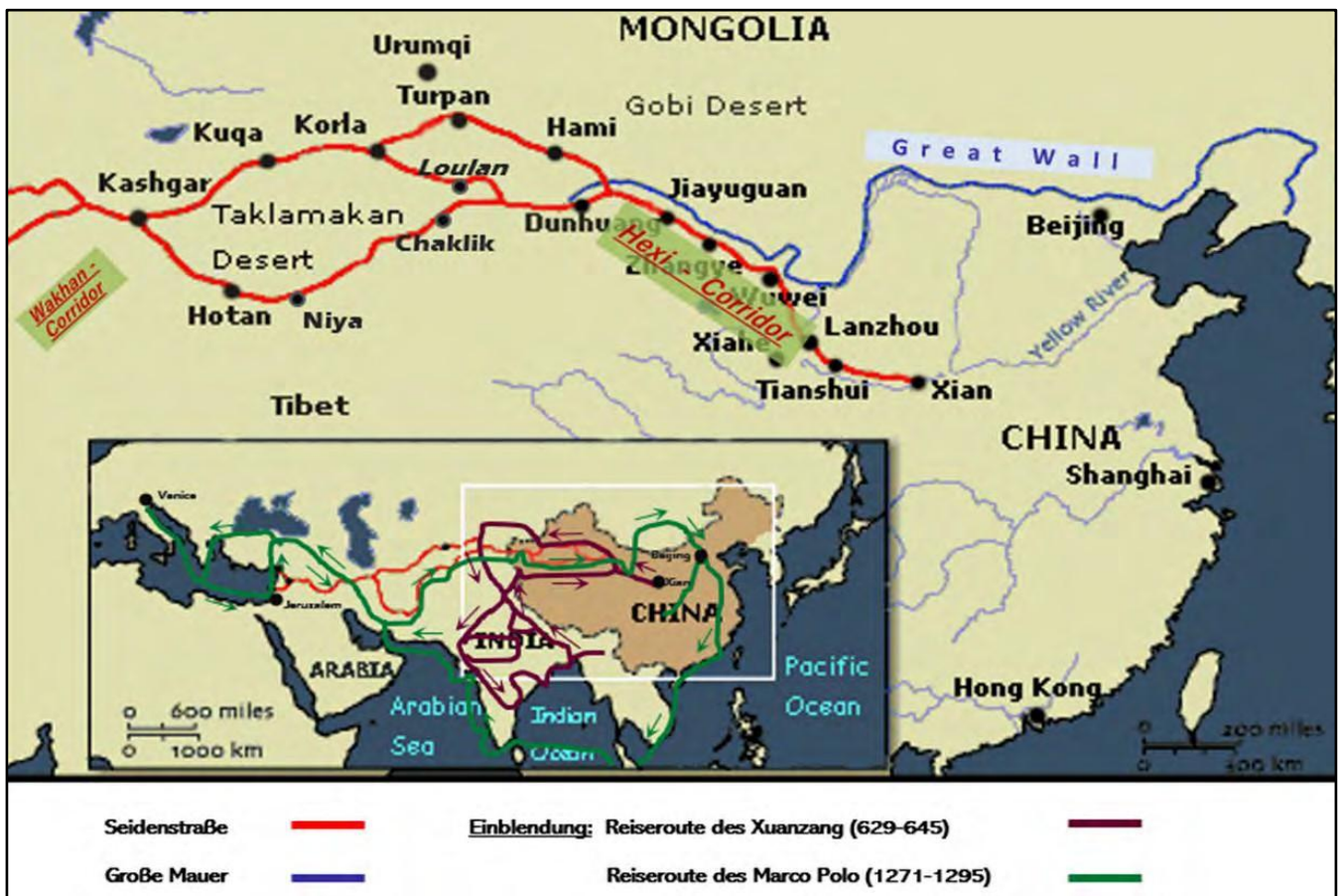
Marco Polo's return, on the other hand, was far less happy. Shortly after his return to Venice, he is said to have been taken prisoner of war in hostile Genoa. As a prisoner, he dictated his travelogue to a fellow prisoner, which later made him famous.

Neither Xuanzang nor Marco Polo should be understood as reporters striving for objectivity in today's sense. Demons, ghosts, mythical creatures they claim to have seen, legends they were told, and their own value judgements populate their accounts just as much as sober descriptions. The distinctions between what they themselves experienced or researched and what they learned only from hearsay or took from other sources, or perhaps even invented, are rarely clear.² Nevertheless, their reports shaped the knowledge of the educated and powerful in China and Europe for centuries: what people in China knew about the 'Western Regions' (including India) was largely due to Xuanzang, while the West owed its knowledge of the 'Far East' primarily to Marco Polo.¹

¹ This is the title of the foreword written by Ulf Diederichs to the German edition of Grousset (1986).

² See Schmieder (1994, chap. II).

³ 'Rihla', the extensive account by the Moroccan Ibn Battuta (1304-1377) of his more or less authentic travels in Arabia, Central and East Asia and Africa was hardly known in medieval Europe (cf. Euben 2006). However, it is likely that Ibn Battuta himself was familiar with Marco Polo's account and drew on it in part (cf. Elger 2910, p. 230ff.).



Eastern Silk Road and Great Wall, with sketch of the travel routes of Xuanzang and Marco Polo¹

However, the area of present-day Xinjiang, which is of primary interest here, is only dealt with marginally in the reports of the two great explorers. Xuanzang was primarily concerned with India, Marco Polo with China and Southeast Asia. We will not go into detail there, of course, but will focus only on those aspects of their travels that are directly relevant to our topic. That is, we will take advantage of the fact that both of them are known to have travelled through Xinjiang, on the Old Silk Road at the edge of the Taklamakan Desert. Both were intelligent, experienced travelers and keen observers. The reports of their experiences in what is now Xinjiang and the horrors of the desert sound quite reliable overall – perhaps precisely *because* they were rather casual observations that did not concern the core of their respective messages. For us, their reports are like two randomly preserved testimonies from ancient times, giving us a personal insight into the long-gone Xinjiang of the 7th and 13th century, which was so very different from today's Xinjiang with its current problems.

² Source: <https://rlg245finaleproject-blog.tumblr.com/post/485570437/journey-to-the-west-end-of-the-silk-road-route/amp> (edited).

Historical contextualization

Xuanzang travelled through the Tarim Basin in 629-30 on his way there and in 644-45 on his way back from his great pilgrimage to the 'Western Regions'. Before we turn to his account of this, some notes on historical classification are necessary:

In ancient China, the *north* was the only direction from which military threats to the Chinese heartland were repeatedly feared. Nomadic horsemen and herding peoples lived in the northern steppes of Asia. China, on the other hand, was an agricultural country with a settled population. In ancient times, the main threat from the north came from the *Xiongnu*: These were mounted warriors who are often equated with the Huns, who also reached Europe in the 4th and 5th centuries, as we know from the *Nibelungenlied*. Later, the Xiongnu were replaced by Turkic-speaking and Mongolian nomadic tribes who ruled the northern steppe regions and repeatedly invaded the Chinese agricultural areas from there.¹

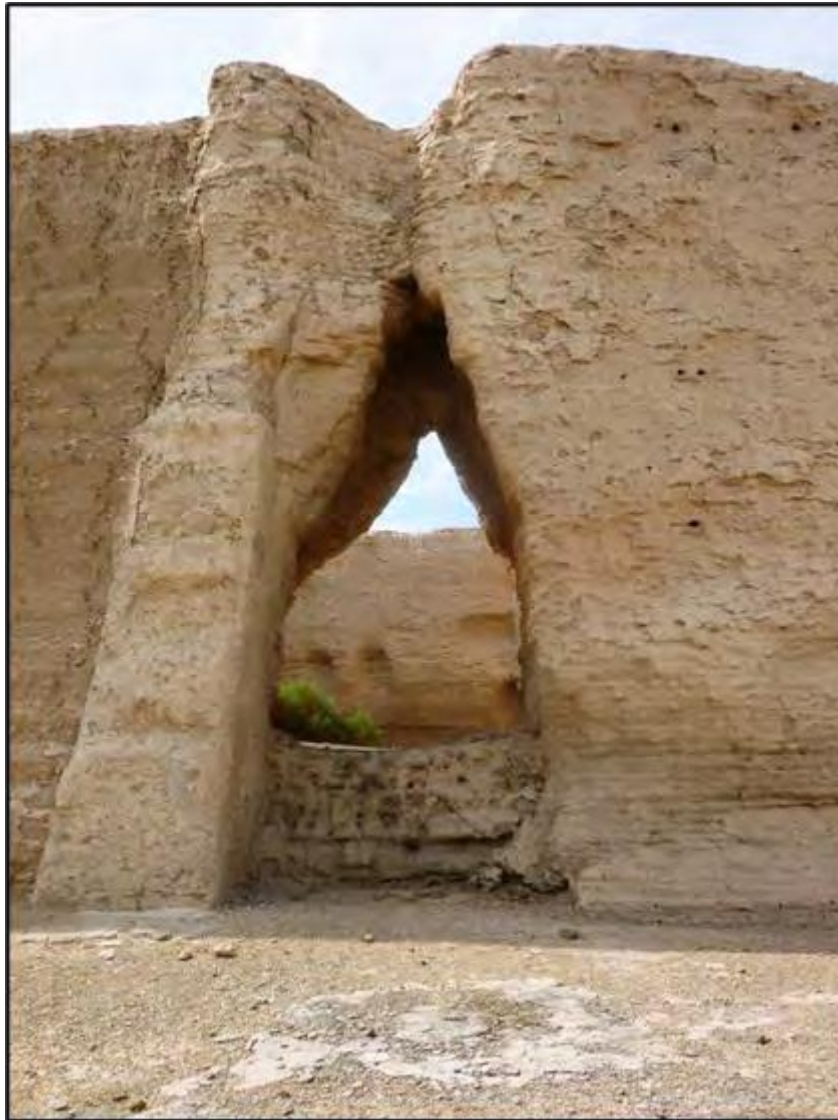
As a protective measure against these invaders, the construction of the Great Wall began in China in ancient times, eventually stretching thousands of kilometers from the Pacific coast far west to the present-day provincial border of Xinjiang.²

The Chinese heartland felt less threatened from *the west*. There were no obvious enemies there⁴ and therefore no Great Wall, only high mountains and deserts that acted as natural barriers. The only route possible for caravans and armies from China to the Eurasian west was the *Hexi Corridor* (also known as the Gansu Corridor), a strip of land framed by mountains and around 1,000 km long, stretching south of the Great Wall from Lanzhou on the Yellow River to the Yumenguan Pass near the border with present-day Xinjiang. On its northern side, the Hexi Corridor is bordered by the inhospitable Gobi Desert, while on its southern side lies the difficult-to-cross Tibetan plateau, which rarely posed a threat.³ (See the map sketch above).

¹ See Barfield (1992).

² In China, large sections of the Great Wall have now been extensively restored. These sections date mainly from more recent times, from the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644). As a "world heritage site", they have become a major tourist attraction. Remains of many other wall structures from earlier times have now been discovered and, in some cases, excavated. See <https://www.chinahighlights.com/greatwall/history/>.

³ A short-lived exception was the Tibetan kingdom in the southwest, which temporarily took control of the Tarim Basin in the 8th century and also advanced into the Hexi Corridor (Millward 2007, p. 33ff.).



Jade Gate Fortress at Yumenguan Pass north of Dunhuang¹

The ancient Silk Road also ran through this corridor. The ancient ruins of *Jade Gate* still stand today on Yumenguan Pass at the western end of the Hexi Corridor, which since ancient times has marked the western border of the territory inhabited by the Chinese. For travelers on the Silk Road, this was a check-point on their way to the "Western Regions". Xuanzang also passed through here.

Since ancient times, the countries beyond the Jade Gate have been understood as the Western Regions (xiyu). In the narrower sense, this included the Tarim Basin in present-day Xinjiang. In the broader sense, it included all other regions of Central Asia that were not under direct Chinese rule, including the Indian subcontinent. via the Central Asian Silk Road, which bypassed the barriers of the Tibetan highlands and the Himalayan mountains to the north and west. Xuanzang is also known to have chosen this route for his 'Journey to the West'.²

¹ https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category:Yumenguan#/media/File:Jade_Gate_entrance_from_the_east_lo-res.jpg.

² From a European perspective, the classification of India as one of the 'Western Regions' seems somewhat unusual. From the perspective of the Chinese heartland, however, India is indeed located far to the west. By land, India was practically only accessible via the Silk Road, and by sea, it was only accessible via the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean.

First exploration of the "Western Regions": Zhang Qian

Xuanzang's famous "Journey to the West" had an equally famous predecessor: even before our era, Emperor Han Wudi (141-87 BC) had commissioned his envoy *Zhang Qian* (c. 185-113 BC) to explore the "Western Regions".



Emperor Wudi seeing off Zhang Qian (kneeling on the left) on his journey to the West¹

Zhang Qian is said to have travelled for a total of 13 years (125-112 BC), covering large areas of what are now Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan and Afghanistan. Zhang Qian's journey was fraught with danger and adversity. He was captured by the Xiongnu and had to spend several years in their captivity. Zhang Qian's account of his experiences was soon included in the official Chinese history of *Sima Qian* (c. 145-90 BC) and thus had a wide impact.²

¹ Source: <https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/3/38/ZhangQianTravels.jpg>. Mural painting from Cave 323 of the Magao Grottoes near Dunhuang, approx. 8th century.

² On Zhang Qian and Sima Qian: See Vogelsang (2021, p. 152ff.). Sima Qian's monumental historical work *Shiji* provided the basis for the division of Chinese history into dynasties, which has shaped the official view of Chinese history to this day.

In China Zhang Qian is now regarded as a kind of forefather" of the Silk Road. The official reports of Zhang Qian led the imperial court to realize that it was in the interests of the traditionally inward-looking "Middle Kingdom" to bring the trade routes to the west under Chinese control.¹ During the Han dynasty, the empire therefore developed a distinct "western policy" for the first time, as mentioned in the first chapter. At that time, numerous Chinese garrisons and guard stations were established and maintained in the Tarim Basin. Their purpose was to protect trade and control travel.

As already indicated above, China's interest in the western regions waned for around half a millennium after the end of the Han dynasty.² In China itself, a long era followed that was marked by internal disagreements and power struggles between rival dynasties and competing warlords.³ The Chinese settlements in the Tarim Basin were abandoned during this period. This allowed independent principalities to emerge there.

Xuanzang's "Journey to the West" and the Tang dynasty's opening to the West

After several centuries of limited Chinese presence in the Tarim Basin, the early Tang dynasty saw a renewed expansion of Chinese rule to the west. This expansion took place primarily under the powerful Emperor Taizong (reigned 626–649) and his successor Gaozong (reigned 649–683).⁴ Taizong founded the 'Tang Empire' which, according to Kai Vogelsang, lasted for about a hundred years, until around 755:

"Taizong ... extended Chinese power further west than ever before. Dunhuang, Hami and Turfan fell back under direct Tang administration; the oasis states along the Taklamakan became protectorates (...) The entire eastern part of the Silk Road was now controlled by the Tang. (...)

*Under Taizong, a hundred-year Pax Sinica began, leading to a unique boom in trade and cultural exchange with all of Asia and even Europe. (...) Merchants from Persia and Assam brought their goods, Buddhists, Manichaeans and Nestorians brought their religions to the most open, culturally diverse empire China had ever known."*⁵

¹ Cf. Stein (1932; pp. 18–24).

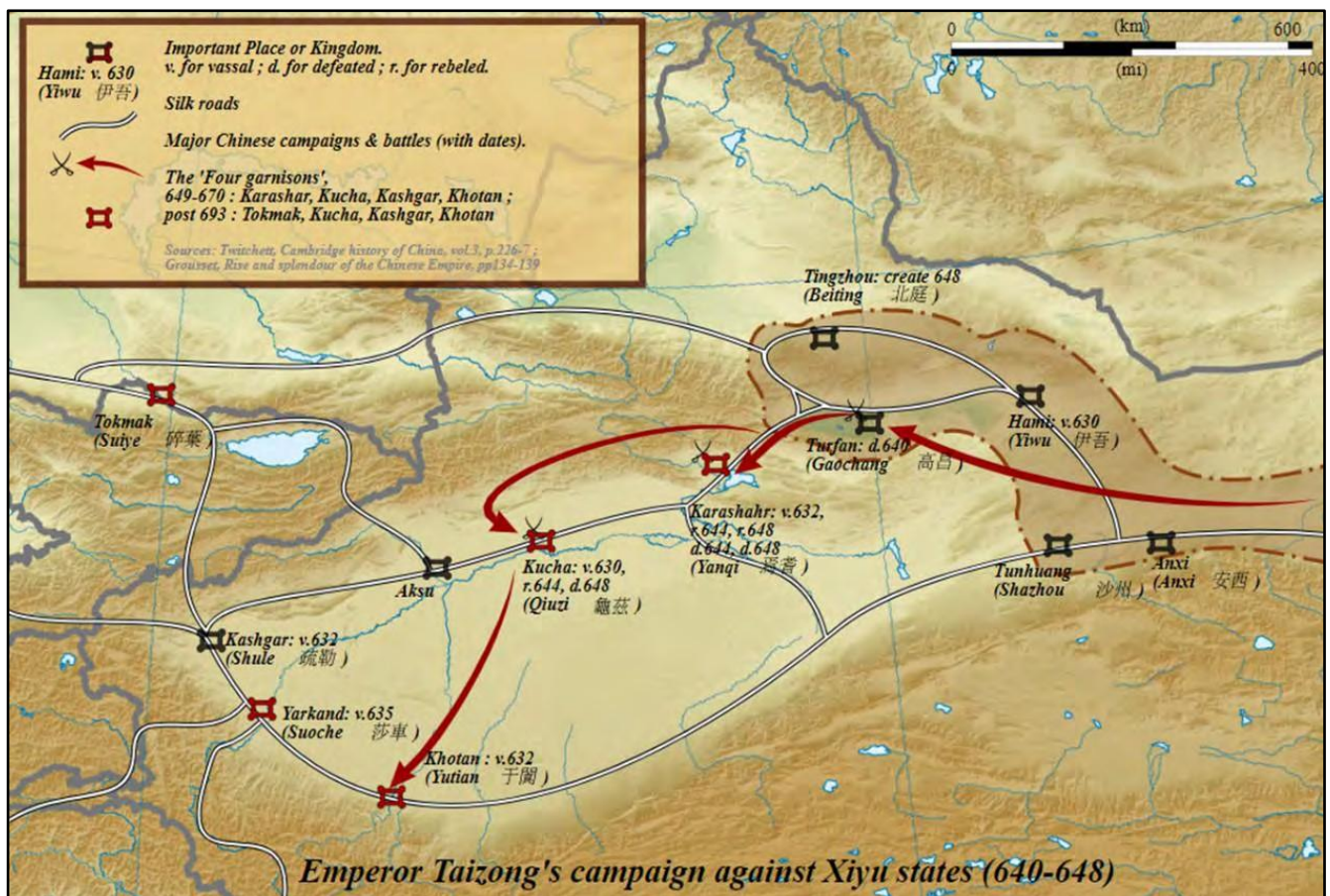
² Cf. Millward (2007, p. 30ff.).

³ According to the official periodization of Chinese history, this was the time of the "Sixteen Kingdoms" (304–420) and the "Southern and Northern Dynasties" (420–589).

⁴ Between 632 and 648, Emperor Taizong's troops conquered the oasis cities in the Tarim Basin and re-established Chinese garrisons there. It was not until the middle of the 8th century that Chinese rule in the Tarim Basin came to an end. Tibetan and later Turkic-speaking princes took their place (Millward 2007, p. 37).

⁵ Vogelsang (2014, pp. 156, 159).

The 16-year-long 'Journey to the West' undertaken by the Chinese monk and Buddhist scholar Xuanzang coincided precisely with the early phase of the Tang dynasty's active western policy. When he set out on his journey in 629 on the northern route of the Silk Road in the Tarim Basin, Chinese influence there was still minimal. When he returned via the southern route in 644-45, it was already firmly in Chinese hands.



Western expansion of the Chinese Empire under Emperor Taizong¹

The conditions for travelling along the Silk Road on the edge of the desert were not much different then than they were in the 19th century, when Sven Hedin and other modern explorers travelled there: travelers had to contend with extreme weather conditions and poorly marked routes. Huge distances lay between the few fertile oasis areas where they could rest. The desert tracks were rarely used and often difficult to find. The only way to travel was at the walking pace of the load-bearing camels and donkeys or, at best, on horseback. There were few water sources along the long stretches of road, which were often covered in desert sand. There was a great danger of getting lost in the desert and dying of thirst. Life-threatening attacks were a constant fear. Severe sandstorms such as the notorious *Kara-Buran*, the black sandstorm, were a frequent threat.

¹ Source: [https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/f/f0/Emperor Taizong%27s_campaign_against_Xiyu_states.svg](https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/f/f0/Emperor_Taizong%27s_campaign_against_Xiyu_states.svg).



Dancing demons in the desert storm wind¹

Xuanzang reported:

*'When these winds arise, humans and animals become confused and careless and fall into a state of complete helplessness. Sometimes sad, plaintive sounds and pitiful cries can be heard, so that people are confused by what they see and hear in the desert and no longer know where to go. That is why so many perish on the way. But all this is the work of demons and evil spirits.'*²

Over a thousand years later, the German Asia researcher Albert von Le Coq describes the phenomenon of the kara-buran in the Taklamakan from his own experience:

'Suddenly the sky darkens ... and in the next moment the storm breaks with terrifying ferocity upon the caravan. Enormous masses of sand, mixed with pebbles, are violently

¹ Sheet from the Siyah Qalam collection, Topkapi Museum, excerpt (source: https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/5/5d/Siyah_Qalam_Demons1.jpg).

² According to the translation by Hopkirk (1986, p. 21).

*torn into the air, whirled around and hurled at people and animals. The darkness increases, strange clanging sounds mingle with the roar and howl of the storm (...). Everything is raging demonically (...). Anyone caught in such a storm must wrap themselves completely in felt, despite the heat, to avoid being injured by the stones hurled around with frenzied force, whizzing through the air with such insane force. Man and beast must lie down and let the storm, which often rages for hours, roar over them*¹

As an individual, it was therefore wise to join a caravan that knew the way and was armed if possible. If, on the other hand, you travelled alone, like Xuanzang, without any knowledge of the area or the language, the risks were even greater. If you wanted to arrive safely at your destination, the active help of local residents or the support of local rulers was a great advantage.

The former inhabitants of the oases along the Silk Road

Who were the people living in the Tarim Basin during Xuanzang's time? Today, there is a somewhat strange controversy surrounding the question of which peoples inhabited what is now Xinjiang, and especially the Tarim Basin, in earlier times, and what languages they spoke: were they people with Chinese-looking features and East Asian languages, or were they members of the Indo-European language family with more Western appearances?

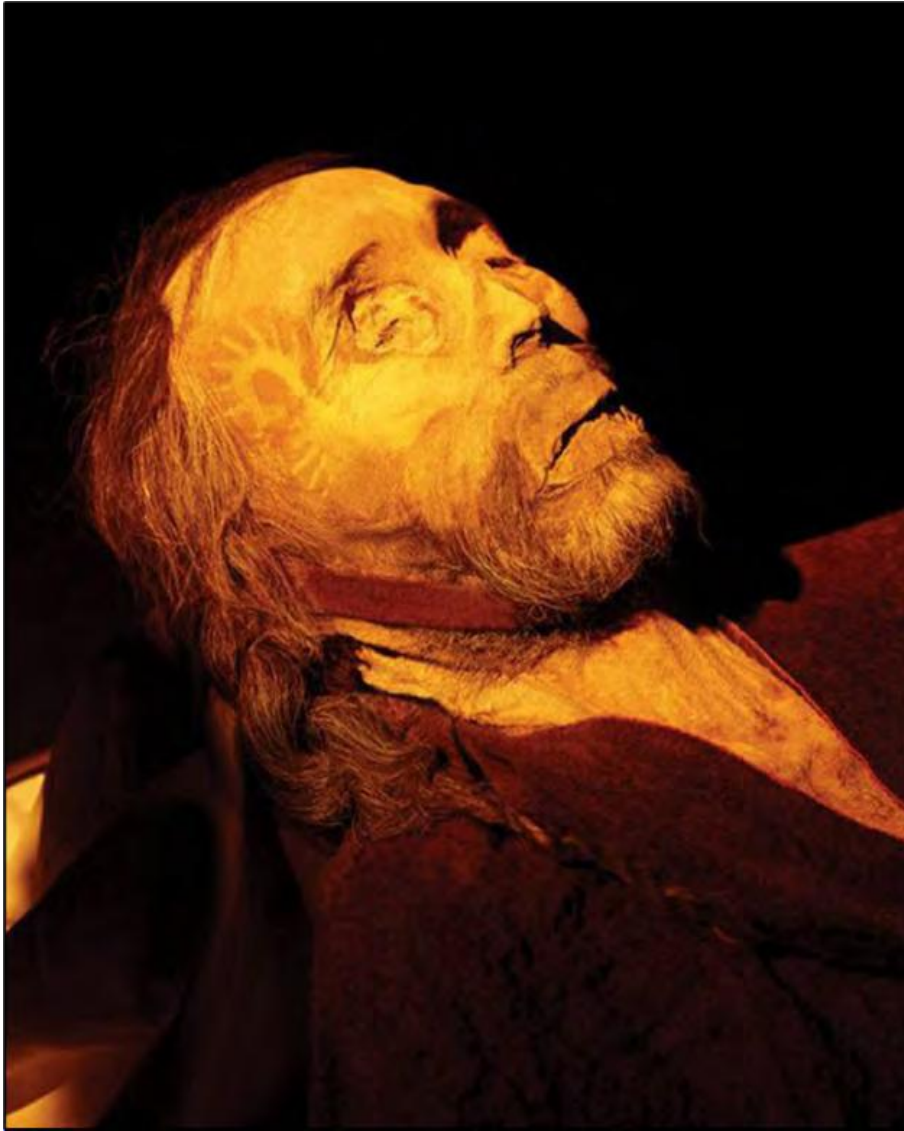
This question was prompted by the discovery of several hundred "Tarim mummies" that have been well preserved in the dry desert climate for thousands of years.² Many of these mummies do not have typical East Asian features; some even have beards and blond or reddish hair. Genetic analyses confirm that since the Bronze Age, people have lived in the Tarim Basin whose genetic makeup shows a mixture of East Asian and Western characteristics.³

However, we should not make too much of these anthropological findings, considering that human history is known to have begun in Africa. In a series of migrations and conquests, *Homo sapiens* settled the entire globe over thousands of years, partly peacefully, partly violently. Time and again, populations have exchanged and mixed. Xinjiang, and especially the Tarim Basin, has been an area of conquest and settlement since ancient times and a melting pot of peoples, cultures and religions of the most diverse origins. Any nationalistically inspired claims to ownership are unfounded.

¹ Le Coq (1926, p. 19f.).

² See Mallory / Mair (2000).

³ Li, Chunxiang et al. (2010).



'Cherchen Mummy' (ca. 1000 BC)¹

If one asks what kind of people lived in the desert cities of the Tarim Basin in 629, when Xuanzang set out on his journey, where they came from and what language they spoke, it is not easy to answer. At least modern Xinjiang historians are in the fortunate position of being able to draw on a large number of ancient documents, paintings and inscriptions. These have been preserved in the dry desert climate, on stone, painted walls, wood, leather, tree bark and even paper.² They all testify to the fact that in pre-Islamic times, an incredible variety of languages were spoken and scripts were used in the oases of the Silk Road.

¹ https://www.archaeology.wiki/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/cherchen_man_big.jpg.

² Hansen (2012, p. 15ff.).

The German orientalist and Xinjiang researcher Albert von Le Coq writes:

*'Languages that were known in part by name and in part not at all were found in numerous manuscripts. (...) No fewer than 17 different languages are found in 24 different scripts'*¹

However, the almost Babylonian diversity of languages in the Tarim Basin does not mean that all these languages were used simultaneously and actually spoken by the population living there. The only thing that is certain is that at some point in earlier centuries they were used for religious, administrative or other records, letters and contracts. They are a sign that Chinese, Tibetan and Mongolian, but also Indian, Iranian, Tocharian and Turkic written languages, as well as Western languages such as Hebrew, Arabic and Greek, left their mark on the ancient oasis cities of the Tarim Basin. It is generally assumed that the lingua franca of businesspeople on the eastern Silk Road in pre-Islamic times was *Sogdian*, an Iranian language that originated in the area around Samarkand in present-day Uzbekistan. Sogdian traders seem to have been omnipresent on the eastern Silk Road at that time. Their trading posts were located throughout the cities, even reaching into the Chinese heartland.²

As far as the *everyday language* of the oasis dwellers and nomads, most of whom were illiterate, is concerned, we are largely reliant on speculation. It is fairly certain that at the time Xuanzang set out on his journey, the ordinary population of the oases of the Tarim Basin spoke neither Chinese nor Old Turkic.³ It was only with the establishment of Chinese garrisons after the conquests of Emperor Taizong's generals from 640 to 648 that the Chinese language became more prevalent there again. As far as Old Turkic is concerned, Turkic-speaking khans ruled north of the Great Wall and the Tianshan Mountains at that time, and they also exerted a certain influence in the Tarim Basin. However, Turkic-speaking groups only began to infiltrate later, from around 840, when the Old Uyghur principality of Kucha (Turfan) was established.⁴

'*Turki*' (or Chagatai Turkish) only gradually became the common vernacular in the Tarim Basin during the Mongol period, i.e. much later.

In Xuanzang's time, *Tocharian*, an Indo-European language that is now completely extinct and is closer to modern European languages than to Indian and Iranian languages, was probably still spoken on the northern side of the Tarim Basin.⁵ In the west and south of the Tarim Basin, especially in Khotan, Sakic was spoken, an ancient south-eastern Iranian language.⁶

¹ Le Coq (1926, p. 10).

² Vaissière (2002, 2014); Li (2005, p. 73); Wood (2007, pp. 45ff.); Hansen (2012, pp. 83ff.).

³ However, Chinese-speaking inhabitants have lived in Hami and Turfan, the eastern oases that now belong to Xinjiang, since ancient times, as well as in the Silk Road city of Dunhuang, which is now located in Gansu Province.

⁴ See Millward (2007, p. 30ff.) for a summary.

⁵ Like all Indo-European languages spoken in Europe, Tocharian belongs to the so-called 'Kentum languages', while the Indian and Iranian languages are 'Satem languages'.

⁶ See Gabain (1987).

Valerie Hansen, an experienced expert on the subject, emphasizes the uncertainty of such assessments, however, because:

*'The peoples of Central Asia were constantly on the move, those in a particular region spoken languages therefore changed frequently. (...) The norm was linguistic change, not linguistic continuity.'*¹

This also applies to the diversity of *religions*. In addition to Buddhism, which originated in India and was particularly influential during Xuanzang's time, evidence of other world religions has also been found in the oases on the edge of the Taklamakan Desert. Chinese Taoism and Nestorian Christianity were represented at that time, as was Manichaeism with its Iranian roots.² In addition, there were traces of traditional shamanistic folk religion.³ A prerequisite for this diversity and constant change was the Silk Road. It brought people of many languages, cultures and religions into contact with one another.

Xuanzang's 16-year journey to the West⁴

After returning from his great journey (629-645) on behalf of the Chinese Emperor Taizong, Xuanzang himself compiled a comprehensive, relatively sober written report entitled '*Si-Yu-Ki*' (Report on the Western Regions).⁵ In addition, there is a somewhat romanticized biography, '*The Life of Hiuen-Tsiang*', which contains additional details about Xuanzang's journey. It was written during Xuanzang's lifetime by his disciple Huili, certainly with Xuanzang's approval.⁶

Huli's work reports that Xuanzang had already attracted attention as a child due to his extraordinary talent and seriousness. He grew into a young man of imposing stature and great charisma. Due to his deep piety, personal modesty and enormous knowledge, the young monk soon gained the highest recognition as a Buddhist scholar. He was referred to as the 'Master of the Law', as 'Tripitaka' (Chinese: *Sanzang*), as someone who had mastered the entire canon of Buddhist teachings.⁶ Early on, he became convinced that the Buddhist texts and traditions available in Chinese were incomplete and, in some cases, based on misleading translations.⁷ He therefore made it his mission to rediscover the true sources of Buddhism. In his opinion, these were to be found in India. From there, he believed, the unadulterated messages of Buddha had to be brought to China and translated into Chinese. Only he himself could put this plan into action.

*"So he took his walking stick, lifted his travelling robe and set off into the distance"*⁸

Huli's manuscript remained under lock and key for several decades. After Xuanzang's death, it was finally completed by Yancong, another of Xuanzang's disciples, who added five further chapters dealing with Xuanzang's later life. Detailed information on this and other sources can be found in Mayer (1992, pp. 34-60) and Deeg (2019).

¹ Hansen (2012, p. 73, own translation).

² See below, chapter 6.

³ Klimkeit (1987).

⁴ Unless otherwise noted, the account of Xuanzang's outward and return journeys is based on Xuanzang's own "report" and Huili's "biography" (Beal 1884, 1911) as well as on the accounts of Waley (1952), Grousset (1986) and Wriggins (1999). For dating, see Vaissière (2010).

⁵ Beal (1884).

⁶ Huili's 'biography' consists of five chapters dealing with Xuanzang's early years and his 'Journey to the West'. They are included in the classic English edition by Samuel Beal (1911), which we use.

⁷ The Sanskrit word "Tripitaka" stands for the entirety of the traditional and recognized rules and doctrines of Buddha, which are divided into three (Tri) major chapters, called "baskets" (Pitaka). The religion of Buddhism is based on them.

⁸ Beal (1884, vol. I, p. 7).



Xuanzang's departure for the West¹

Xuanzang's 'Journey to the West' began in October 629 with a bang: leaving the 'Middle Kingdom' was not permitted at that time without imperial permission. Therefore, it is reported that Xuanzang asked the imperial court to grant him a travel permit. However, this was expressly refused, as his biographer Huili emphasizes several times. Nevertheless, Xuanzang decided to travel, thus disregarding the prohibition of the Emperor. In the China of that time, this was an egregious offence that could only be punished by death.² Therefore, all his potential companions withdrew.

So Xuanzang set off alone, with his old rickety horse: from Anxi (*Guazhou*) in the Hexi Corridor, he travelled to Jade Gate Pass to cross the border to the west. He had been informed that there were five Chinese checkpoints beyond Jade Gate Pass that monitored the route. Xuanzang tried to bypass them unseen. However, he was discovered by the guards at the very first station. According to Huili, Xuanzang was lucky in his misfortune. The Chinese station commander was a Buddhist and helped him on his way. To avoid future checks, he was recommended an alternative route to the west, which led through the Hami oasis. Xuanzang followed the advice and chose this route. It was considered extremely dangerous because it ran through a foothill of the dreaded Gobi Desert.

To make matters worse, Xuanzang lost all his drinking water on the way to Hami. He wandered through the desert for four days and five nights in search of a spring. At the end of his strength, he finally got completely lost. That's when his ancient horse took the initiative. It changed direction on its own and found a grassy spot in the middle of the desert with a pool of drinkable water. Xuanzang and his horse were saved. They were able to recover thoroughly and are said to have reached the oasis of Hami (today's Uyghur name: Kumul) safely two days later.

¹ Monument to Xuanzang in the ancient capital city of Gaochang near Turfan. Photo: Marga Kreckel. Map 1, P1010 416.

² Deeg (2019: p. 929).

All this sounds rather improbable. Even the refusal to obey the emperor, which was unheard of at the time, probably belongs more in the realm of legend. Xuanzang himself, at any rate, does not mention it at all in his own account. It is also implausible that the Chinese emperor would have taken a personal interest in a young monk who wanted to make a pilgrimage to India. But whether truth or legend, the story spread by Huili did not fail to have an effect, lending its protagonist a special aura that set him apart from ordinary mortals.

However, the specific travel information that we owe to Xuanzang and his biographer Huili appears to be authentic. After conducting detailed land surveys, British archaeologist Aurel Stein proved that the information about Xuanzang's route from the Chinese border at that time to Hami can still be traced today.¹ Xuanzang's arduous journey through the desert therefore really did take place, as far as human judgement can tell. Most of the other details that Xuanzang recorded on the further stages of his outward and return journey on the edge of the Tarim Basin are also likely to be based on his actual experiences² Nevertheless, they should not always be taken at face value. They are often based on mere hearsay, and sometimes seem like figments of the imagination. In addition, they are quite selective because the Buddhist monk Xuanzang was primarily interested in information relating to Buddhism. But let us continue with Xuanzang's travel experiences:

After arriving in the small oasis town of Hami, Xuanzang was warmly welcomed by the local prince. The king of the neighboring, much larger and more powerful kingdom of Kotcho also heard about this. He sent an honorary escort to accompany Xuanzang on the perilous journey there.

Ruins of Kotcho south of Turfan, where Xuanzang stayed in 629¹



Ruins of Kotcho south of Turfan, where Xuanzang stayed in 629¹

¹ Stein (1919).

² See Seeg's (2007) critical reflections on the text.

³ Photo: Marga Kreckel, Map 1, P1010 447. (In the background, the backdrop of the 'flaming mountains').

After six days, Xuanzang and his royal escort reached the capital city of *Kucha* (Chinese: Gaochang), a

city surrounded by high walls. It was located in the Turfan Depression, a desert landscape characterized by fertile and densely populated oases (see below, Chapter 7). Impressive remains of Kucha can still be seen today. The king of Kucha was himself a Buddhist. Xuanzang was therefore received by him personally with great honors and enjoyed his hospitality for a long time. A well-equipped caravan was then provided for him to continue his journey. Above all, however, he was given letters of recommendation from the king to the princes of the neighboring oases and to the powerful Khan of the Western Turks. This meant that from then on, Xuanzang's 'Journey to the West' was always under the protection of the local princes.



King and Queen of Kucha (mural painting, Kizil, Maya Cave, 7th century)¹

¹ Photograph of a mural removed from the Maya Cave in Kizil, northwest of Kucha, which was destroyed in Berlin during a bombing raid in World War II. It may depict King Swarnatep of Kucha with his wife, whom Xuanzang met in the winter of 629-630. Source: Digital Silk Road / Toyo Bunko, <http://dsr.nii.ac.jp/toyo-bunko/LFa-21/V-1/page/0275.html.en>, cf. Grousset (1986, p. 68f.), Wriggins (1997, p. 55, 274).

Xuanzang's next extended stay was in *Kucha*, a flourishing river oasis. At that time, Kucha was one of the most important centres of Buddhism in Central Asia. Today it is a modern metropolis. At that time, there were said to be around 100 Buddhist monasteries with over 5,000 monks in Kucha.¹ There, Xuanzang was given a festive welcome by King Swarnatep and his wife. It is believed that the two are depicted in a mural in the Maya Grotto of Kizil near Kucha. It depicts two magnificently dressed figures of Iranian or Indian appearance.²



Ruins of the monastery town of Subashi near Kucha, where Xuanzang spent the winter of 629-30³

Xuanzang was also able to enjoy the hospitality of high-ranking Buddhist rulers in Kucha. They even allowed him to spend the winter months in the extremely impressive monastery town of Subashi outside Kucha. The ruins of Subashi on the edge of the Tianshan Mountains can still be admired today.

In the spring of 630, Xuanzang set off again. With his now impressive caravan, he soon reached the oasis of *Aksu* further west, the last stage of his journey along the northern side of the Tarim Basin. From there, he and his companions set out to cross the still wintery Tianshan Mountains from south to north, presumably via the 4,284-metre-high Bedel Pass. On the verge of physical collapse, Xuanzang finally reached Lake Issyk Kul in present-day Kyrgyzstan after seven days. Some of his companions had been killed by an avalanche along the way. Xuanzang himself described his experiences in the high mountains with his typical mixture of objectivity and superstition as follows:

¹ Centuries before Xuanzang, the Buddhist monk *Kumarajiva* (344-413) lived in Kucha. He is said to have been the son of an Indian father and a local princess. He translated numerous Buddhist Sanskrit texts into Chinese (Kausch 2001, p. 253f.).

² Grousset (1986, p. 68f.).

³ Photo Marga Kreckel, Map 1, P1010 547.

*"The mountains and valleys are covered in snow, and it freezes even in spring and summer. (...) The paths are steep and dangerous, and a cold, biting wind blows. Wild dragons often harass travelers. Anyone travelling here should neither wear red clothing nor carry loud drums. Even the slightest violation of this rule will lead to certain disaster. Suddenly, a violent storm will arise, whirling up swathes of sand and stones. Getting caught up in it will lead to exhaustion and almost certain death."*¹

Finally arriving at *the warm Issyk Kul Lake*² in present-day Kyrgyzstan, Xuanzang and the rest of his caravan were able to recover extensively from the hardships of the winter crossing of the Tianshan Mountains. Now he had the opportunity to visit the mighty Khan of the Western Turks, Yehu (Yabghu), who had set up camp very close to Lake Issyk Kul.

The letter of recommendation given to him by the king of Kocho paved the way for him to meet this powerful ruler. The Khan invited Xuanzang into his yurt. He was reportedly so impressed by Xuanzang that he recommended him to his allied princes in what is now Uzbekistan and Afghanistan. This secured Xuanzang's entire onward journey to the Khyber Pass, the gateway to India. He travelled under the protection of the Khan of the Western Turks. The Khan's allies provided his caravan with everything it needed.

Return journey on the southern route of the Silk Road (644-645)

Xuanzang spent the following years as a pilgrim on the Indian subcontinent, where the Buddhist faith was still very much alive at that time. He was searching for the true sources of Buddhism. These years of study and travel in India established Xuanzang's later fame as a great religious scholar. However, they took place far away from Xinjiang, to which he would not return for fourteen years.

Here we pick up the thread of the story again: In 644, Xuanzang, heavily laden with sacred Buddhist scriptures and relics, set out on his return journey to China. A later, frequently copied illustration shows him as a solitary wanderer carrying his precious load on his back.

¹ Beal (1984, p. 25), own translation.

² Thanks to underground hot springs, Lake Issyk Kul never freezes over.

³ Modern historians are unsure whether this was Tong Yabghu Qaghan or his son and successor Si Yabghu Qaghan. See Vaissière (2010, p. 165ff.).

⁴ It was not until later in the Middle Ages that Buddhism was almost completely supplanted by Hinduism and Islam on the Indian subcontinent.



Xuanzang on the road¹

However, according to Huili, a powerful Indian patron provided him with an entire caravan of pack animals for his journey home. Even a real elephant is said to have been part of the party. Xuanzang and his entourage first reached present-day Afghanistan via the Khyber Pass.

¹ Copy of a 14th-century Japanese illustration, Urumqi, Xinjiang Museum (photo: Marga Kreckel, map 1, P1010 290).



Xuanzang on his return journey from India¹

From Kunduz in Afghanistan, Xuanzang set off eastwards towards China in the summer of 644. His caravan crossed the Pamir Mountains and finally reached – via the long and wild high valley of the "Wakhan Corridor"¹ – again the area of today's Xinjiang.

¹ Mural painting in the Magao Grottoes near Dunhuang, Cave 103, 8th century, detail (https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/3/3c/Xuanzang_returned_from_India._Dun-huang_mural%2C_Cave_103._High_Tang_period_%28712-765%29.jpg).

Xuanzang's first stop after the arduous crossing of the Wakhan Corridor was the ancient Silk Road town *of Tashkurgan* on the edge of the Pamir Mountains. Today, Tashkurgan is located in one of the most remote and poorest corners of the People's Republic of China, at an altitude of around 3,000 meters on the Karakorum Highway, which leads to Pakistan. The Wakhi, an ancient Iranian language, is still spoken there.

Xuanzang was full of praise for the prince of Tashkurgan, whom he described as a pious and capable man. Xuanzang learned the following bizarre legend about the origins of the ruling dynasty of Tashkurgan. It sheds a revealing light on the complex relations between China and the 'Western Regions':

'A long time ago, the Shah of Persia wanted to take a Chinese princess as his wife. An Iranian escort picked up the young woman from China and set off with her on the long journey to Persia. However, the region around Tashkurgan was in a state of war and anarchy, making it impossible to continue the journey westward. The princess was therefore housed in a well-guarded dwelling on an inaccessible mountain peak.

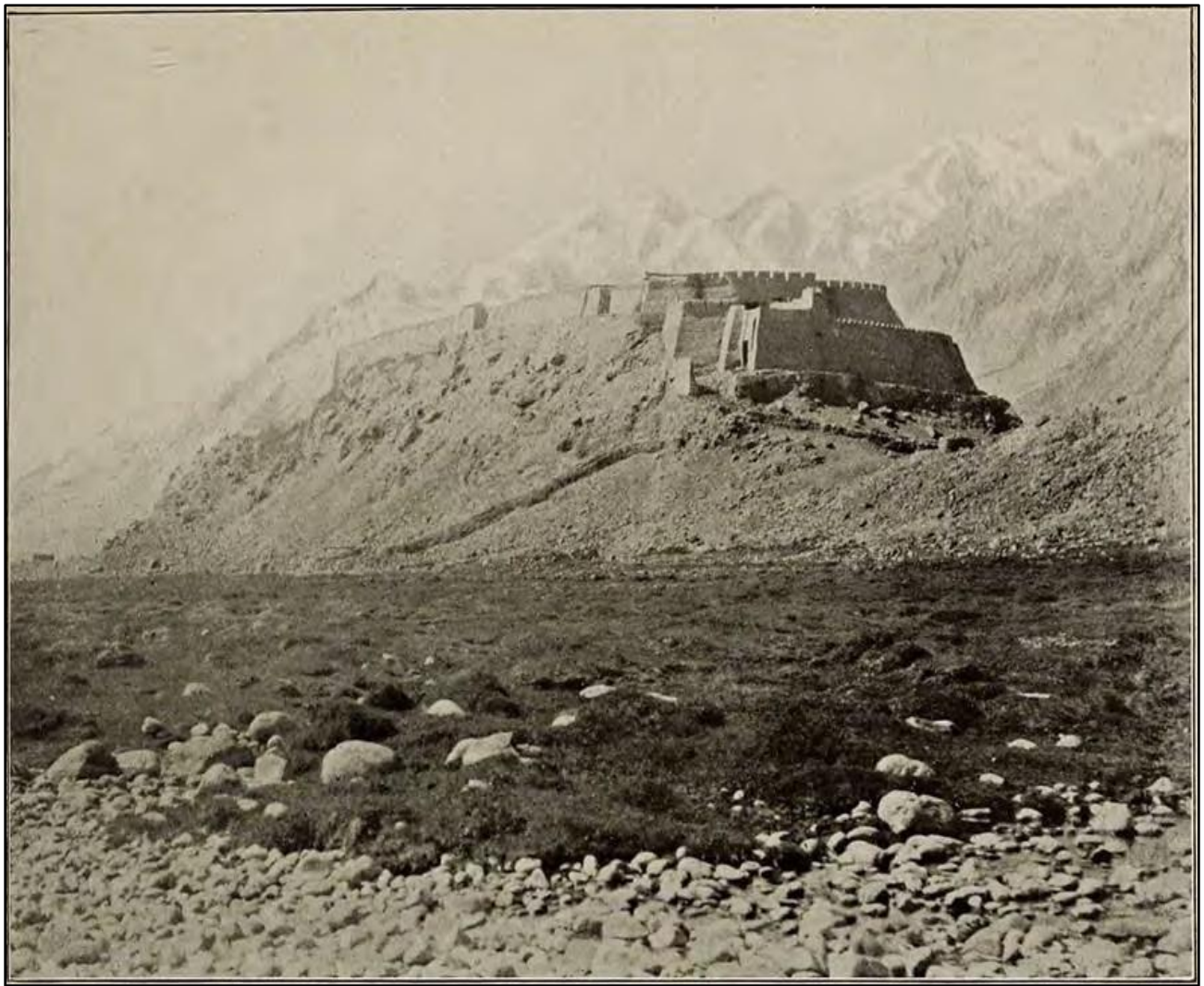
After three months, peace was restored. The journey could have continued, had it not been for the surprising discovery that the princess had become pregnant. After thorough questioning, it emerged that the sun god had visited the lady every day at noon and was the father of the child.

With this news, it was difficult to face the Shah of Persia. So a large palace was built for the princess on the mountain top, called the 'Virgin's Castle'. Xuanzang is said to have visited the ruins of the palace on his return journey from India to China.

From then on, the princess took over the government of Tashkurgan herself. Soon afterwards, she gave birth to a son of extraordinary beauty and unusual abilities. He could fly through the air and control the weather. Until he came of age, his mother ran the government for him. Under her guidance, he developed into an important ruler. The dynasty he founded is proud of its dual ancestry, namely that of the sun god and the Han. All members of the ruling dynasty of Tashkurgan therefore have Chinese features, but they wear the clothing of the local population and follow their customs.¹

¹ Marco Polo also travelled through the Wakhan Corridor on his way from Persia to China. In the 19th century, the Wakhan Corridor played a strategically important role in the Great Game. It was annexed to the Kingdom of Afghanistan in 1888 to prevent a direct confrontation between British India and the Russian Empire. See below, Chapter 13.

² Beal (1884, vol. II, p. 300ff.), Wriggins (1999, p. 210f.).



Ruins of the 'Virgin's Castle' near Tashkurgan, photo by Aurel Stein, ca. 1910¹

Shortly after Xuanzang's departure from Tashkurgan, his elephant met a sad fate. At a narrow pass in the mountains, a band of robbers attempted to attack the caravan. In the process, the elephant fell into a raging river and drowned. The robbers, who saw this as a bad omen, fled in terror. After this mishap, Xuanzang was no longer bothered and was able to continue his journey to *Kashgar* with his people undisturbed.

For his return journey to China, Xuanzang chose the southern route of the Silk Road this time. The climatic conditions there were less favorable than on the northern side of the Tarim Basin. As we now know, the Taklamakan Desert has gradually expanded further south since ancient times. As a result, the routes were increasingly pushed to the edge of the impassable Kunlun Mountains, which separate Xinjiang from Tibet. Various former Silk Road locations had already been abandoned before Xuanzang's time due to water shortages and had sunk beneath the desert sand.

¹ [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category:Tashkurgan_Fort#/media/File:Ruins_of_desert_Cathay_personal_narrative_of_explorations_in_Central_Asia_and_westernmost_China_\(1912\)_14783115345.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category:Tashkurgan_Fort#/media/File:Ruins_of_desert_Cathay_personal_narrative_of_explorations_in_Central_Asia_and_westernmost_China_(1912)_14783115345.jpg) (accessed 20 September 2021).

From Kashgar, Xuanzang travelled on to the then relatively insignificant city of Yarkand to the oasis city of *Khotan*. There, on the southern edge of the Tarim Basin, Xuanzang spent the entire winter of 644–655 there. His biographer Huili reports that Xuanzang sent a messenger from Khotan to the Chinese emperor in his capital Chang'an (today Xi'an) to ask him for permission to return to China. Imperial permission was granted. Xuanzang himself makes no mention of this in his own travelogue. He merely emphasizes that he spent his time in Khotan visiting monasteries in the surrounding area and preaching and debating.

Khotan was an extremely prosperous city at that time, with an ancient Buddhist tradition and many connections to nearby India. The language spoken there was Khotanese, a dialect of the East Iranian-Saka language. A slightly modified form of Indian Brahmi was used as the written language. According to legend, the royal family of Khotan descended from the Indian sky god Vaisravana. The current king, whom Xuanzang praised in the highest terms as a brave warrior and devout Buddhist, received him personally with all honors and lodged him in a monastery near the city.

According to Xuanzang, the climate in Khotan is mild and pleasant, with the city only occasionally being hit by terrible sandstorms. Xuanzang particularly highlights Khotan's flourishing craft industry. Carpets and fine woolen fabrics are produced here, but especially high-quality silk fabrics.

Xuanzang was particularly impressed by the jade production in Khotan. White and green jade was found, processed and marketed here. As we know, jade has always been a particularly sought-after and precious stone in China. Khotan is still famous for it today.



White and green jade pebbles from the mountain rivers around Khotan¹

¹ Photographed in autumn 2019 at the jade market in Khotan (photo: Marga Kreckel, map 3, P1010 218).



Gemstones from the Khotan area¹

In his report on Khotan, Xuanzang also recounts a number of legends surrounding the city and its history. One of these, which is recounted in various versions, deals with the origin and production of Khotan *silk*, which remains an important industry for the city to this day:

'In earlier times, there were neither mulberry trees nor silkworms in Khotan. It was also strictly forbidden to export them from China. Bales of silk were so precious that they were even traded as currency.

A long time ago, the king of Khotan decided to marry a Chinese princess. He sent confidential messengers to ask her to bring mulberry seeds and silkworm eggs with her on her journey from China to Khotan. At that time, the production of silk was still a closely guarded and extremely precious secret of Chinese experts. Nevertheless, the princess managed to obtain what her future husband desired. When she set off for Khotan, she hid the mulberry seeds and silkworm eggs in her headdress. Although she was strictly checked at the border, the guards did not dare to search the princess's hair.

Thus, the mulberry seeds and silkworm eggs reached Khotan. Under the supervision of the new queen, mulberry trees were soon planted and silkworms bred. The queen is said to have personally supervised the mulberry plantations and the production of silk. She is also said to have donated the monastery garden, where, centuries later, Xuanzang is said to have seen some stumps of the first mulberry trees.²

¹ Photo: Marga Kreckel, Map 3, P1010 222.

²According to Beal (1884, vol. II, p. 318f.).

Surprisingly, in 1901, British archaeologist Aurel Stein made a sensational discovery during excavations in the sunken desert city of *Dandan-Oilik*, about 100 km northeast of Khotan: he discovered a painting on wood with very remarkable content:



*The 'Silk Princess', painting on wood, Dandan-Oilik, 7th-8th century*¹

In the centre of the image is an elegant lady wearing a tall headdress, presumably the legendary 'Silk Princess' and later Queen of Khotan. To her right stands a young woman pointing at the headdress with her finger. Below it, one can see a basket which, according to Aurel Stein's interpretation, contains the silkworm cocoons that the princess smuggled to Khotan in her hair. The second woman on the princess's left has a wooden frame in front of her for winding the silk thread. Aurel Stein was convinced that this depiction was a direct allusion to the legend of the origin of silk cultivation in Khotan, as told by Xuanzang.² The ruined city of Dandan-Oilik (later rediscovered by Sven Hedin and excavated by Aurel Stein³ was probably abandoned in the 8th century due to water shortages. It is believed that Xuanzang personally visited the city in 645. Other desert cities on the southern side of the Tarim Basin, such as Niya, Endere, Miran and Loulan further north, had already been swallowed up by the desert sands at that time. However, Xuanzang had obviously heard of these ghost towns. He speaks of an ancient city in the desert that is hidden under a large sand mound. He recounts that princes and powerful figures from the surrounding area had often attempted to excavate the mound and uncover the hidden treasures. But when they arrived there, *'a furious storm broke out over them. Dark clouds gathered from all four sides of the and they lost their way in the darkness.'*⁴

Xuanzang and his caravan finally left Khotan in the spring of 645 and, heavily laden with numerous Buddha statues and over 600 Buddhist manuscripts, set off on their journey home towards the east. Xuanzang reports little about the last stage of his journey from Khotan along the southern route of the Silk Road to the Chinese border. He mainly gives the impression that he had to cross a particularly desolate desert region:

*'If we go east from here, we enter a large, drifting sand desert. This sand stretches for a great distance, like a drifting stream, piled up into dunes or blown away by the wind. Travelers leave not the slightest trace there. They often cannot find their way. Then they wander back and forth, quite distraught and disoriented. Piles of bones from dead animals serve as landmarks for them. Neither water nor grass nor herbs can be found, and often hot winds blow.'*⁵

¹ https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:British_Museum_silk_princess_painting.jpg.

² Stein (1974, p. 57).

³ See chapters 5 and 6 below.

⁴ Stein (1974, p. 60ff.).

⁵ Wriggins (1999, p. 217).

As we shall see below, Xuanzang's account of his desert experiences sounds little different from that of Marco Polo, even though the latter travelled the same route more than 600 years later. Even today, the impression of deep desolation remains understandable when travelling eastwards from Khotan on the southern edge of the Taklamakan.¹

After a long and arduous journey through the desert, Xuanzang finally reached *Dunhuang*, the first Chinese garrison town, safe and sound. From there, he soon continued eastward through the Hexi Corridor to the imperial capital of Chang'an (now Xi'an). According to his biographer Huili, Xuanzang was personally welcomed there by Emperor Taizong.

This is where Xuanzang's sixteen-year 'Journey to the West' ended. From then on, he made his mark primarily as a Buddhist teacher and translator of the manuscripts he had brought back with him, true to his self-imposed task of spreading the unadulterated sources of Buddhism in China and thus contributing to its renewal.

The media afterlife of Xuanzang in China

Xuanzang's journey took place well over a thousand years ago. Nevertheless, this wandering monk and scholar is still a popular and ubiquitous figure today, known to everyone in China. He appears in films, television series, school textbooks and comics, and tourists on the Silk Road recognize his likeness. Xuanzang's enduring popularity is astonishing. In the early Middle Ages, Xuanzang played an important role in Chinese Buddhism for a time; he was even revered as a saint. But the "idealistic" Buddhism he taught lost all influence in China just a few decades after his death. Only Xuanzang's translations of classical Buddhist scriptures remain.

If one were to search German history for a figure comparable to Xuanzang, one might perhaps think of Saint Boniface (c. 673–755). He, too, was a wandering monk and preacher. Originally from England, he came to the Frankish Merovingian Empire as a missionary and eventually earned the honorary title "Apostle of the Germans." He is said to have cut down the "Donar Oak" with his own hands, a symbol of the ancient Germanic belief in gods. Today, Boniface is largely forgotten. As a Catholic saint, he is just one among thousands. At best, devout Catholics or specialist historians are still interested in him. Why did things turn out so differently for Xuanzang in China?

Huli's biography of Xuanzang contributed greatly to Xuanzang's early fame as a fearless wandering monk who experienced wonderful things and survived many adventures. In contrast to Xuanzang's own rather sober travelogue, it contains many dramatic embellishments and glorifications. British author Sally Wriggins describes the further fate of the story of Xuanzang's journey as follows:

*'We know that Xuanzang's biographers embellished the facts and his life story with tales and miracles. His heroic deeds from the seventh century developed into folk legends and became part of a lively oral tradition that initially circulated in Chinese monasteries. 'Do you know how the Chinese monk defeated the evil spirit in the cave? And how he escaped from the pirates?' Later, they were told in Chinese teahouses. Over the course of almost a thousand years, Xuanzang's story was recorded in poetic narratives, stories, plays and descriptions. Eventually, a fully developed narrative in verse and prose emerged'*²

¹ See, for example, the colorful travelogues of well-known contemporary writers such as William Dalrymple (1990, chap. 7), Richard Bernstein (2002, chap. 20) and Colin Thuborn (2013, chap. 5). According to Beal (1884, vol. II, p. 324). The legend of the Chinese princess who brought silkworms out of the country circulates throughout Central Asia in many versions, including in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan. See Kreckel (2007, p. 83ff. and 2017, p. 202ff.) for more on this and on the production of silk.

² Wriggins (1999, p. 246). See the detailed documentation in Kong (2019).

This refers to the epic novel ‘*Journey to the West*’ (xiyu ji) by the poet Wu Cheng'en, which was written around 1580. This novel was the result of a centuries-long process in which the original Xuanzang story was repeatedly retold, enriched and reinterpreted. Today this widely read work is one of the four ‘classic novels’ of Chinese literature. It is included in every school curriculum, and schoolchildren can recite key passages from memory.¹

However, in the hundred chapters of Wu Cheng'en's monumental work, there has been a significant shift in emphasis compared to Huili's original biography of Xuanzang: Although Xuanzang's pilgrimage to India continues to provide the framework for the plot, the main character is no longer Xuanzang himself (who is called "Tripitaka" in the novel), but the *Monkey King Sun Wukong*, also known as ‘Monkey’.

Sun Wukong is a legendary monkey king who appears in several ancient Chinese and Indian legends. He is a rebellious jack-of-all-trades who can do anything, but always has mischief on his mind. With the help of his magic staff, Monkey can develop enormous powers and move through space at great speed. He can also take on different forms. Sun Wukong is immortal. According to legend, he is eventually even accepted into the circle of gods. But as punishment for his many pranks, he is simultaneously buried under a high mountain.

However, Sun Wukong, the Monkey King, is soon released on probation – with the task of accompanying and protecting the monk Tripitaka on his pilgrimage. Eva Lüdi Kong, the translator of the novel, summarizes what follows as follows:

‘Dangerous battles against robbers and demons, adventurous rescue missions from the clutches of voracious monsters and lustful demons, the salvation of entire kingdoms or oppressed ethnic groups. The fairy-tale motif of travelling from kingdom to kingdom, as well as the mythological dimensions of heaven and hell, land and water. This world and the next exert a fascination that virtual worlds and computer games in particular like to draw on today. Added to this is the fascination exerted by the main characters, the nimble, witty Monkey King Sun Wukong (...) and the kind, moral and emperor-loyal monk Tripitaka. They are characters with whom readers can identify. The character of the Monkey King in particular is certainly an important reason for the novel's great popularity. The Monkey King embodies the free individual who bows to no authority, and against whose subversive power even the Jade Emperor in heaven – the mythological image of Chinese state rule – is powerless.’²

We cannot delve any further into this semi-hierarchical, semi-anarchic fairy-tale world at this point. However, it is understandable that the pilgrim and his companion, the Monkey King, have enjoyed a joint literary career in China:

¹ <https://de-academic.com/dic.nsf/dewiki/1463783> (accessed: 2 December 2021):

² Kong (2017).



*Xuanzang (with halo) and Monkey King. First joint illustration (11th–12th century)*¹

The somewhat dusty scribe Tripitaka (alias Xuanzang) has found a popular companion in the novel in the form of the clever Monkey King Sun Wukong. Thanks to his popularity, Monkey has ensured that his companion Xuanzang has not been forgotten to this day. The first literary encounter between the two dates back to at least the 11th or 12th century, as evidenced by a mural in the Yulin Temple Cave near Dunhuang. Since then, they have been an inseparable pair. Wu Cheng'en's novel from 1580 then immortalized the two together.²

Monkey and Tripitaka, this literary duo, continue to enjoy astonishing success in China and throughout South-east Asia, as evidenced by their high media presence. Monkey stands for creativity and chaos. He is particularly popular with younger people who are looking for exciting and sometimes outrageous entertainment. The thoughtful Tripitaka, with his sense of responsibility and duty, reinforces the state-supporting component and appeals more to a more sedate readership. He also ensures that, despite all its anarchic tendencies, the Monkey-Tripitaka saga remains within the bounds of what is pedagogically acceptable to Chinese school authorities.

¹ Detail from a mural in the Yulin Caves, north of Dunhuang. On the horse's saddle, you can see a bundle of sacred scriptures with rays of light shining out of them. (<http://kimon.hosting.nyu.edu/sogdians/files/original/1460a183281fb6fb362596e064dbdd8e.jpg>). See Wong (2002, p. 72f.).

² Wong (2002).

³ See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_media_adaptations_of_Journey_to_the_West (accessed: 1 December 2020).

In the wake of the Chinese government's New Silk Road policy, there has even been something of a Xuanzang renaissance. In 2016, for example, the spectacular historical film "Xuan Zang" was shot as a Chinese-Indian co-production, dramatizing Wu Cheng'en's classic novel 'Journey to the West'. It was presented as China's official entry for the title of 'Best Foreign Language Film' at the Academy Awards (Oscars).¹ Much of the filming took place on the ancient Silk Road routes in Xinjiang, which Xuanzang once travelled. The film also casually conveys the message that Xinjiang is a natural part of China's new Silk Road initiative towards the West.²

The fictional characters of Monkey and Tripitaka, in connection with the real historical journey of Xuanzang behind them, are just one of many examples of the 'benefits and disadvantages of history for life'. A creative combination of fiction and truth has given rise to something unique that attracts the attention of a large audience and can be used for all kinds of advertising purposes.

¹ [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Xuanzang_\(film\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Xuanzang_(film)). The film can be downloaded with English subtitles on YouTube at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ulDzLjz0wdw> (accessed: 1 December 2021).

² See Deeg (2019, p. 932).chapter Three

Chapter Three

Europe 'discovers' the Far East: Marco Polo and the Pax Mongolica

Marco Polo is the Western counterpart to the Chinese traveler Xuanzang. In terms of Marco Polo's fame and media presence, he too is omnipresent today. There are numerous films and television series about Marco Polo's travel adventures, as well as Marco Polo children's books and Marco Polo comics. The popular MARCO POLO travel guides are well known, MARC O'POLO is a widespread clothing brand, and much more.

As already noted, Xuanzang can be described as the 'Marco Polo of the East'. Conversely, he may also be seen as he 'Xuanzang of the West'. But in one respect Marco Polo differs significantly from Xuanzang. He actually explored China and Southeast Asia, i.e. the 'Far East' from a European perspective. Xuanzang, on the other hand, only travelled to the 'western regions' bordering China in Central Asia and India, i.e. the 'Near West' of China. Xuanzang did not have his sights set on the European West.

In ancient China, there was only a brief period of official interest in the distant western continents: Between 1405 and 1433, Admiral *Zheng He* (1371 - approx. 1435), who came from an old Muslim family, undertook seven voyages lasting several years on behalf of the Chinese emperor, which took him far to the West. With a large fleet of huge ships, Zheng He reached the Persian Gulf, the Red Sea and the east coast of Africa. The reports handed down about his voyages are extremely worth reading.¹

After this brief period of openness to the West the traditional isolationism and self-sufficiency of the 'Middle Kingdom' regained the upper hand. In any case, there is no public awareness of any significant Chinese explorers or diplomats who reported on Europe in China in a way that attracted wider attention.²

Pax Mongolica

Much earlier, however, there was a completely different contact between the Far East and the European West. It did not originate in China, but with the *Mongols*, China's northern rivals. In the 13th century, *Genghis Khan* (reigned 1206-1227) and his sons and grandsons, founded a huge Mongolian world empire. Militarily superior Mongolian cavalry armies conquered large parts of Eurasia in just a few decades. At the height of its power, the Mongolian empire stretched from the Pacific coast in the east across what is now southern Russia to the border of Poland. To the south, Mongol rule extended to southern China, Iran and parts of Mesopotamia and Anatolia (see map).

¹ See Ptak (2007).

² However, specialist historians are familiar with *Rabban Bar Sauma* (1225–1294), a Nestorian clergyman from northern China who grew up speaking a Turkic language and who, around 1287, during the Pax Mongolica, travelled to Byzantium, Naples, Rome and Paris on behalf of the Mongol Il-Khan Argun. A remarkable account written by an anonymous author shortly after Bar Sauma's death was long lost, but was found and translated in the 19th century. It has remained virtually unknown to the Chinese public (cf. Höllmann 2004, pp. 34f.; Toepel 2008, pp. 13, 72-94).



Silk Road, main routes in the Middle Ages and the "Pax Mongolica": Expansion around 1294 ¹

From a global historical perspective, the Mongol Empire founded by Genghis Khan is the historical counterpart to the short-lived Macedonian Empire that *Alexander the Great* created a millennium and a half earlier in the opposite direction. Both were the result of ruthless conquests, but both also left a deep cultural and political mark.

Marco Polo's journey to the Far East (1271-1295) coincided precisely with the period of greatest expansion of Mongol rule. The head of the vast Mongol Empire, in whose service Marco Polo was to remain for many years, was Kublai Khan, a grandson of Genghis Khan. *Kublai Khan* (reigned 1260-1294) had been the Great Khan of all Mongols. At the same time, from 1279 until his death, he was also Emperor of China and founder of the Yuan dynasty.²

¹ Overview map of the Mongol-ruled territories at the end of Kublai Khan's reign, 1294 (with today's national borders). Source of the map: https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/8/84/Mongol_Empire_map_1297.png; routes and locations have been added.

² Kublai Khan was the last Great Khan to be recognized as the supreme ruler by *all* Mongol princes. After his death, several independent Mongol khanates emerged, some of which were hostile to each other. After his death, Genghis Khan divided the Mongolian empire among his four sons: *Ögödei* succeeded him as Great Khan, *Jochi* and his descendants ruled the western steppe empire of the 'Golden Horde' (Kipchak Khanate), *Chagatai* and his family exercised supremacy in Turkestan and soon adopted the local language and religion. *Tolui*, Genghis Khan's fourth son, died young.

His sons were *Kublai Khan*, who ruled as the last Great Khan of all Mongols in 1260 and at the same time founded the Yuan dynasty in China, and *Hülegü*, the founder of the Mongol 'Il-Khanate' in Persia and the Middle East. (See Weiers 2004, p. 239ff.).

The original seat of the Mongolian Great Khans was the capital *Karakorum*, founded by Genghis Khan in the middle of the Mongolian grasslands. From there, a largely flat and grassy steppe stretches from east to west for about 7,000 km. It runs through the Kazakh steppe, across the Russian and Ukrainian lowlands where the Volga, Don and Dnieper rivers flow, to the Hungarian Puszta. Here, north of the Old Silk Road, which mostly ran through deserts and semi-deserts and had to overcome difficult mountain passes, a new, faster east-west connection was created at that time.

While pack camels were the main means of transport on the southern desert trails, the faster riding horse dominated the northern steppe routes. Military-controlled relay and post stations were set up where horses could be changed. This applied to the entire area of the four Mongolian sub-empires that emerged after the death of Genghis Khan.

It was the time of the so-called *Pax Mongolica*, the 'Mongolian peace', which ensured relatively safe travel on the many paths and trails of the Silk Road for about a century and a half. British historian Gavin Hambly praised it as follows:

*'The Pax Mongolica was a reality that allowed people to travel in relative safety from the Crimea to Korea and made it possible for ideas, inventions and trade goods to reach from one end of the known world to the other.'*¹

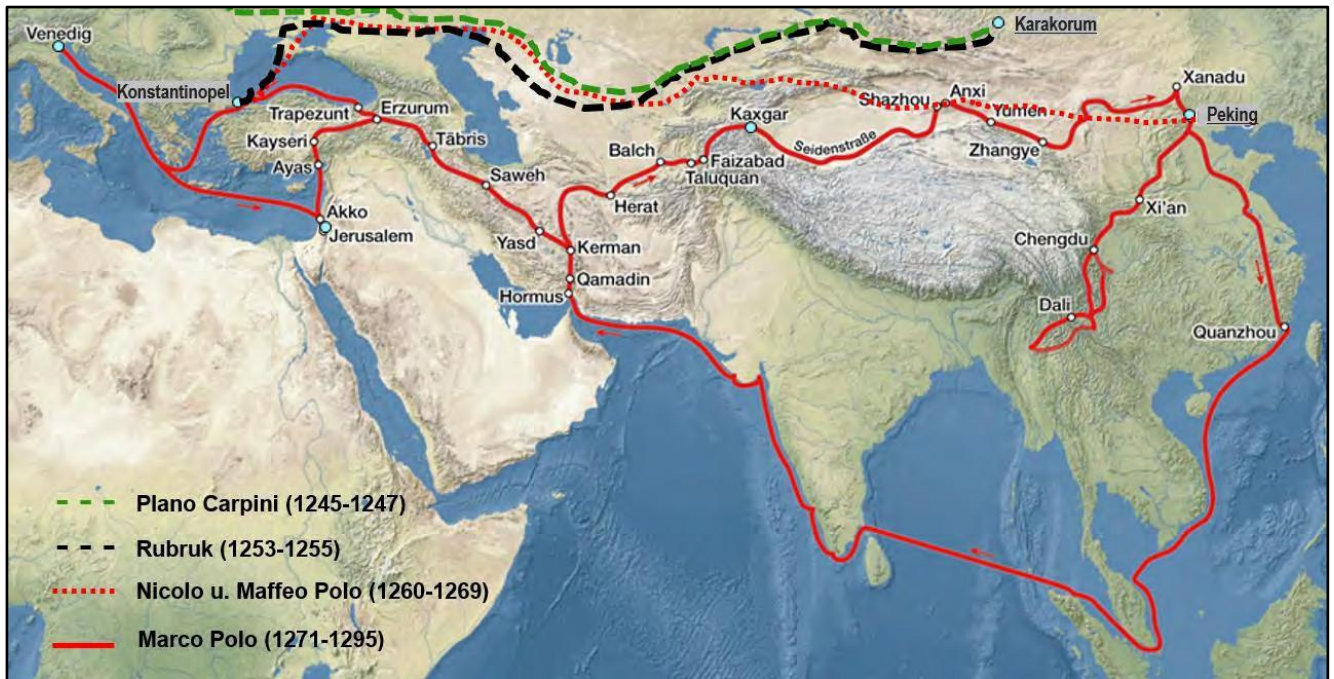
This applied not only to the northern steppe routes of the Silk Road, but also to the desert routes further south.²

Exploratory journeys to the Mongol Empire: Plano Carpini and Rubruk

It was during this "Mongol" period that Marco Polo undertook his 24-year journey between Venice and the Far East, which we will discuss later. The young Marco began his great journey as a companion and apprentice' to his father Niccolo and his uncle Maffeo. The Polo brothers and their young nephew Marco travelled on behalf of Pope Gregory X, carrying a letter to the Mongolian Grand Khan Kublai Khan. However, the three Venetians were not the first European travelers to East Asia on an official mission.

¹ Hambly (1966, p. 123).

² For the current state of discussion on the 'Pax Mongolica', see Favereau (2018). Stefan Barisitz (2017, p. 15) summarizes: *'During the Mongol period, the Eurasian Silk Road network probably reached its greatest geographical extent.'*



Travel itineraries of Plano Carpini and Rubruk, as well as Niccolo, Maffeo and Marco Polo¹

For centuries, European princes had shown no interest whatsoever in conditions in the Far East² – just as Chinese rulers had shown no interest in Europe. They knew very little about each other. Of course, European traders, missionaries, adventurers and prisoners often found their way to China or Mongolia. But they usually remained anonymous. If they returned, they usually shared their travel experiences only orally and did not reach a wider audience.³ Their reports would have had no practical significance for the secular and spiritual princes of Europe. East and Central Asia were too far removed from the political horizon of medieval Europe.

This only changed when huge Mongolian cavalry armies suddenly appeared at the gates of Europe, ravaged large swathes of land and conquered fortified cities such as Moscow, Kiev and Breslau. In particular, the news that a large Polish-German cavalry force had been decisively defeated by Mongolian cavalry troops near *Legnica* in Silesia in 1241.

¹ Source: https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/7/78/Travels_of_Marco_Polo.jpg, with own additions (accessed: 1 June 2019).

² Bezzola (1974, p. 8), Reichert (2013, p. 60).

³ See Schmieder (1994, Chapter II), Schmieder (2015, p. 19 ff.).

The royal courts felt directly threatened by the massive advance of these "Tartars", as they were called¹. They were said to be capable of every cruelty imaginable. On the other hand, however, people were deeply impressed and shaken by the military superiority and astonishing discipline of the mounted Mongolian archers compared to the heavily armored and therefore immobile European knights.



Battle of Legnica 1241: Mongolian archers defeat Christian armored horsemen²

Thus, the Mongols were both admired and demonized. Nevertheless, or perhaps precisely because of this, people hoped to win them over as allies in the fight against the Muslims (then called "Saracens"), whose sultan Saladin had recently recaptured the holy city of Jerusalem from the Christian crusaders. The Muslim "infidels" were considered the worst enemies of the Christian rulers of Europe. The Mongols were thought to have a less anti-Christian attitude, but otherwise no concrete knowledge was available about them.

This led to two remarkable diplomatic exploratory missions to the Mongol Empire, carried out in quick succession by two Catholic clergymen, Johannes de Plano Carpini and William of Rubruk. Both travelled via the Mongol-controlled Eurasian steppe route to meet the respective rulers of the Mongols (see Overview map above). After their return, they wrote detailed, highly informative travel reports.³

¹ The Mongols called themselves "Mongal". The term "*Tartars*", which quickly became common in Europe, was intended to imply that the Mongols were Satan's accomplices, originating from Tartarus, the deepest level of hell in Greek mythology. They should not be confused with the Turkic people of the Tatars, who can still be found today in Crimea and the Russian steppes, although this often happens (Schmieder 1994, p. 258ff., Münkler 1998, p. 15 and 19).

² Source: <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Legnica.JPG>. Illumination from 1353. The Latin inscription reads in English: "*Here Duke Henry, son of St. Hedwig, fights against the Tartars in the field called Walstad.*"

³ Plano Carpini (2015), Rubruk (2013). The following is based primarily on the accounts of Bezzola (1974), Münkler (1998; 2000), Reichert (2013) and Schmieder (1994; 2015).

- The Italian Franciscan monk *Johannes de Plano Carpini* (c. 1185–1252) was a personal confidant of Pope Innocent IV (reigned 1243–1254). On his behalf, he travelled to the Mongol Great Khan to gather detailed information about the Mongols and the secret of their military successes. Plano Carpini's journey lasted two and a half years, from 1245 to 1247. It first took him from Lyon via Bohemia and Poland to Mongol-occupied Kiev, which until then had been under the rule of the Rus. From there, in February 1246, he continued eastward across the endless Mongol-controlled steppe landscape. Plano Carpini and his companions travelled north past the Caucasus Mountains and the Caspian Sea, then crossed what is now Kazakhstan and the Dzungarian Basin in northern Xinjiang, finally reaching the Mongol heartland with its capital Karakorum in mid-August 1246. On the way back, they took almost the same route. After various stops along the way, Plano Carpini reached Lyon at the end of 1247 and informed Innocent IV, who was staying there, verbally about the results of his journey.

It would go too far here to go into detail about the extensive written report later compiled by Plano Carpini, *Ystoria Mongolorum quos nos Tartaros appellamus* ('History of the Mongols, whom we call Tartars').¹ It describes in detail how the entire journey took place through areas that were well organized and controlled by the Mongols: At regular intervals of approximately thirty kilometers, there were military stations responsible for the accommodation, security and surveillance of travelers. In exchange for payment or gifts, they were also provided with food and could regularly change horses, which was crucial for rapid progress.²

¹ Plano Carpini (2015).

² There, as everywhere else in the Mongolian empire, there was the so-called *jam system*, which Rubruk described in detail in his report: These were relay stations maintained at regular intervals, which were under the authority of a military official who bore the title 'Jam'. The Jam was responsible for maintaining order on the transport routes and for maintaining the relay post, which was indispensable for the vast empire. He was responsible for ensuring that the local population provided replacement horses and food for mounted messengers and official envoys. At river crossings, the Jam had to supervise ferry operations and arrange for local guides or interpreters, among other things. The Jam was therefore an influential figure.

Private travelers and foreign merchants (such as Marco Polo later on) could also make use of this system – provided they managed to win the favor of the military official in charge or his superiors. This often required personal skill and expense or gifts. The Jam system was essential for the exchange of information and goods in the Mongol Empire to function. For more on the Mongolian Jam system, see Morgan (1986, p. 103ff.), Favereau (2018).

Marco Polo also reported on it in detail later. The description of the 'safety of the roads (and) the sophisticated postal and embassy system in the empire of the Great Khan played an important role in his book on the 'Wonders of the World' (Münkler 1998, p. 79).

The actual highlight and culmination of Plano Carpini's mission was his participation in the enthronement ceremonies of the newly elected Great Khan *Güyük*, a grandson of Genghis Khan. They took place in August 1246 in the ruler's camp near the Mongolian capital Karakorum on the Orkhon River. Here he met numerous foreign guests and dignitaries who had travelled from afar. They were proof that the Mongol-controlled steppe route was a functioning transport artery connecting the Great Khan's centre of power with the outside world.

However, Plano Carpini's mission was not only to gather as much useful information as possible about the Mongols and their empire. He also had the task of delivering an official message from the Pope to the Great Khan. This took place in December 1246 during an audience at *Güyük*'s camp. In Innocent IV's message, the Mongol Great Khan was bluntly asked to convert to Christianity.¹ Above all, however, the Pope expressed in clear terms his dismay '*at the tremendous slaughter of people, especially Christians, particularly Hungarians, Moravians and Poles, perpetrated by the Tartars*'. He called on the Great Khan to '*refrain from such acts in future*' and to '*repent for your misdeeds*.'²

This sharp, undiplomatic rebuke did not go down well with the Great Khan. *Güyük* saw himself as the almighty ruler of the world. All other princes had to pay homage to him, and no one was allowed to give him orders. *Güyük* therefore wrote a dismissive reply to Innocent IV, which was delivered by Plano Carpini. It stated laconically:

*'If you wish to have peace with us, then you, Pope, and all kings and rulers must come to me immediately, and then you will hear our answer and our will. (...) If you do not follow our advice to come to us, then we know with certainty that you want war with us'*³

Plano Carpini's journey was therefore a diplomatic failure for Pope Innocent IV. In his eyes, the Grand Khan's reply was an open affront. For he saw himself as the supreme representative of all believers and thus, in principle, of the entire known world. He was no one's subject. He had even just succeeded in gaining the upper hand in the long-standing conflict between the empire and the papacy. At his instigation, Emperor Frederick II was deposed at the Council of Lyon 1245. The role of ruler of the world thus fell to him personally, as the all-powerful Pope.

¹ *Güyük*'s reign was short-lived; he died in 1248.

² Plano Carpini did not reach Karakorum itself – the only "really impressive" city of the Mongols (Plano Carpini 2015, p. 39).

³ Plano Carpini delivered the Pope's message to the Great Khan during an audience in December 1246. It is not certain whether Plano Carpini actually handed over the Pope's letter or merely conveyed its contents to the Great Khan orally (Schmieder 2015, p. 21f.).

⁴ Plano Carpini (2015, p. 93).

⁵ Münkler (2000, p. 32).

- However, the then King Louis IX of France, known as 'Louis the Saint' (reigned 1226-1270), saw things somewhat differently. He aspired to political leadership in the Christian world and was therefore equally outraged by the Mongol Great Khan's demand for submission. At the same time, however, Louis IX was also the driving force behind the Sixth Crusade to Palestine (1248-1254). In this capacity, he hoped despite everything to gain the support of the Mongols in the struggle of the Christian powers against the Muslim 'Saracens'.

To this end, in 1249 he first sent the French Dominican priest *André de Longjumeau*, who was experienced in the Orient, on a journey to the Great Khan. His task was to sound out whether an alliance against the Saracens was possible. After his return in 1251, the disappointment was great: The widow of the now deceased Great Khan Güyük once again demanded submission. However, Longjumeau also reported that, in his opinion, the newly elected Great Khan Möngke (reigned 1251-1259) was much more friendly towards Christianity than his predecessor. So there was still hope.

So, soon after, Louis IX sent another personal ambassador to the Great Khan, the Flemish Franciscan monk and missionary *William of Rubruk* (c. 1215–1270).¹ In 1253 Rubruk sailed from Constantinople across the Black Sea to Crimea and from there travelled to Mongolia along the same northern steppe route as Plano Carpini before him². Rubruk appears to have been well received by the Great Khan Möngke. With his permission, he even stayed in his camp for several months. However, the Great Khan also made it clear to him that he did not intend to enter into an alliance with the King of France on equal terms. In his letter to Louis IX, which he handed to Rubruk upon his departure, he repeated the well-known demand that the King of France, like all other Christian princes, was obliged to obey the Great Khan of the Mongols.³

This chapter was now closed. William of Rubruk's mission had also failed. He returned empty-handed in 1255. What remained was William of Rubruk's unique travelogue, the '*Itinerarium Willelmi de Rubruc*'. These records – like their counterpart penned by Plano Carpini – are invaluable documents that provide first-hand accounts of the living conditions of the Mongols and travel under the conditions of *the Pax Mongolica*.

¹ Rubruk travelled officially as a missionary. However, the Mongols regarded him as an envoy of the King of France, which he indeed was. He was therefore immediately taken to the Great Khan.

² Rubruk was familiar with Plano Carpini's report.

³ Rubruk (2013, p. 197ff.).

The area of present-day Xinjiang, which is of particular interest to us here, was only touched upon by Rubruk when he passed through the Dzungarian Basin in what is now northern Xinjiang. However, he knew about the ancient Uyghur kingdom of Kocho, located further south in the Tarim Basin: it had quickly submitted to Genghis Khan's troops and eventually the entire Tarim Basin had fallen into the hands of the Mongols. He had been told that the region was mainly inhabited by 'Turkoman' and Persian-speaking Muslims ('Saracens'), but also by some Buddhists ('Idolaters') and Nestorian Christians.¹ The centre of the Mongol Empire was the city of *Karakorum* with the palace of the Great Khan, which Rubruk found extremely impressive:

*'As for the city of Karakorum ..., there are two districts, one belonging to the Saracens, where the markets are held and many merchants gather because of their proximity to the court, but also in view of the envoys who stay here. Then there is the district of the Cathai (Chinese), who are mainly craftsmen. Outside these quarters are the large houses belonging to the secretaries employed at court. The various peoples have twelve idol temples, two mosques where the teachings of Mohammed are proclaimed, and a Christian church at the far end of the city. The entire city area is surrounded by a clay wall and has four gates. At the eastern gate, millet and other grains, which are, however, only rarely imported here, are sold. At the western entrance, sheep and goats are offered, at the southern entrance oxen and carts, and at the northern entrance horses.'*¹

It is clear that Karakorum was a rather small, rural town in its heyday. Nevertheless, it fulfilled the function of an imperial capital, as can be seen from the large number of international and multi-religious visitors or petitioners and the many merchants, soldiers and officials that Rubruk encountered there. However, it was the capital of a nomadic empire. There was hardly any permanent Mongolian population in Karakorum. Only twice a year, when the Great Khan was present, did Karakorum come to life. The city was then surrounded by the camps of nomadic families with their animals.² However, this situation was soon to change with the rise to power of Kublai Khan, a grandson of Genghis Khan.

A Mongol emperor of China

Kublai Khan (1215-1294) was the conqueror of China. In 1260, he was proclaimed Grand Khan of all Mongols as the successor to his brother Mönke. At that time, however, Kublai Khan was already living in China.

¹ Rubruk's information corresponds with the findings of modern research. See Millward (2007, p. 59ff.).

² See Weiers (2004, p. 113ff.).



Portrait of Kublai Khan, aged approximately 45¹

In 1264, Kublai Khan made the momentous decision to move his capital from Karakorum to the newly founded royal seat of *Beijing* (then known as Daidu, or Khan-baliq in Mongolian, meaning 'city of the Khan'). Beijing soon became a true metropolis – albeit one that was influenced less by the nomadic way of life and more by the language, culture and needs of the sedentary Chinese population. Kublai Khan increasingly focused his activities on China. Although he retained the title of Mongolian Great Khan, he also ascended the Chinese imperial throne in 1271. Initially, his sphere of influence only covered northern China. By 1279, Kublai Khan had gradually conquered the entire Chinese empire from north to south. He thus became the founder and recognized first emperor of the Mongol Yuan dynasty in China (1279-1368).⁽²⁾

¹ The painting was created by court painter Araniko after Kublai Khan's death in 1294. It is now housed in the National Palace Museum, Taipei (https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/b/ba/Kublai_Khan.jpg).

² In 1279, the last representative of the previous Song dynasty (960-1279) was killed after losing a naval battle at the mouth of the Pearl River.

Sinologist Schmidt-Glintzer comments on the gradual shift in the focus of Kublai Khan's rule from Mongolia to China as follows:

"The relocation of the capital from Karakorum to Khanbalik (Beijing) in 1264 was a sign of the shift away from the steppes. Beijing was expanded from 1267 onwards, and in 1272 Khubilai moved all central authorities there"⁽¹⁾

From then on, Mongolia no longer played a major role in long-distance trade. Karakorum lost its international importance, which Wilhelm von Rubruk had described so impressively. The city gradually fell into decline and eventually vanished completely.

After Kublai Khan's *'turning away from the steppe'*, the Silk Road caravan routes running along the edge of the Tarim Basin once again became the most important overland connection between the West and China. Karakorum and Mongolia had lost their appeal for international long-distance travelers, and the northern steppe route lost its former importance. The most significant destination was now Mongol-ruled China with its new capital, Beijing. This led to a revival of the traditional Silk Road with its southern desert route.

At that time, the Central Asian region of present-day Xinjiang, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan was ruled by the *Chagatai* princely family, descendants of a son of Genghis Khan. The countries bordering to the south, from Afghanistan to Iran and Mesopotamia, were also under Mongolian rule. These rulers were known as *"Il-Khans"* and were descended from Hülegü, a grandson of Genghis Khan. They all recognized the formal suzerainty of the Great Khan Kublai Khan. In principle, this also applied to the much more independent khans of the *"Golden Horde"* who ruled in the Eurasian steppe regions, especially in present-day Kazakhstan, southern Russia and Ukraine: They were descended from *Jochi*, the eldest son of Genghis Khan, who died at an early age (see map above).

Despite occasional disputes, the *Pax Mongolica* prevailed in all these Mongolian territories at that time. The travels of Niccolo, Maffeo and Marco Polo to China clearly illustrate the renewed importance of the southern Silk Road route, which was also controlled by the Mongols.

¹ Schmidt-Glintzer (2008, p. 82), emphasis added.

² The term "horde" can easily lead to linguistic misinterpretations. The word does not refer to an unbridled or marauding "wild bunch", as one might think. Rather, it derives from the Mongolian word "Orda" or "Ordu", which refers on the one hand to the army camp of a powerful khan, but on the other hand also to all his "loyal followers" who are bound to him by protection and loyalty (cf. Weiars 2004, p. 118; Kollmar-Paulenz 2011, p. 55ff.).

Marco Polo's popular account and the question of its credibility

The reports written in Latin by Plano Carpini and Rubruk about the Mongols and their rule in Eurasia never found a wider readership. They were only *'of interest to a political-clerical specialist discourse, in which sought to respond to the Mongol threat to Europe and to classify the Mongols Mongols within the history of salvation.'*¹

The situation was quite different with Marco Polo's (1254-1324) report. His book on the 'wonders of the world' quickly became a kind of international bestseller – and this at a time when books were only available as handwritten copies and only a select few could read and write. They were therefore often only disseminated through public readings or retellings. Merchants, missionaries, diplomats, and those interested in politics and history were just as much a part of Marco Polo's audience as people who simply wanted to satisfy their curiosity about the distant world of East Asia or revel in the exoticism of foreign countries. Marco Polo undoubtedly shaped the European image of East Asia for centuries. In the image of East Asia in Europe, which was permeated by exotic fantasies, remote Xinjiang also played a role, as we shall see in a moment – albeit a rather minor one.

The original of Marco Polo's travelogue, which was probably written in 1298-1299, has been lost. There are about one hundred and fifty manuscripts, *'none of which is completely identical to another.'*² It is important to note that the early Polo manuscripts and translations were written in different vernacular languages, such as a Franco-Italian dialect, courtly French, Tuscan and Venetian Italian. It was not until around 1310 that a Latin version was produced, which reached a wider audience. This was the basis for the German translation published in 1477, which was already produced using Gutenberg's printing press.

Behind the rapid spread of Polo's report was something akin to a successful marketing strategy: Marco Polo had embarked on his great journey to Asia at the age of 17, accompanying his father Niccolo and his uncle Maffeo Polo. Both were experienced merchants who had already been to China. The young Marco was their apprentice, but he became the main character in Marco Polo's report. The preface states:

*"This book deals only with true events. (...) Since the creation of our forefather Adam, there has been no Christian, no pagan, neither a Tartar nor an Indian, not a single person of any origin who knew and explored as much and who knew about such a wealth of curiosities as Messer Polo alone. (...) And now I would like to tell you that Marco Polo spent a good twenty-six years (sic!) in those foreign lands and acquired his knowledge there. Later, in 1298 AD, when he was imprisoned in Genoa together with Messer Rusticiaus of Pisa [Rustichello da Pisa], he asked him to write down everything he told him."*³

¹ Münkler (1998, p. 82f.).

² Münkler (1998, p. 184).

³ Polo (2003a, p. 9.f.).

It reads almost like the advertising text for a modern travel bestseller: Marco Polo is presented to the audience as a shining light and an expert beyond any doubt. However, Marco Polo did not write the book himself, but rather the 'ghostwriter' Rustichello, a professional writer. The two authors met in an unusual situation, in the prison of Genoa. Whether, why and under what circumstances the two actually sat in prison together can no longer be verified today. The joint work was originally titled *Le devisement dou monde* (The Diversity of the World). How much of this book can actually be attributed to Marco Polo and how much to his silent partner Rustichello, who himself never visited East Asia, is also impossible to determine.² There are also no contemporary illustrations of the two. The image of the young Polo that adorns the German print edition of 1477 is certainly not a realistic portrait, nor is the famous Genoese mosaic from 1867, which shows the well-travelled Marco Polo in a grand pose.

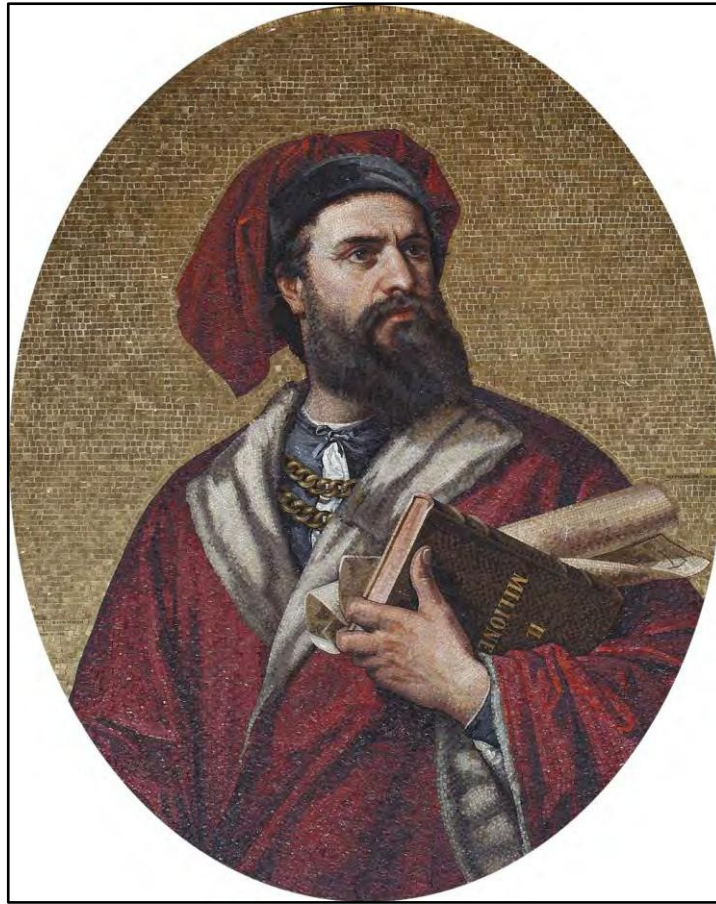


The 17-year-old Marco Polo, stylized book illustration from 1477³

¹ Little is known about the life of Rustichello da Pisa. He was not a prominent writer, but he had 'already gained some fame as a compiler of Arthurian romances' (Münkler 1998, p. 59).

² See Münkler (1998, pp. 37-65).

³ Illustration from the first German edition of Marco Polo, printed in Nuremberg in 1477. The surrounding German inscription reads: 'This is the noble knight Marcho Polo of Venice, the greatest traveler, who describes to us the great wonders of the world that he himself has seen from the rising of the sun to its setting ...'



Marco Polo in the pose of a man of the world and successful author, mosaic from 1867¹

But now to the content of Marco Polo's extensive report on his journey to East Asia (1271-1295):

- The book begins with a brief account of the first journey to China by the brothers Maffeo and Niccolo Polo, Marco Polo's father. It probably lasted nine years and took place between 1260 and 1269. This earlier journey provides the *framework* for the entire book, so to speak. It reports that the two Polo brothers travelled in several stages from Venice via Constantinople and the Crimea further and further east. They first followed the Mongolian steppe route through what is now Kazakhstan, which Plano Carpini and Rubruk had already travelled before them. However, they then made their way to the rich oasis city of Bukhara, located further south in what is now Uzbekistan. There they joined an envoy of the Mongol Il-Khan Hülegü, who led them on an unspecified route to the Great Khan Kublai Khan, presumably to his newly built capital Beijing (Khanbaliq). Either in 1264 or 1265, they were warmly welcomed there by Kublai Khan.

¹ https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Marco_Polo_Mosaic_from_Palazzo_Tursi.jpg. Genoa 1867, Palazzo Grimaldi Doria-Tursi, 1867 (accessed: 1 June 2019).

As Marco Polo asserts, they '*spoke fluently Tatar*'¹ and were therefore able to report to the Great Khan about the papacy, the princes and the political situation in the West. Kublai Khan finally released the two older Polos and sent them on their return journey to the Pope with a personal message, accompanied by a Mongolian nobleman. The Pope was to send the Great Khan one hundred Christian scholars. In addition, the Polo brothers were to bring him personally oil from the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem. Furthermore, Kublai Khan decreed *that 'they should be given a small gold tablet on which was inscribed noticed that everyone everywhere was obliged to accommodate the three envoys and provide them with horses and companions for their journey from province to province.'* With that, they set off on their return journey. They soon had to leave the Mongolian nobleman behind due to illness. '*They rode day after day, and after three arduous years they reached Laia*s'² today's Iskenderun on the Mediterranean. This was probably in 1269. Upon arrival, the two brothers discovered that the Pope, to whom Kublai Khan's message was addressed, had since passed away.

- After much back and forth, the two older Polos set off again for China in 1271, together with the young Marco Polo, from where they would not return until 24 years later. They carried a letter from the newly elected Pope Gregory X to Kublai Khan and – as a precious gift – a vial of consecrated oil from the Holy Sepulchre. However, they travelled without the requested hundred Christian scholars. After three and a half years, they finally reached Kublai Khan's summer residence in northern China in 1275 and followed him from there to his capital, Beijing. Marco Polo reports that from then on he served for many years at the imperial court as Kublai Khan's personal advisor and confidant, with the rank of prefect. On imperial orders, he undertook extensive inspection tours throughout the country. Finally, in 1291, with imperial consent, he set off on his return journey with his father and uncle, this time by sea. They reached Venice in 1295.

Doubts about the credibility of Marco Polo's report quickly arose. After all, he not only told of distant lands, unusual events and strange customs, but also of wondrous monster creatures. He reported of donkey-headed people, cannibals, headless people and unicorns that were said to live in distant Asia. Storytellers and illustrators at fairs were particularly fond of such horror stories. They reinforced the skepticism of many serious readers.

¹ Polo (2003a, p. 13).

² Ibid., p. 15.



*Marco Polo illustrations from the Duc de Berry's 'Livre des merveilles du monde'*¹

Some parts of Marco Polo's book were interpreted as pure bragging, such as his claim that he was a high-ranking official in China and a personal confidant of Emperor Kublai Khan. Ultimately, there were even doubts as to whether Marco Polo had ever been to the Far East at all. His travelogue could have been compiled from other sources and, in some cases, simply invented.²

However, based on recent sinological research³, it is now generally agreed that Marco Polo did indeed visit China and must have undertaken inspection trips into the interior of the country. He reported in great detail and accurately on the functioning of the Chinese tax system and the production and distribution of paper money. This is insider knowledge that cannot have come from mere hearsay and was not to be found in the sources available at the time. The numerous inaccuracies and gaps found in Marco Polo's text are more likely to be attributed to the fact that neither Marco Polo nor his co-author Rustichello were researchers in the modern sense, but rather authors with gaps in their memory and knowledge who also wanted to cater to their audience's thirst for sensation and were not without vanity and superstition themselves. However, Marco Polo's statements about specific, geographically identifiable places that he knew from his own observations are mostly sober and factual.

The account of the two older Polos' two journeys to East Asia as commissioned 'mediators' between the Great Khan and the Pope does not necessarily have to be taken at face value. No evidence of this has yet been found in the Vatican archives. However, Marco Polo's report itself is based on a verifiable core

¹ [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Marco_Polo,_Livre_des_merveilles,_Fr._2810,_Tav._76v_\(Dettaglio_Detail\).PNG](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Marco_Polo,_Livre_des_merveilles,_Fr._2810,_Tav._76v_(Dettaglio_Detail).PNG); https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Libro_de_las_Maravillas_Livre_des_merveilles_Book_of_the_mar-vels_of_the_world_Fol_29v_Mythical_creatures.png. (Accessed: 1 June 2019).

² In her book *Did Marco Polo go to China?* (German title: *Marco Polo kam nicht bis China*), British sinologist Frances Wood (1995) compiled the main arguments against Marco Polo's account. For example, he did not mention the Great Wall. Nor did he consider it worth mentioning that people in China eat with chopsticks, drink tea or that Chinese women have their feet bound. He did not mention the Chinese writing system, which he, as a high imperial official, should have been familiar with. His name does not appear anywhere in the Chinese annals or other Chinese sources, etc.

³ See Haw (2006), Vogel (2013), Atwood (2015).

from real experiences that he may well have had during his long stay in the Far East. Numerous more or less credible embellishments have been added, as was customary at the time. As already mentioned, the whole story is held together by a kind of 'frame narrative'. It is no longer possible to clarify what role Marco Polo's father and uncle actually played in this. It also remains a mystery what kind of person Marco Polo really was and how he spent his seventeen long years in China: Marco Polo's own character is hardly revealed in his account.

Marco Polo's account of his journey through the Tarim Basin

Now let us turn to the passages in Marco Polo's account that are of immediate interest to us. These concern only a small part of the journey undertaken by the brothers Niccolo and Maffeo Polo with their nephew Marco, who was still a teenager at the time: The route across the Pamir Mountains and through the Tarim Basin in what is now Xinjiang. On their way to China, the three Polos travelled along this route, either in 1274 or as late as 1275. The relevant descriptions in Polo's report are relatively brief and clear. There is no mention of monsters or other improbabilities. Given the poverty and remoteness of the region, Marco Polo and his co-author Rustichello had little reason to rave about the wonders and riches of the Orient here.

Like Xuanzang and countless other travelers on the historic Silk Road before them, the three Polos also used the high-altitude *Wakhan Corridor* to reach the Tarim Basin between the Hindu Kush and Pamir mountain ranges. Marco Polo writes:

"If you continue walking in a north-easterly direction, crossing mountain after mountain, you finally reach a point where you might believe that the peaks around you make this the highest country in the world. Between two mountain ridges, you can see a large lake from which a beautiful and friendly river flows, irrigating a wide green plain. This pasture is so excellent that it fattens even the leanest cattle within ten days.

In this plain there are ... sheep of extraordinary size, with horns three, four or even six spans long. The shepherds use these to make spoons and all kinds of utensils; they also make fences out of them to protect their cattle from wolves'.¹

This summery high-mountain idyll was probably *Lake Chaqmaqtiin*, located at an altitude of 4,024 meters, which Xuanzang had already described as the 'Great Dragon Lake'.² However, the rest of the journey turned out to be much more barren:

¹ Polo (2001, p. 84)

² Sparavigna (2020).

*"For twelve days, the route leads across a plateau called Pamer [Pamir]. As there are no human settlements along the entire route, you must stock up on everything you need beforehand. The mountains here are so high that no birds can be seen near the peaks, and it has even been claimed that fires you light do not give off the same heat as in lower areas due to the thinness of the air, nor are they as effective in cooking food. (...) Once you have completed these twelve days of travel, you must walk another forty days in the same direction, crossing mountains, valleys and many rivers, without seeing a hut or anything green."*¹

It should be noted that the entire mountain journey took place almost twenty-five years before Marco Polo reported on it. Only unusual details such as the boiling point of water at high altitudes or the enormous horns of mountain sheep remained vivid in his memory. What is certain is that the travelers finally arrived in the Tarim Basin and continued eastwards in the footsteps of Xuanzang.

The first place Marco Polo reported on after the arduous crossing of the high mountain region was Kashgar. [Kashcar]. He writes:

"Finally, one reaches a place called Kashcar, which used to be an independent kingdom but is now under the rule of the Great Khan. Its inhabitants are Muslims. (...) The people speak their own language and live from trade and crafts, especially the production of cotton fabrics. There are pretty fields, orchards and vineyards here; in addition to cotton, flax and hemp are also grown. (...)

*In addition to the Muslims, there are many¹ Nestorian Christians among the inhabitants of Kashcar, who are allowed to live according to their own laws and build churches"*²

Marco Polo's brief characterization of the economic life in Kashgar differs only slightly from what Xuanzang had observed centuries before him. Only the political and religious conditions had changed completely. Kashgar was now under Mongol rule. Islam had replaced Buddhism. In general, however, a certain religious pluralism still existed.

Marco Polo crowned his description of Kashgar with a sweeping assessment of its inhabitants:

*'The merchants of the country travel all over the world; but in truth they are a dirty and greedy people who eat badly and drink even worse.'*³

¹ Polo (2001, p. 84).

² Polo (2001, p. 85).

³ Ibid.

Here, one senses that the Venetian Marco Polo must have had culinary standards as high as those of Venetians today. A certain condescension on the part of the Venetian merchant towards his seemingly poor colleagues from Kashgar is also unmistakable.

Just like Xuanzang before them, Niccolo, Maffeo and Marco Polo traveled on from Kashgar along the southern route of the Silk Road, via Yarkand to Khotan. Both had since become Muslim cities under Mongol rule.

About *Khotan* [Cotan], which had once so impressed Xuanzang, Marco Polo writes only:

*'The inhabitants live according to the law of Mohammed. The most beautiful of the cities is the capital, Cotan. Everything is available in abundance there. Cotton grows here. The people cultivate vines, tend their estates and the many gardens. They are merchants and craftsmen, but not good soldiers'*¹

Marco Polo makes no mention of Dandan-Oilik, which Sven Hedin would later rediscover, or of the other cities lost in the desert around Khotan. In fact, he does not seem to have been entirely clear about the geography of the Tarim Basin; for example, he makes no mention of the Tarim Desert River.

It is also striking that, unlike Xuanzang, Marco Polo does not mention the outstanding importance of silk and jade for the crafts and trade of Khotan. In the case of jade, however, this could simply be a mistake. Marco Polo writes about the region immediately east of Khotan: *'Abundant jasper and chalcedony can be obtained from the rocks of the rivers. These beautiful stones are sold at high prices in Catai [China].'* This is exactly the case with jade, a gemstone that is highly sought after in China and is still found today in the mountain rivers around Khotan, which flow from the Kunlun Mountains into the desert.³ Marco Polo had another very different experience in this region that particularly moved him. he repeats it several times in a similar form:

*'I want to tell you about a strange custom. When a man goes on a journey and his wife is left alone at home for twenty or more days, she is allowed to live with another man with another man. The husband who is away has the same right.'*⁴

Elsewhere, Marco Polo even reports that it is customary for the master of the house to leave his visitor:

¹ Polo (2003a, p. 73).

² Ibid., p. 74.

³ The gemstones jasper and chalcedony are quartz stones that resemble jade stones, which are highly prized in China but are mineralogically different. Marco Polo may not have been aware of the difference.

⁴ Polo (2003a, p. 73).

"The two take great pleasure in each other. (...) The women are beautiful, cheerful and always in a good mood."⁽¹⁾

Such spicy stories certainly contributed to the popularity of Marco Polo's account. Of course, it is not easy to draw the line between truth and fantasy.

From Khotan, Niccolo, Maffeo and Marco Polo travelled eastwards along the southern edge of the Taklamakan Desert. After several stops, which can no longer be identified with certainty, they arrived at a place called "Lop". This was probably today's *Charklik* (Chinese: Ruoqiang), which lies about 800 km east of Khotan at the entrance to the Lop Nor desert, halfway to Saciou, today's *Dunhuang*. In Dunhuang, the caravan routes of the northern and southern bypasses of the Taklamakan meet again. ⁽²⁾

Marco Polo describes the road to Dunhuang as particularly desolate and exposed.

Similar to Xuanzang before him:

"Because nothing grows in the desert, no animals or birds live there. (...) During the nightly ride through the desert, it can happen that someone falls a little behind, straying from their companions to sleep or for some other reason. When they then want to rejoin their fellow travelers, they hear ghostly voices speaking as if they were their companions, for they often call them by name. Sometimes they lead them astray to such an extent that they never find the caravan again. Many have died and disappeared without a trace in this way"⁽³⁾

After crossing the desert for a month, the Polo caravan finally arrived in Dunhuang (Saciou), the first Chinese city on their journey. At that time, the city was home to a few Muslims and Nestorian Christians, but mainly Buddhists and Taoists. Marco Polo refers to them as "heathens". He reports that these pagans throughout the country *"maintained abbeys and monasteries with all kinds of idols, which are worshipped and adored and to which sacrifices are made."*⁽⁴⁾ This is likely a reference to the Buddhist Magao Grottoes with their numerous cave temples near Dunhuang, which have now become a major tourist attraction.

The rest of the journey from Dunhuang to the Chinese heartland cannot be reconstructed precisely from Marco Polo's account. In any case, Niccolo, Maffeo and Marco Polo finally travelled on to the summer residence of the Great Khan, where they were received by Kublai Khan himself.

From there, they travelled on to the capital Beijing (*Khanbaliq*), probably in 1275. This is where the main part of Marco Polo's 24-year travel adventure began. The account of the "wonders of the world" written by Rustichello and himself, which established Marco Polo's later fame, deals mainly with his long stay in China (ca. 1275-1291) and his subsequent four-year return journey by sea to Venice (1291-1295).

¹ Marco Polo reports this from the oasis of Hami (op. cit., p. 79f.).

² See Polo's itinerary from Kashgar to Dunhuang: Sparavigna (2020), Polo (2003a, p. 431). Marco Polo seems to have had no knowledge of the huge Lop Nor Lake further north in the desert.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid., p. 77.



Niccolo, Maffeo and Marco Polo with Emperor Kublai Khan. Stylised illustration, approx. 1410¹

We will not concern ourselves with that here. We will leave it at the brief passages described above, in which Marco Polo recounts his personal experiences, which he had or claims to have had around 750 years ago on the historic Silk Road in what is now Xinjiang.

¹ https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/b/b1/Marco_Polo_at_the_Kublai_Khan.JPG (From the "Livre des merveilles du monde" by the Duc de Berry, ca. 1410-1412).

Whether Marco Polo was actually as close to the powerful Kublai Khan as he claims in his account remains unclear. In any case, his stories from the Far East only reached the West in a fairy-tale-like, distorted form. This can be clearly seen in the idealized illustration reproduced here of the meeting between the three Venetian merchants and the Mongolian Great Khan and Emperor of China from the famous *Livre des merveilles du monde* of the Duc de Berry.

In the Western world Marco Polo's book had a decisive influence on public knowledge about East Asia until the beginning of the modern era. In 1492, Christopher Columbus took a copy of Marco Polo's book with him on his first voyage from Portugal to the west, on which he wanted to reach India, but found Central America instead, and made handwritten notes in it.¹

In the Western view of East Asia at that time, the distant region of Xinjiang, which we are concerned with here, was just a small splash of colour that was easy to overlook. It remained that way for centuries. As already described in the first chapter, Eurasian long-distance trade gradually shifted from the overland routes of the Silk Road to the sea route. As a result, Xinjiang fell to the margins of international attention. The European maritime powers, which had begun their colonial conquest of the world in the late 15th century, certainly had no interest in Xinjiang. For them, there was literally not much to gain in this barren land.

¹ Münkler (1998, p. 100ff.)

Chapter Four

Xinjiang, Muslim land on the edge of world history: Benedikt Goës and the Khojas

The image of the 'Far East' conveyed by Marco Polo was medieval, without clear geographical contours. During his lifetime, people still believed that the earth was flat. From the perspective of the new colonial rulers, who began to conquer the rest of the world with their warships and merchant vessels after 1492, it was already a globe. For them, Marco Polo's mixture of detailed descriptions, exaggerations and fantastic stories was no longer a sufficient basis for knowledge. They thirsted for accurate information.

The Muslim countries that Marco Polo crossed on his way to China were all within the sphere of influence of *the Pax Mongolica*. As we saw in Chapter 1, the Pax Mongolica came to a definitive end after its revival under Timur Lenk (reigned 1370–1405). The old desert and mountain routes of the Silk Road continued to exist. However, at their key point, the passage from Afghanistan through the Tarim Basin into the Chinese heartland, there was no longer an assertive authority to ensure the safety and maintenance of the transport routes. As a result, these became increasingly dangerous for caravans and individual travelers and were therefore less frequented.

In Southeast Asia, the era of colonial world domination by European maritime powers began: *Portuguese, Spanish and Dutch ships* were the first to arrive in India and China, followed by *English and French* seafarers. They all came as conquerors with claims to ownership and dominance. These new rulers had no particular interest in maintaining a transport network on the Eurasian continent. After the end of the Pax Mongolica, three great Islamic empires ruled the region and controlled the transport routes: the *Ottoman Empire*, which reached its first peak in 1453 with the conquest of Constantinople by Sultan Mehmet II, the *Persian Empire*, ruled since 1501 by the powerful Shiite Safavid shahs, and the *Indian Empire of the Great Mughals*, created by Babur and his successors in 1526 in what is now northern India, Pakistan and Afghanistan.

At that time, the area that is now *Xinjiang* was far from the limelight:

The remote region was of little interest to *European colonial powers*. The great *Islamic empires* also had no great interest in distant Xinjiang. And the *Chinese Empire* had only a scarce presence in Xinjiang during the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644). The *Russian Empire*, the future great power in the north, was still in its infancy.

Thus, during this period, Xinjiang was able to develop its own Muslim world away from the major political events of the world, shaped primarily by regional and local power relations and religious characteristics.

Nevertheless, this remote region once again came to the attention of the Christian world: Around 1600, three centuries after Marco Polo's journey, a scholarly dispute arose as to whether the country Marco Polo referred to as 'Cathay' was synonymous with 'China' or whether Cathay was a kingdom in its own right. The dispute originated among Jesuit missionaries in India who had come from Portugal. At first glance, this may seem surprising. But even before the English, shortly after Vasco da Gama had discovered the sea route to India (1498), Portuguese sailors had founded their own colony in India, the *Estado da India*. From 1505 onwards, a Portuguese viceroy or governor resided there, in the West Indian port city of *Goa*. A little later, Portuguese sailors reached the South China Sea and established a settlement in *Macao* on the Pearl River Delta in 1557.¹ Jesuit missionaries finally arrived in Beijing in 1601 under Matteo Ricci.

The Portuguese therefore knew exactly where China was located. But doubts arose among theologians. Marco Polo and other medieval sources had reported that there was a Christian kingdom called 'Cathay' in the north-east of China, ruled by the legendary *priest John* or his descendants.² People now wanted to know whether this Christian country actually existed and could possibly be considered a Catholic ally.

In the Footsteps of Marco Polo: The journey of Benedikt Goës

With the support of the Viceroy of Portuguese India, *Aires de Saldanha* (reigned 1600-1605), an expedition was sent out to answer the geographical research question: Are Cathay and China one and the same country, or is there a Christian kingdom called 'Cathay' in addition to 'Pagan' China? To obtain certainty, the expedition's task was to follow Marco Polo's route through the Tarim Basin as closely as possible. *Benedict Goës* (Bento de Góis, 1562-1607), a Jesuit from Portugal who lived in Goa, was put in charge of this expedition.

Goës was not a priest, but a Jesuit lay brother who was considered particularly capable and influential. He was theologically educated and spoke several languages, including Persian and Chagatai Turkish. He also belonged to the illustrious circle of representatives of different religions with whom the Indian Grand Mogul Akbar (reigned 1556-1605) discussed fundamental religious questions in his palace. Akbar, a professed Muslim, is said to have been an enlightened and inquisitive spirit. Thus, It is understandable that he not only supported the expedition financially, but even provided Goës with a safe conduct pass within his domain.

¹ Macao fell to the People's Republic of China in 1999, with an agreed transition period of 50 years, as did the British Crown Colony of Hong Kong.

² Polo (2003a, pp. 85-91), Knefelkamp (1988).

³ See Kreckel (2011, p. 90f.).

However, the main financier of the expedition was the viceroy of Portuguese India, *Aires de Saldanha*. In addition to the more academic question of the identity of Cathay, he was particularly interested in the practical question of whether there was a shorter and safer land route from India to China than the very lengthy sea route around the Malay Peninsula and through the risky Strait of Malacca. Goës was also tasked with exploring this possibility with the help of his expedition.



Benedict Goës (1562-1607) ²

¹ Yule (1916, p. 218ff.).

² <https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/2/23/Gois.jpg> (accessed: 10 November 2021).



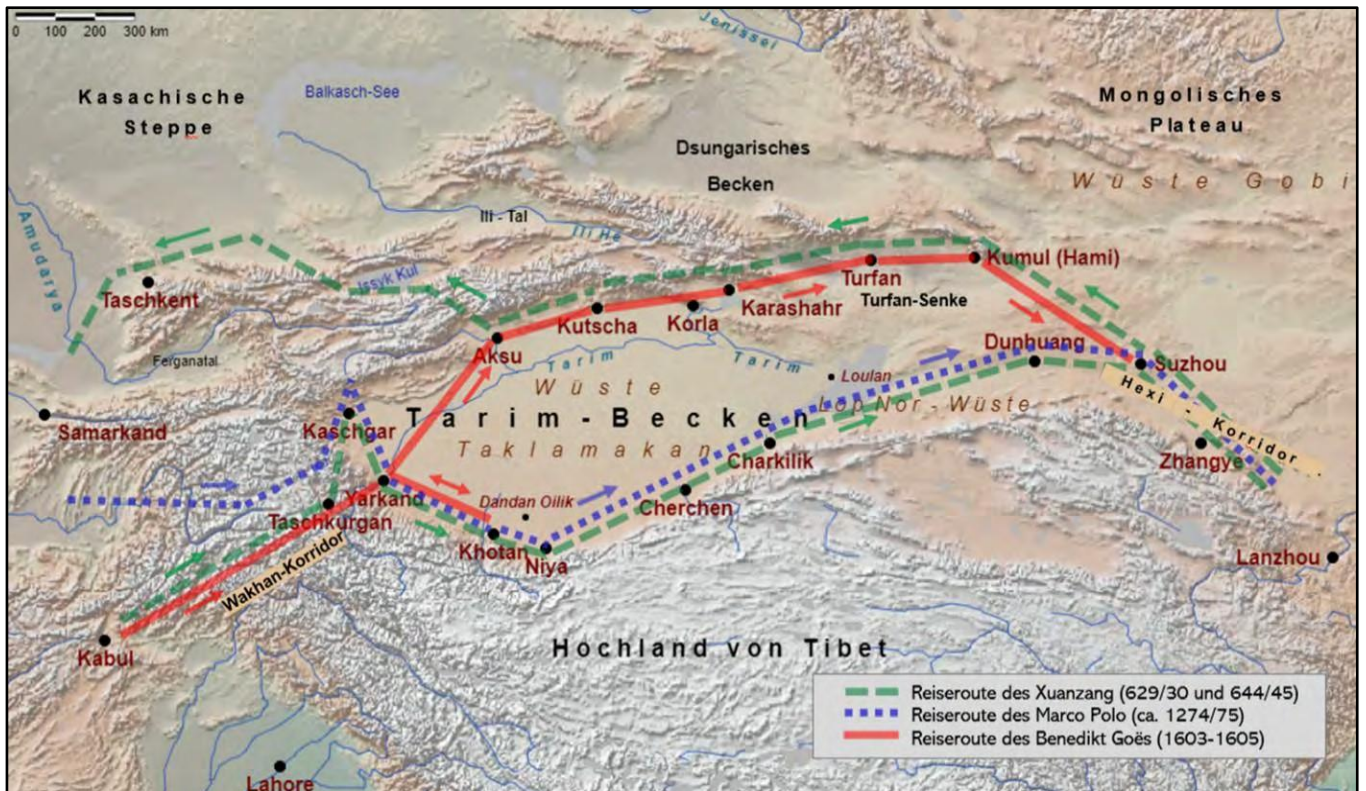
*Grand Mogul Akbar in dispute with Portuguese Jesuits*¹

With the highest level of protection, money, gifts and merchandise, Benedikt Goës set off from Agra in India at the beginning of 1603. Via Lahore in present-day Pakistan, he and his companions travelled to Kabul in Afghanistan, which at that time belonged to the Indian Mughal Empire. From there, he endeavored to follow Marco Polo's footsteps as closely as possible along the Silk Road to China.

The account of this journey serves as a third historical snapshot in our journey through the history of the Tarim Basin, allowing us to look back on times long past.²

¹ Illumination from Abu l'Fazl's Akbar-Nama, ca. 1605, detail. Source: Kreckel (2011, p. 91), https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/d/d1/Jesuits_at_Akbar%27s_court.jpg.

² Henry Yule writes: "Since Marco Polo, Goës was the only European traveler on the Pamir route whose journey has been handed down in written form." (Yule 1916, p. 181).



Three historical journeys through the Tarim Basin: Xuanzang, Marco Polo, Benedikt Goës¹

At the time Goës set out on his journey, the Pax Mongolica was long gone. The ruling houses were often at odds with each other, and caravan traffic on the Silk Road was extremely sparse and therefore unsafe. To successfully overcome the dangers of the long journey, travelers had to form larger groups. This usually happened only once a year.

In *Kabul*, in what is now Afghanistan, the first stage of the expedition, Goës had to wait for months until enough fellow travelers had gathered for a caravan to the Tarim Basin. When the time finally came in early summer 1603, the group included not only a few merchants but also Muslim pilgrims on their way back from Mecca. This was fortunate for Goës, because among these Mecca pilgrims was the sister of the Khan of Kashgar, who lived in Yarkand, the caravan's next destination. This sister, known as "*Hajji Hanım*" (pilgrim princess), had run into financial difficulties on her long pilgrimage. Goës helped her out with a generous interest-free loan of six hundred gold pieces. This good deed would later prove very helpful to him in Yarkand.

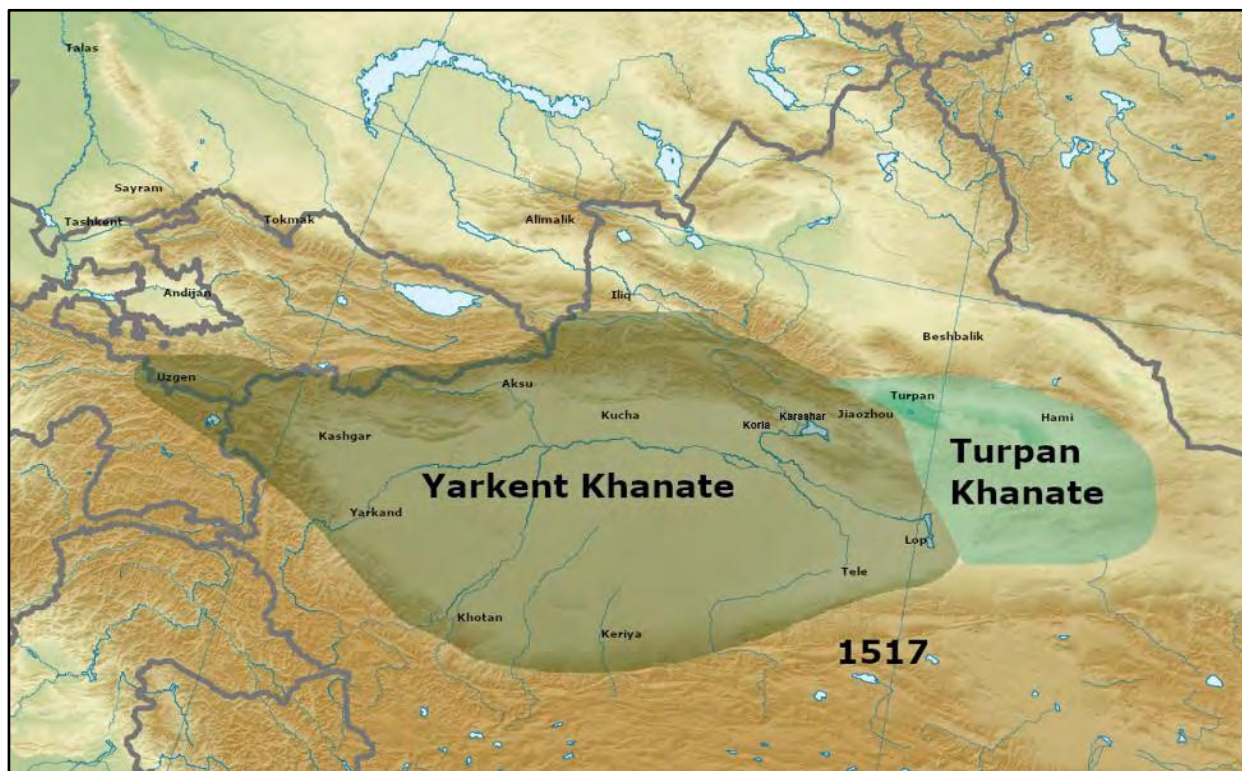
The exact route of the first stage of Goës' expedition from Kabul across the Pamir Mountains to the Tarim Basin can no longer be reconstructed today. This is due to the sad fact that Goës was unable to write the report of his journey himself. He died on the way, before reaching his final destination of Beijing. The description of his journey is therefore not his own, but is based on the oral account of his Armenian travelling companion Isaak, and a few written documents by Goës that have been preserved.³

¹ Copyright: Stepmap 3. 4. 2021; own adaptation.

² The following is based on information provided by Yule (1916), Wessels (1924) and Payne (1930).

³ After his death, Goës' detailed travel diary is said to have been destroyed by merchants who still owed him money (Yule 1916, p. 248f.).

*Matteo Ricci*¹, who came from Italy and had been head of the Jesuit mission in Beijing since 1601, later wrote down and published the account of the late Benedikt Goës' journey.¹ There were some inconsistencies, particularly in the information about places and proper names that were completely unfamiliar to Ricci. These mainly concerned the Pamir stage of the journey. It therefore remains unclear which routes and passes Goës took to cross the Pamir highlands. What is certain is that it was an extremely arduous journey, which finally took him to Yarkand on the western edge of the Tarim Basin in November 1603.²



*The Khanate of Yarkand (or Khanate of Kashgar), extent around 1512*³

¹ The Italian Jesuit and astronomer *Matteo Ricci* (1552–1610) lived in China for decades. He spoke and wrote perfect Chinese and was thoroughly familiar with Chinese culture. On this basis, he wrote his famous book about China. According to Jürgen Osterhammel, Ricci was a ‘*universal scholar at the height of his time ... who had left behind him the naive amazement at the wonders of the Orient*’. He sees Ricci’s book on China as a ‘*magnificent attempt to explain the prosperity, power and manners of the Chinese on the basis of his rich observations and comprehensive knowledge of literature, drawing on their geographical and ecological living conditions and the ethnographically sharply defined characteristics of their civilization. (...) His China is no longer the legendary Cathay of the late Middle Ages*’ (Osterhammel 1989, p. 23ff.). Unfortunately, there is no modern English translation of Ricci’s book on China. A good English account is provided by the British historian Mary Laven (2011).

² After Ricci’s death, his colleague Nicholas Trigault compiled Ricci’s extensive writings on China, translated them into Latin and published them in 1615 as a book entitled ‘*De Christiana expeditione apud Sinas*’. This text, which was widely read at the time and also translated into German, contains the account of Benedikt Goës’ journey in chapters XI–XIII.

However, the original Italian version written by Matteo Ricci himself has since been found in his estate. This was taken into account in the new edition of the first English translation by Henri Yule, edited by Henri Cartier (Yule 1916), which we follow here. In addition, we draw on the chapter ‘The Travels of Benedikt Goes’, which is reprinted in Payne (1930, pp. 119–182). This chapter includes additional information from letters written by Benedikt Goës during his journey. These letters are not included in Yule’s translation of Ricci’s text.

³ https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/5/52/1517_Yarkent_and_Turpan.png (accessed 9 June 2021).

The large river oasis of Yarkand was then the capital of a vast empire, sometimes referred to as *the Khanate of Kashgar*, sometimes as *the Khanate of Yarkand*.¹ In 1603, when Benedikt Goës reached Yarkand, it was ruled by *Mohammad Khan* (1591-1610), a member of the Chagatai dynasty, which descended from Genghis Khan but had long since become Islamized and Turkified. His domain included all the oases on the northern and southern routes of the Silk Road at the edge of the Tarim Basin.²

When Benedikt Goës arrived in *Yarkand*, he was honorably received by Mohammad Khan. The intercession of the Khan's sister, whom Goës had previously helped with a loan, had paved the way for him. However, after Goës revealed himself as a Christian in the purely Muslim city of Yarkand, the goodwill evaporated. Outraged Muslim townspeople and courtiers put him and his companions in dangerous distress. However, as Goës was under the protection of Mohammad Khan and especially his prime minister, '*a very powerful lord*'³ no serious conflicts arose. Mohammad Khan even provided Goës with a personal passport for his onward journey through his territory.

A long wait began again in Yarkand. In order to continue the journey towards China, it was necessary to form another large and wealthy travelling group. Benedikt Goës' report states:

'Yarkand, the capital of the Kingdom of Kashgar, is a major market and an important meeting place for merchants, offering a wide range of goods. (...) A large caravan is assembled here for the journey to Cathay. It is led by a caravan leader authorized by the king and his assistants, who charge the participants very high fees. (...) A caravan does not set out every year, but only when enough fellow travelers can be found and when an entry permit to Cathay has been obtained.

*No commodity is as valuable and as widely used as an investment for the journey to Cathay as ... jade. It is offered for sale to the imperial court in Beijing, which pays very high prices for it. Anything that is not purchased can be freely marketed. The profit from the jade trade is so high that it compensates for all the efforts and costs of the journey.'*⁴

Goës used the waiting time to make a detour to the oasis city of *Khotan*, some 300 km away on the southern route of the Silk Road. Xuanzang and Marco Polo had been there before him; the condition of the arduous journey route on the edge of the desert had hardly changed since that time. However, Khotan had meanwhile become a strictly Muslim city.

¹ *Kashgar*, until then the most important city in the region, had been conquered by foreign troops in 1514 and almost completely destroyed. Their leader was *Said Khan* (1514-1533) from the ancient, now Islamized and Turkified Mongolian Chagatai dynasty. He became the founder of the 'Eastern Chagatai' dynasty based in Yarkand, which ruled the western oases of the Tarim Basin from then on (until 1705). Muhammad Khan, whom Goës met in Yarkand, was a grandson of Said Khan. Until 1514, Kashgar had been under the rule of the Shaibanid princely family, who had long been rivals of the Chagatai dynasty (see below, chapter 11).

² See Papas (2005a), Millward (2007).

³ Payne (1930, p. 139).

⁴ Cf. Yule (1916, p. 218f.).

.Khotan was still a centre of the jade trade. Goës went there mainly because Hadschi Hanim, the princess to whom he had lent six hundred gold pieces, lived there. She was the mother of the governor (Wali) of Khotan, a nephew of Mohammad Khan. In Khotan, the debts were generously repaid in the form of valuable jade stones. This meant that Goës was well equipped for his onward journey to China. He could now return to Yarkand in good spirits.

However, the renewed stay in Yarkand was delayed again and again. It was not until November 1604 that the large caravan with 72 participants was finally ready to depart. Bypassing Kashgar, the caravan reached the *Aksu* oasis on the northern route of the Silk Road after about four weeks.

From there, it continued on to the oasis *of Kucha*, the former stronghold of Buddhism. Xuanzang had once stayed there for a long time in a Buddhist monastery. Now Kucha was a completely Muslim city; Buddhism had disappeared. As the caravan reached the city during the fasting month of Ramadan, conflicts arose with local Muslim clerics. They demanded that Goës respect the fasting rules of Islam or else pay a high dispensation fee. Goës refused both, which was ultimately accepted.

Religious conflicts also shaped the next stage. It led to '*Cialis*', a city that can no longer be clearly identified today. It was probably *Karashar* (Chinese: Yanqi).¹ The local prince was said to have been a son of the King of Kashgar. He issued wild threats when he heard that Goës and his people were Christians. Only with great difficulty were they able to appease him with travel documents signed by Mohammad Khan, his father. Completely unexpectedly, he had Goës picked up one night and subjected him to a rigorous interrogation by Islamic scholars. Ultimately, however, the prince was so impressed by the Jesuit's steadfastness and strength of faith that he treated him with great respect from then on. He even issued him with letters of protection for the rest of his journey, which he was finally able to undertake after three months.

In *Cialis*, Goës also found the answer to the question that had originally prompted him to embark on his journey. Muslim merchants returning from China told him '*that they had stayed at the same inn as the Jesuits in Beijing. They were therefore able to tell Goës first-hand about Father Matteo [Ricci] and his colleagues. To his surprise, Goës learned that China was indeed the Cathay he had been searching for.*'²

The actual purpose of the journey had thus been fulfilled. Proof had been provided that Marco Polo's 'Cathay' was not a separate Christian kingdom, but merely another name for the Chinese Empire. Its present-day capital, Beijing, had been called 'Cambaluc' by Marco Polo, which corresponded to the Mongolian name Khanbaliq (City of the Khan).

The next major stops on Goës' journey eastward were the oases *of Turfan* and *Kumul* (Hami). In the opposite direction, Xuanzang had also been there almost a thousand years earlier.

¹ It could also have been the oasis of Korla, located slightly further west.

² Yule (1916, p. 235f.).

After lengthy stays in these oases, Goës and his companions arrived at *the Jade Gate* on the Great Wall of China in the autumn of 1605. In December 1605, they finally reached Suzhou, the first garrison town on Chinese territory.

They were held captive in *Suzhou* for over a year, during which time they had many disputes with the Chinese authorities and Muslim merchants who were also stranded there. Eventually, Goës fell seriously ill. He managed to send a letter to Father Matteo Ricci in Beijing with a personal request for help. Ricci immediately sent a Chinese Christian, Brother Ferdinand, to Suzhou. Shortly after his arrival, on 11 April 1607, the exhausted Goës died – in the certainty that he had fulfilled his mission and proved that ‘Cathay’ and China were one and the same country.

Goës' last personal testimony is his letter to Matteo Ricci, written in 1606. Although this letter was primarily a call for help, Goës also reported on the dangerous journeys he had made through mountains and deserts. He wrote that they were completely unsuitable for trade between India and China. In any case, he himself would prefer to return to India by ship from China via Canton (Guangzhou). In his letter, Goës also emphasized how much he had suffered among the Muslims during his entire journey. He expressly warned Ricci about their ‘lack of trustworthiness’.²

It is clear that for the Christian Benedikt Goës, his relationship with Muslims was a sore point. This was not surprising for a Jesuit and missionary at that time. The topic runs like a thread through the entire report. Time and again the text contains references to mutual mistrust and misunderstanding between Christians and Muslims. Although Goës seems to have had a sufficient command of Persian and Chagatai Turkish to be able to communicate reasonably well with the local inhabitants during his travels, his general reservations remained.

On the other hand, it is also clear that Goës had a realistic and pragmatic assessment of the power relations in the Muslim-ruled oasis cities of the Tarim Basin. He understood the family relationships and dependencies between the individual princes and governors. He also knew how to gain personal access to them and win their goodwill.

However, the final report on Goës' journey (written by Matteo Ricci) contains no clear reference to the now undisputed historical fact that the legitimate Chagatai prince Mohammad Khan was by no means the sole ruler in the oases of the Tarim Basin. Actual rule was largely exercised by so-called ‘*Khojas*’ (pronounced ‘Hodjas’), who outwardly appeared as mere religious advisors to the prince and did not stand in the limelight.

¹ Suzhou is now a district of the large municipality of Jiuquan. Suzhou is located in the Hexi Corridor in Gansu Province, about 350– s km east of Dunhuang.

² Wessels (1924, p. 38f.).

³ The report (written by Matteo Ricci) even suggests that Benedikt Goës may have been poisoned by Muslims, who also destroyed his travel diary (Yule 2016, p. 248f.).

The *de facto rule of the Khojas* during this period became the hallmark of Islam in Xinjiang. Historian Gavin Hambly summarizes it as follows:

*"During the 16th century ... Chagatai rule in Kashgar became increasingly weak until it was supplanted in the cities by the establishment of a strong theocracy by a family of Khojas."*¹

The honorary title 'Khoja' (meaning 'revered master'), widely used in the Islamic world, is of Iranian origin. We must now take a closer look at the special role of the Khojas in the history of Xinjiang, which is not mentioned in Goës' report.²

The 'holy state' of the Khojas

During the Mongol period (13th-15th centuries), a form of Islam strongly influenced by various Sunni Sufi brotherhoods (*Tariqa*) became prevalent almost everywhere in Central Asia. This also applied to the oases of the Tarim Basin. From the 16th century onwards, the Muslim Sufi brotherhood of *the Naqshbandis* gained the upper hand there.³ The missionary work of pious Naqshbandi preachers was so successful that they outstripped other Sufi brotherhoods and gained great influence over the Turkic-speaking population. From then on, the Naqshbandis were an integral part of popular religiosity in the Tarim Basin. Even in pre-Islamic times, people in this region had been inclined to worship saints, both living and deceased. In addition, they had made pilgrimages to particularly sacred places, holy trees, shrines or tombs. The Naqshbandis continued these ancient traditions.

The Naqshbandis did not advocate militant Islam. They preached the *'ideal of a simple life focused on ... frugality and orientation towards God (inner-worldly asceticism).'*⁴ They practiced *'silent meditation rather than the loud or musical, often ecstatic rituals of other Sufi orders. In connection with the master-disciple relationship, which is so important in Sufism, the Naqschbandiya places 'heart connection to the master' is particularly emphasised.'*⁵

The close personal relationship between a revered master and his disciples gave certain Naqshbandi masters power and political influence. As Anne-Marie Schimmel points out, *'the Naqschbandiyya, although a mystical order, was always interested in politics ... because it saw the education of the ruling class as its duty.'*⁶ This means that it was not only ordinary believers who became dependent on their Naqshbandi masters through their personal ties to them, but also influential Personalities. Even ruling princes could fall under the spell of such a Sufi master as 'disciples', who could then influence them as their 'spiritual advisor' and mentor and influence their decisions.

¹ Hambly (1966, p. 149).

² It is difficult to say whether the silence about developments in the Muslim sphere of influence can be traced back to Benedict Goës himself or to Matteo Ricci, who wrote the report.

³ The name Naqshbandis can be traced back to *Baha-ud-Din Naqshband* (1318-1391), who was active in Bukhara in Uzbekistan.

⁴ Paul (2010, p. 335).

⁵ Krämer (2007, p. 56).

⁶ Schimmel (1992, p. 519).

In principle, any Muslim could rise to become the master of a Naqshbandi brotherhood. All he had to do was distinguish himself through exemplary piety and earn a reputation as a healer and miracle worker. In reality, however, certain *family dynasties* emerged among the Naqshbandis over time. These were families who considered themselves direct descendants of the Prophet (Sayyid). In these Sayyid families, which were considered particularly 'holy', the office of Sufi master was passed down from father to son. They assumed the title of 'Khoja'. These holy Khojas were regarded as the natural leaders of the brotherhood and thus gained ever greater power.

The founder of the Khoja dynasty, which was to shape the fortunes of Muslims in the Tarim Basin for a long time, was the Sufi saint and preacher Ahmad Kasani (1461-1542), who bore the religious honorary title *Makdhum-i-Azam* (Highest Teacher). He was mainly active in the Ferghana Valley and Bukhara, but is also said to have spent several years in Yarkand, where he was spiritual advisor to the ruling khan.²

However, the actual start date of the Khoja rule in the Tarim Basin is later, around 1580. At that time, Makdhum-i-Azam's son *Ishak Khoja* is said to have arrived there and distinguished himself as a miracle healer and successful preacher.³ Together with his followers, Ishak Khoja established strong Naqshbandi brotherhoods throughout the oasis cities, with their own properties, meeting places and considerable wealth. In addition, Ishak Khoja was able to win over many high-ranking personalities as followers, thereby increasing his own influence. Above all, he succeeded in making the Chagatai prince Muhammad his personal disciple. In 1591, the latter succeeded his brother and ascended the throne of Yarkand as Muhammad Khan (reigned 1591-1610). Ishak Khoja was Muhammad Khan's trusted advisor and mentor. He was thus the 'strong man' in the khanate.

It was this very Muhammad Khan who hosted Benedikt Goës in Yarkand in 1603. As we have seen, Goës also reported on Muhammad Khan's first minister, whom he had met at court. This dignitary, whom Goës described as a 'very powerful lord', questioned him intensively about religious topics. Presumably, this 'powerful lord' was none other than the influential Naqshbandi master Shutur Khalifa, who temporarily held the Role of Ishak Khoja, who died in 1599, as 'spiritual advisor' to the Khan.⁴

¹ On this and the following: Schwarz (1976), Papas (2005a, 2005b, 2019), Krämer (2007), Millward (2007: p. 82ff.), Paul (2010, p. 330ff.).

² According to Schwarz (1976, p. 270ff.). Whether Makdhum-i-Azam actually visited Yarkand himself is disputed among historians. In any case, one of his wives is said to have come from Kashgar. It is undisputed that their son Ishak Khoja was active in Yarkand and other cities in the Tarim Basin from around 1580 and served as spiritual advisor to his student Mohammad Khan from 1591 onwards.

³ Papas (2019, p. 4).

⁴ The Naqshbandi master *Shutur Khalifa* was the guardian of *Shadi Khoja*, the young son of Ishak Khoja, who died in 1599. Shadi Khoja (1588-1645) eventually succeeded his father as "powerful lord" and spiritual advisor to the khans of Yarkand. Shortly before his death, Ishak Khoja is said to have appointed his student Muhammad Khan as his own spiritual successor and Sufi master in order to secure his family's continued influence at court (Millward 2007, p. 86).

However, this is only an obvious assumption. On the other hand, it is well documented historically that the Naqshbandi-Khoja family dynasty, which traces its origins back to *Makdhum-i-Azam*, gained great power in the oases of the Tarim Basin and possessed considerable wealth. Specialist historians today believe that at that time an 'Alliance of throne and altar' had come about, which in the 16th and 17th centuries had led to a kind of '*holy state*'¹ in the cities on the edge of the Taklamakan. The ruling Khans had become so weak that they could only remain on the throne if they allied themselves with a Khoja. The Khoja, sanctified by his descent from the Prophet, conferred the necessary legitimacy on the Khan's rule. The Khan could therefore only make important decisions with the consent of the Khoja, who thus de facto determined the guidelines of politics in the name of Islam.²

As can also be seen from Benedikt Goës' report, the Khans in the cities of their domain used to appoint members of their own family as governors (Walis), which was certainly only possible in agreement with their Khoja. The Khojas themselves were also able to accumulate considerable possessions for their families.

It is difficult to determine today exactly how the balance of power between the Khan and the Khoja was distributed. *Shadi Khoja* (1582-1645), the son of Ishak Khoja, attained great power. He succeeded his guardian Shutur Khalifa as spiritual advisor and 'powerful lord' of Mohammad Khan. Until his death, he served six more khans as a religious mentor and "éminence grise". In fact, he probably determined their policies to a large extent.⁵

The controversial role of Apak Khoja and his successors

Ultimately, it was Apak Khoja (c. 1625–1694) who completely sidelined the legitimate khan and seized power for himself. Apak Khoja became one of the most influential and controversial figures in the history of Xinjiang. His spectacular mausoleum on the outskirts of Kashgar bears witness to this to this day.

¹This expression was coined by the German Islamic scholar Martin Hartmann (1905) in a much-cited essay. Cf. also Hartmann (1908, p. 31ff.), where he refers to an "Islamic ecclesiastical state".

³See Papas (2005a, pp. 25–73; 2005b, 2019), Millward (2007, pp. 86ff.). Florian Schwarz (1998) summed up this connection succinctly: '*No sheikh, no empire*'.

⁴See Eden (2014).

⁵Papas (2005b, pp. 168ff.).



Mausoleum (Mazar) of Apak Khoja in Kashgar (construction began around 1640)¹



View inside the Apak Khoja mausoleum with probably 58 graves²

¹ Photo Marga Kreckel 2018, Map 4, P1010 216. The date of construction of the mausoleum is disputed. It probably did not take on its present form until the 1690s, at the end of Apak Khoja's life (cf. the detailed discussion by Gilkinson 2013, p. 17ff.).

² Photo Marga Kreckel 2018, Map 4, P1010 187. Information about the actual number of graves varies. The tomb of Apak Khoja and the tomb monument of the "Fragrant Concubine" are not visible to visitors.

Apak Khoja (often referred to as Afaq Khwaja) lived during one of the most turbulent periods in Xinjiang's history. He belonged to the Khoja dynasty of the 'Khojas of the White Mountain'. At the time of Benedict Goës' visit to Yarkand, however, the rival 'Khojas of the Black Mountain' ruled there, especially Ishak Khoja and later his son Shadi Khoja, whom Benedict Goës had described as 'powerful lord'. They acted as spiritual advisors to Muhammad Khan and his successors. From around 1620, however, they faced competition from within their own family: in Kashgar, the aforementioned 'Khojas of the White Mountain'.² appeared on the scene and built up their own following. Their most important leader was the Naqshbandi master Apak Khoja. He succeeded in making the governor of Kashgar, *Yulbars*, the son of the Khan of Yarkand, his personal Sufi disciple.

When he succeeded his father on the throne of Yarkand in 1668, Apak Khoja became his spiritual mentor and thus the de facto ruler. The 'Khojas of the Black Mountain', who had dominated Yarkand until then, were deposed. They were replaced by the 'Khojas of the White Mountain' under Apak Khoja – but only for a short time. For Yulbars was assassinated in 1670. Under his successor, *Ismail Khan*, the "Khojas of the Black Mountain" once again took the helm in Yarkand. Their rival, Apak Khoja, was driven into exile.

Apak Khoja then spent many years wandering far away, about which little reliable information is known. During this time, he gained a great reputation as a Sufi preacher, miracle worker and saint. But he also seems to have been very active politically. He is even said to have travelled to Tibet to visit the Dalai Lama, who wielded great power at the time. He is said to have addressed him with the words: '*Ismail Khan has driven me from my country. Now give it back to me.*'³ The Dalai Lama is said to have recommended him to his own ally and disciple, the Mongolian *Galdan*, a Dzungarian prince who at that time ruled over 'Dzungaria', today's northern Xinjiang.

The Dzungarian prince is said to have followed the Dalai Lama's request and conquered Kashgar and Yarkand with his troops in 1678. He deposed the legitimate ruler Ismail Khan and installed Apak Khoja in his place. Until his death in 1694, Apak Khoja was not only the spiritual but also the secular head of the khanate. Outwardly, he was now the sole ruler of all the oases in the Tarim Basin, including the two seats of power, Yarkand and Kashgar, but with one restriction: He was a vassal of the Dzungars to whom he was obliged to pay high annual tributes.

Since the conquest by the Dzungarian prince Galdan, who had restored Apak Khoja to power in 1678, his entire territory had effectively been under Dzungar rule. However, when they gradually withdrew their troops after a few years, a confusing and controversial power vacuum arose in the Tarim Basin.

¹ See the (sometimes contradictory) information provided by H. Schwarz, Papas, Millward and Thum.

² Ishak Khoja, son of the dynasty's founder Makdhum-i-Azam, was the progenitor of one branch of the Khoja family, known as the *Khojas of Black Mountain* (or, after their founder, "Ishakis"). The centre of their influence was Yarkand. They were rivalled by the *Khojas of the White Mountain* (or "Afakis"), who traced their origins back to his hostile older brother Ishan-i-Kalan. They were mainly active in Kashgar. Their most important member was Apak Khoja, a grandson of Ishan-i-Kalan (Schwarz 1976, Papas 2005b).

³ Hartmann (1905, p. 210).

From then on, Apak Khoja's rule was constantly contested. He had to assert himself against resistance from the old ruling family and also from the rival Khojas of Black Mountain. From then on, he seems to have resided primarily in Kashgar, where he had his largest following.

In the decades following Apak Khoja's death, the fate of the oasis cities of the Tarim Basin was marked by local wars, conspiracies and intrigues. Members of the two rival Khoja dynasties and members of the ancestral family of the Chagatai Khans fought for power and influence with varying degrees of success. The powerful Dzungars from the north also continued to assert their supremacy.

It would go too far here to deal with these historical trials and tribulations in detail. The historian Rian Thum writes:

"Apak Khoja died in 1694. But over the next 65 years, the Altishahr region saw an endless succession of wars between the leaders of the Khoja dynasties of the White Mountain and the Black Mountain, with frequently changing alliances with the Dzungars, the actual military power in the region. The back and forth only came to an end when Apak's old rivals, the Sufis of Black Mountain, collaborated with the Qing conquerors in 1759-60. (...) The leaders of the White Mountain fled to West Turkestan (mainly to the Ferghana Valley), from where they launched invasions and rebellions in the Qing-controlled territory." ¹

In other words, it was not until the final destruction of the Dzungarian Empire and the conquest of the Tarim Basin by the troops of the Manchu Emperor Qianlong in 1759 that this turbulent phase came to an end. From then on, the Tarim Basin, together with Dzungaria, came under the rule of the Chinese Empire, under the new Chinese name 'Xinjiang'.

In southern Xinjiang, individual descendants of the old Khoja families continued to play an influential role for a long time. Protest movements and uprisings flared up repeatedly, with the Khojas participating in the name of their – ancestral or assumed – rights to rule.

The now officially ostracized rebel leader *Emir Jakub Bek*, who ruled in Kashgar from 1867 to 1877 (see illustration in the first chapter), had a large mosque and a madrasa built right next to the mausoleum of Apak Khoja. Jakub Bek revered Apak Khoja as a precursor. He himself is said to have found his final resting place in an unknown grave next to the mausoleum.

It is clear that the history of the Khojas and Islam in Xinjiang is a thorny field that must be approached with caution. The few surviving sources and earlier historical accounts at our disposal were all written by partisans or opponents and are therefore not very reliable. The boundaries between history, ideology and legend become blurred. Even a portrait of Apak Khoja cannot be found; his historical traces remain unclear.

¹ Thum (2012a, p. 296, own translation). See also the summary timeline in Papas (2005a, pp. 280-282, and Kim (2018).



Spacious prayer hall leading to the mosque at the Apak Khoja Mausoleum¹



Cemetery with anonymous graves near the Apak Khoja Mausoleum²

1Photo Marga Kreckel 2018, Map 4, P1010 238.

2Photo Marga Kreckel 2018, Map 4, P1010 198.

The views and interpretations of history held today also vary greatly. This is clearly illustrated by the ongoing dispute over the historical significance of Apak Khoja and his mausoleum in Kashgar¹, which was originally built for his father:

- Devout local patriots revere Apak Khoja as an important Sufi master and Muslim saint. For them, the mausoleum of Apak Khoja and his family in Kashgar is the holiest place of pilgrimage in Xinjiang, which they still visit on certain days.
- For others, Apak Khoja is considered a folk hero and founder of Uyghur self-determination. They see him as the precursor to the founding of a sovereign Islamic state called 'East Turkestan'.
- Still others, however, strongly reject Apak Khoja. They accuse him of treason for ousting the legitimate ruling dynasty and bringing his country under the control of the Dzungars. In doing so, they say, he paved the way for Xinjiang's subsequent subjugation under Chinese rule.
- Apak Khoja is not very popular among today's Chinese state and party leadership either. He is considered a representative of backward-looking religious forces and has long been ignored. His mausoleum in Kashgar was neglected, especially during the years of the Chinese Cultural Revolution. In an official history book about Xinjiang published in 2005, Apak Khoja's name is mentioned only once and quite casually.²

Xiang Fei or Iparhan: The myth of the fragrant concubine

In recent years, however, extensive restoration work has begun on Apak Khoja's mausoleum and the surrounding historic buildings and parks, with a view to enhancing their appeal to tourists. It is interesting to note that the focus is not on Apak Khoja as an important historical figure, but on his legendary descendant Iparhan (Chinese: Xiang Fei), the '*fragrant concubine*' of the Emperor of China, who is also said to be buried there.

¹ See Waite (2006), Thum (2012a), Gilkinson (2013), Kościelniak (2017).

² Li, Sheng (2005, p. 49).



Xiang Fei or Iparhan, the "fragrant concubine" (c. 1734-1788)¹

¹ Contemporary portrait attributed to court painter Giuseppe Castiglione (1688–1766). Source: https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/3/3b/Consort_Rong_dressed_in_Manchu_Clothes.JPG (accessed 22 June 2021).

In fact, there are several different versions of the story of the "fragrant concubine". James Millward has compiled them in a thoroughly researched article:¹

1. In the most colorful and imaginative version of the story, the great Emperor Qianlong is said to have learned one day that in distant Kashgar, a descendant of Apak Khoja had a wife (or daughter) who was distinguished by her breathtaking beauty and exquisite body odor. He had this woman brought to his palace in Beijing. She was anointed daily and bathed in camel milk to preserve her fragrance. Under the Chinese name Xiang Fei (fragrant concubine), she was accepted into the imperial harem. However, the young woman proudly resisted all of the emperor's advances. Qianlong had done violence to her country. He had stolen Xiang Fei and abducted her to distant China, killing her relatives. She could never forgive him for that.
The emperor nevertheless tried to win her over with generous gifts and special privileges, but without success. Instead, Xiang Fei sought revenge. The empress dowager and mistress of the imperial harem was no longer willing to stand idly by and watch. In her son's absence, she had the rebellious concubine strangled, who had continued to insist on her attitude and refused to be humiliated.
Since the Empress Dowager thwarted all attempts to build a dignified tomb for Xiang Fei, the enraged Emperor had her body buried in a crude grave by the palace wall.
2. Another version of the story tells that the emperor was deeply affected by the death of his beloved. He embraced the deceased Xiang Fei, who still exuded her incomparable fragrance. Eventually, however, the emperor came to terms with what had happened. He respected Xiang Fei's unyielding attitude. He had her buried with full honors in the imperial mausoleum outside Beijing.
3. A third version makes no mention of the time and manner of Xiang Fei's death. This version of the Xiang Fei legend suggests that the relationship between the emperor and his concubine was entirely normal, in keeping with the customs of the imperial harem at that time. The focus here is on the statement that Emperor Qianlong fulfilled his Muslim concubine's last wish. He had Xiang Fei's remains transferred to the mausoleum of her ancestors in her native Kashgar. The magnificent wooden catafalque with her coffin, which is said to have been transported from Beijing to distant Xinjiang, could be admired in the Apak Khoja Mausoleum for a long time afterwards.

The range of Xiang Fei legends is wide. At one end is the story of the upright Muslim woman from Xinjiang who defended her personal honor and that of her people against rape and foreign rule. Xiang Fei (or Iparhan, as she was most often referred to) is elevated here to an icon of Uyghur resistance. At the other end of the spectrum is the romantic story of the encounter between the almighty Emperor of China and a beautiful exotic woman from distant Xinjiang, whose religion and foreignness he respects.

¹ For the following: Millward (1994, p. 429ff.).

What connects the stories about the 'fragrant concubine' is the tacit understanding that it is difficult to integrate the Turkic-speaking Muslims of Xinjiang into the Chinese sphere of influence. Thus, the first version conceals the now obvious asymmetrical conflict between the Han Chinese and the Uyghurs. The third, on the other hand, represents the official government view, which emphasizes the harmonious integration of different minorities into the Chinese nation, while recognizing ethnic and cultural differences.

It is clear that the various Xiang Fei stories reflect the problems of today's world. In fact, the stories about the 'fragrant concubine' all originated in the 19th and 20th centuries, a time of upheaval in which multi-ethnic empires and colonial empires ruled by aloof monarchies lost their legitimacy, while the political ideas of self-determination of peoples and nationalism gradually took shape.

4. However, there is also a much more prosaic fourth interpretation of the Xiang Fei story. It is based on documents preserved in the archives of the Imperial Court in Beijing: According to these records, when Emperor Qianlong's troops conquered Kashgar and Yarkand in 1759, some descendants of the Apak Khoja family fought on the imperial side. As a result, they were rewarded with high government offices and rich estates in Beijing in 1760. A sister was also among them, who was accepted into the imperial harem and received a princely salary. She bore the Chinese court name He-zhuo (Uyghur: Khoja).¹ Palace documents show that over the years, this young woman rose to the second highest rank in the harem hierarchy and gave birth to a daughter. However, it is not clear whether she was a particular favorite of the emperor. She was probably more of a normal 'career concubine' at the imperial court. After her death at the ripe old age of about 65, she was given a funeral befitting her status.

The oft-told story that the body of the 'fragrant concubine' was transferred to Kashgar after her early death and buried in the mausoleum of Apak Khoja is now considered to be refuted. In 1979, a tomb was found not far from Beijing that could be clearly identified as that of the emperor's Muslim concubine.²

There are therefore many reasons not to romanticize Xiang Fei. The career of the 'fragrant concubine' and that of her male relatives at the court in Beijing was more a part of the imperial alliance and marriage policy that was common at the time. As James Millward writes, the aim was to form a strategic alliance with members of the Khoja upper class in defeated Xinjiang and thus consolidate its integration into the Chinese Empire.³

¹ These were Khoja Erke Husein, a grandnephew of Apak Khoja, his two nephews Mahmud and Turdi, and their sister. The young woman's original name has not been recorded (Millward 1994, p. 434). See also the genealogy in Schwarz (1976, p. 292).

² Millward (1994, p. 447).

³ Op.cit, (p. 437f.).

Outlook

As we have seen, the cult of the 'fragrant concubine' has served a wide variety of political purposes. The same is true of the heroization or demonization of Apak Khoja. The historically verifiable facts in both cases are sparse and contradictory or, as in the case of Xiang Fei, rather sobering.

What is indisputable, however, is that the multi-religious and multi-cultural times of earlier centuries are definitely a thing of the past. When Benedikt Goës stayed in the Tarim Basin at the beginning of the 17th century, it was already a *thoroughly Muslim and Turkic-speaking region*. Despite Goës' keen powers of observation, he was probably not fully aware of the Khojas' role in supporting the state; at least, there is no mention of this in the report that Matteo Ricci later wrote on Goës' behalf.

And yet, it was at that time that the roots were laid for the region's unique Muslim path, a path that was strongly influenced by the Sufism of the Naqshbandi preachers, mullahs and qadis. As a mystical variant, it was deeply religious. But it was not suited to religious fanaticism and political fundamentalism. It was down-to-earth, and the Naqshbandis also allowed traditional folk religious customs to flourish.

When the country finally fell to China in 1759, little changed in this regard. Xinjiang, south of the Tianshan Mountains, had virtually no non-Muslim population, and people kept to themselves. Until well into the 19th century, everyday administrative and governmental affairs were mainly handled by the local Muslim elites and religious Naqshbandi leaders.³ Education was also firmly in Muslim hands.⁴ It was not until the massive influx of Chinese-speaking citizens since the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949 that this situation changed fundamentally. But more of that later.

² Cf. Bellér-Hann (2008, p. 300ff., 320ff.).

³ Millward (2007, p. 97f.), Newby (1998), Bellér-Hann (2008), Kim (2018).

⁴ See Chapter

Chapter Five

Surveying the desert: Sven Hedin and the battle against the 'white spots' on the map

As has been emphasized many times, Xinjiang has always been one of the most inaccessible and unfamiliar regions on earth for Europeans. The ancient Chinese accounts of Xinjiang by famous travelers such as Zhang Qian, Faxian and Xuanzang were unknown in Europe. The few surviving accounts by European travelers to East Asia, most notably Marco Polo's description of the 'wonders of the world', tended to reinforce the impression of exotic unreality and remoteness. In any case, for centuries there was no significant public interest in Europe in news about Xinjiang.

It was not until the second half of the 19th century that this began to change fundamentally. Civilian and military researchers, surveyors and cartographers from many countries set out to travel to Xinjiang and report on their experiences and discoveries to the Western public.

The best known and most publicized of them in Germany was the Swedish Central Asian explorer and geographer *Sven Hedin* (1865-1952), who will now be discussed. Hedin had first visited Kashgar as a young man in 1890. Later, he explored Xinjiang and its fearsome Taklamakan Desert, furrowed by high shifting dunes, in detail during three major expeditions (1895-1897, 1899-1902 and again in 1934) and mapped it. Sven Hedin was not only a renowned scientist, but also a successful publicist, self-promoter and networker, not unlike his medieval predecessors Xuanzang and Marco Polo.

As a tireless explorer and meticulous cartographer, Hedin is still held in high esteem. However, his political stance as a royalist and admirer of Hitler remains highly controversial to this day.

Hedin reported on his travel experiences and findings not only in strictly scientific treatises, but also in many popular books that became bestsellers, and in countless public lectures. With the help of his book and lecture fees, he was able to finance his expeditions largely himself. Overall, Sven Hedin repeatedly emphasized in his writings and lectures that his main goal on his voyages of discovery to distant lands was to find the 'last blank spots' to remove from the map and thus to expand humanity's geographical knowledge.²

¹ Sven Hedin had access to many powerful figures of his time, including German Emperor Wilhelm II, the Russian Tsar, the Shah of Persia and the President of the Republic of China, Chiang Kai-shek. But he was also received on several occasions by Adolf Hitler and other Nazi leaders, whose policies he also publicly endorsed. Because of his proximity to Nazi Germany, Hedin later lost his honorary doctorates from the universities of Oxford and Cambridge and other honorary titles (Wood 2007, p. 127f., Meyer / Brysac, p. 310ff.).

² Salomon (2013, p. 7), cf. Wennerholm (1978, p. 174).



*Sven Hedin surveying the Taklamakan Desert, 1899*¹

Alexander von Humboldt's 'Central Asia'

Today, one might wonder how necessary it really was at the time to accurately survey the Taklamakan Desert, which was completely inaccessible to ordinary mortals, and to correct European maps accordingly. After all, functional maps of Xinjiang already existed. One of them was even created by *Alexander von Humboldt* (1769-1859), perhaps the most famous scientific explorer.²

Unlike Sven Hedin, however, Alexander von Humboldt never visited Xinjiang himself. During his great journey through Russia in 1829, which he recounted in his three-volume work "*Asie centrale*" published in French in 1843, he only reached the Siberian Altai Mountains and the then Russian-Chinese border in present-day Kazakhstan, but not Xinjiang. Nevertheless, Humboldt also dealt extensively with the geography, geology and climatology of Xinjiang in "*Asie centrale*". In doing so, he relied on the geographical and geological knowledge available at the time.

¹ https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/f/f7/Hedin_making_surveys_in_Kara-Koschun.jpg (accessed: 22 June 2021).

² The literature on Alexander von Humboldt is extensive. We would like to refer here only to the current, very informative short Humboldt biography by Daum (2019).

also on Chinese map material.¹ Xinjiang was therefore by no means a 'blank spot' for Western experts even back then – and certainly not for Chinese experts. In Humboldt's map of Central Asia, only the Taklamakan Desert is marked as '*Terra Incognita*'.² Otherwise, the geographical contours of Xinjiang as depicted by Humboldt differ little from those found on a modern map.

However, there is one significant difference. The travel routes and distances between individual locations were not measured precisely on Humboldt's map. Like other cartographers of his time, Alexander von Humboldt had to rely on the same unreliable information that travelers on the Silk Road had relied on for centuries – *travel itineraries*:

Itineraries were route descriptions in which distances between two locations were usually calculated in terms of 'day's journeys'. At a time when there were no accurately surveyed maps, they were indispensable for travelers unfamiliar with the area. The itineraries contained information about junctions and crossroads, bridges and fords, mountain passes, watering places, weather conditions, hostels and other useful information – sometimes even about robbers or ghosts that regularly lurked there. Marco Polo's account of his journey from the Pamir Mountains via the Tarim Basin to Beijing can also be read as a travel itinerary over long stretches.

Alexander von Humboldt also had to use such itineraries as sources for creating his map. He even included some of this information, which also describes various routes to Kashgar, in his work on Central Asia. He commented critically on it, particularly because of its often dubious distance specifications.³ It was not until the late 19th century, when Sven Hedin had already mastered the methods of trigonometric land surveying, that this unsatisfactory situation for geographers and travelers came to an end.⁴

The battle against the 'white spots'

This brings us back to Sven Hedin and his self-imposed mission to survey the land in detail and eliminate the 'white spots' on the map of Xinjiang. In 1884, shortly before Hedin travelled there for the first time, Xinjiang had been granted the status of a regular province of the Chinese Empire.

¹ See Humboldt (2009), Lubrich (2019).

² A facsimile of the map is printed in the critical new edition of Humboldt's Central Asia work. See Humboldt (2009: p. 752).

³ Ibid., pp. 628–663.

⁴ There is a map of Central Asia created by Sven Hedin in 1903, which incorporates the results of the surveying work carried out during Hedin's first two Xinjiang expeditions (1895–1897, 1899–1902). A facsimile of the map is reproduced in Wahlquist (2008, p. 156).

However, among the inhabitants of Xinjiang themselves there was no specific interest for an accurate cartographic survey of the impenetrable Taklamakan Desert.

At that time, it was not only explorers with primarily *scientific goals* who were interested in accurately mapping the 'unexplored' areas of the earth, but above all ministries of war and general staffs who needed reliable maps for their very specific purposes.¹ It is possible that accurate Chinese military maps of Xinjiang already existed at the end of the 19th century. However, they were probably kept secret. In any case, they were not accessible to foreigners.

At that time, China's two major 'neighboring powers', *British India* and *Tsarist Russia*, had a particular *military interest* in obtaining accurate information about Xinjiang. They were rivals for political influence in Xinjiang. Obtaining reliable information about this Chinese border province was therefore important for both of them. It was all about the 'Great Game' between Russia and Britain, i.e. about supremacy in Central Asia. We will discuss this in more detail in Chapter 13.

The two competing great powers maintained forward observation posts in Kashgar in the far west of Xinjiang. Russian Consul General *Nikolai Petrovsky* had been stationed there since 1882, and from 1890 onwards, a permanent British representative (also Consul General from 1910 onwards), *George Macartney*, was also present. Both made every effort to gather military intelligence on Xinjiang for their governments. Western explorers found them to be very supportive.

Apart from that, the *Survey of India* had a major influence on the British side. This was a powerful colonial government agency in Calcutta, which was responsible for trigonometric surveying and mapping of the whole of India. Primarily for military reasons, the Survey of India was also interested in the geography beyond India's borders, especially Tibet and Xinjiang:

*'In order to obtain the information required for geographical science and probably also for the secret service, the Survey of India used to employ so-called pundits or munshis, locals who were familiarized with the simplest surveying methods and sent to areas where Europeans could not move freely.'*³

¹ For example, before the introduction of aerial cartography in Germany, there were particularly accurate 'General Staff Maps' for a broad overview and detailed 'Survey Sheets' on which topographical details could be visualized.

² See, for example, Skrine / Nightingale (1973), Hopkirk (1990), Tamm (2011, chap. 6).

³ Franz (1987, p. 39); cf. Hopkirk (1990, p. 329ff.).

In addition to such Indian scouts and 'barefoot geographers', British explorers with a clear military background also played a formative role, foremost among them the well-known explorer *Robert Shaw* (1839–1879), a wealthy tea planter and former member of the army. In 1868, he was one of the first Britons to reach Kashgar and wrote a detailed report on it.¹ Shaw was later followed in his footsteps by his nephew *Francis Younghusband* (1863-1942), a British officer in the service of the Indian colonial army.² Younghusband was particularly interested in exploring the Chinese-Indian border area from a military perspective and mapping it. To this end, he undertook numerous expeditions to Tibet and Xinjiang, on which he reported to his superiors⁽³⁾

On the Russian side, the most famous example was *Nikolai Prschewalskij* (or Przewalski, 1839-1888), a trained geographer and high-ranking officer in the Russian army.⁴ Prschewalskij, who conducted four expeditions in Central Asia between 1876 and 1888, '*freely gave advice on the military application of his findings to the ministry.*'⁵ In 1877, he crossed the Taklamakan Desert from north to south, i.e. from the oasis of Korla on the northern route of the Silk Road to the oasis of Charklik (Chinese: Ruoqiang) on the opposite southern route. He followed the lower reaches of the Tarim River which flowed into a large freshwater lake on the southern edge of the Taklamakan Desert. Prschewalskij was certain that he had found the legendary Lop Nor Lake, which Chinese and European geographers had been reporting on since ancient times. However, the exact geographical location of this lake had remained unclear until then.⁶

Shortly after Prschewalskij's return from Central Asia, a scientific controversy arose between him and the eminent Berlin geographer and geologist *Ferdinand von Richthofen* (1833-1905), who is known to have coined the term 'Silk Road' (see above). Richthofen was a highly respected scholar who had conducted relevant field research in China himself between 1868 and 1872. He doubted Prschewalskij's claim. The freshwater lake he had discovered could not possibly be Lake Lop Nor, because the terminal lake of the Tarim River, where its waters have evaporated and seeped away since time immemorial, must in any case be a salt lake. That seemed conclusive. Prschewalskij, however, countered this and insisted on the accuracy of his own observations and surveying work. This, too, could not be easily refuted. Thus, the controversy remained unresolved at that time.

1 , op. cit., p. 323ff.

² On Younghusband: French (2004).

³ Younghusband later became infamous as the commander of a British-Indian force that carried out a massacre in Tibet in 1904 (Hopkirk 1990, p. 509ff.).

⁴ Prschewalskij is also known to the wider public as the namesake of *the Przewalski horse*, an East Asian wild horse breed that he was the first to describe. During his journey through the Taklamakan, Prschewalskij also encountered wild camels, which he also researched scientifically.

⁵ Dreyer (2008, p. 180). A map of "Chinese Turkestan and Northern Tibet" from 1890 by Prschewalskij has been preserved, on which he accurately marked the end lake of the Tarim, which he discovered and named Lop Nor Lake (printed as a facsimile in Dreier, *ibid.*).

⁶ Hedin (1941, p. 244ff.), Prschewalski (1952, p. 44ff.).

⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 252–255.

But back to *Sven Hedin*. For him, the dispute between Richthofen and Prschewalskij over Lake Lop Nor became a kind of personal turning point, as he admired both explorers as shining scientific role models: Ferdinand von Richthofen was Hedin's academic teacher and mentor. He had studied with him at Berlin University in 1889-1890 and again in 1892. Later Richthofen and Hedin engaged in an intensive scientific correspondence.¹ In Sven Hedin's eyes Nikolai Prschewalskij was the quintessential, comprehensively educated scientific explorer. He was the role model he aspired to follow. In 1891, he even visited Prschewalskij's grave in Karakol in present-day Kyrgyzstan. Later, he edited and annotated Prschewalskij's Central Asian travelogues in Swedish and German.²

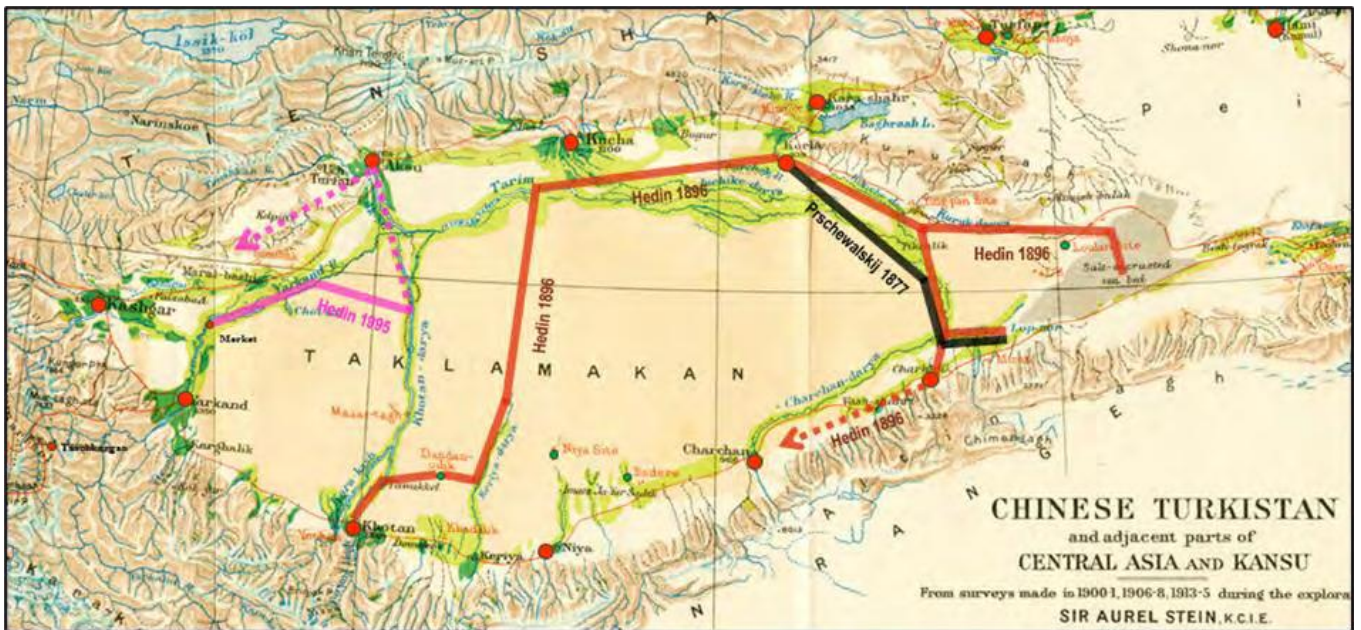
From then on, Sven Hedin was obsessed with the unresolved scientific controversy between Richthofen and Prschewalskij. He wanted to solve the 'Lop Nor mystery' himself and find the definitive answer that his two heroes had sought in vain. The discovery of the exact geographical location of Lake Lop Nor thus became one of the main aims of Sven Hedin's life's work. His three major Xinjiang expeditions, which we will now discuss in more detail, were intended to serve this purpose.

Sven Hedin's first Xinjiang expedition (1895-1896)

To get to the bottom of the Lop Nor mystery, Sven Hedin wanted to be the first explorer to cross the Taklamakan Desert from west to east, a distance of well over 1,000 kilometers. The Tarim Basin, which has no drainage and extremely low rainfall, and in which the Taklamakan Desert, covered over long stretches by high shifting dunes, is located, is enclosed on the south, west and north by glaciated high mountains (Kunlun, Pamir and Tianshan). The mountain rivers flowing down from there, fed by meltwater, flow towards the Tarim from all directions. Some, such as the Khotan Darya and the Yarkand Darya, only reach it during the months of particularly high water levels after the snowmelt. Others, such as the Keriya Darya or the Cherchen Darya, always seep away into the desert. Only the tributaries of the Tarim coming from the Tian Shan Mountains carry water all year round. The mighty desert river Tarim, which flows eastwards at the northern edge of the Taklamakan and turns southeast near the oasis city of Korla, finally disappears into a closed-end lake. This was the state of knowledge in 1895, according to Sven Hedin. He now wanted to determine the exact geographical location of this terminal lake and ascertain whether it was Lake Lop Nor.

¹ See Richthofen (1933), Montety (2015).

² "General Prschewalskij in Inner Asia", Hedin (1925).



First expeditions through the Taklamakan: Prschewalskij (1877) and Hedin (1895–96)¹

It is important to realize that in the late 19th century, travelling in Xinjiang was still almost exactly the same as it had been in the days of Xuanzang, Marco Polo or Benedikt Goës. The travel routes were rudimentary and one could only travel on foot, by caravan or, at best, on horseback. Motorized vehicles did not yet exist, nor was there a railway connection from China to Xinjiang.² As a glance at the map shows, under these circumstances it would have been obvious for Sven Hedin to take either the northern route of the classic Silk Road from Kashgar to the Korla oasis. From there, he could have followed the course of the Tarim River in a south-easterly direction to locate its terminal lake, as Prschewalskij had already done in 1877. Or he could have chosen the southern route of the Silk Road via Khotan to Charklik (Chinese: Ruoqiang) and from there set off in a north-easterly direction in search of the Tarim's terminal lake. However, Hedin did not choose either of these alternatives. At the time, he also ruled out the third possible option, a river journey down the Tarim from west to east, which would ultimately have led him to the end lake. He only chose this option four years later during his second Xinjiang expedition. In 1895, however, he had set his mind on crossing the desert from west to east in its entire length. To prepare for this enormous undertaking, he began with a shorter stage. He wanted to explore and map an approximately 180 km long impassable section of desert in the west of the Taklamakan. It stretched between two source rivers of the Tarim that did not carry water all year round, the Yarkand-Darya and the Khotan-Darya. In April 1895, he set off from the village of Merket on the Yarkand-Darya with a small caravan consisting of himself, four local guides and eight pack camels.

¹ Historical map by Aurel Stein from 1933, edited excerpt. Source: <https://www.stevenandrewmartin.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/aurel-stein-1933-chinese-turkistan-map-stein-andrew-martin-silk-road-research-770kb.jpg> (accessed: 28 June 2021).

² The railway line from central China to Urumqi was opened in 1966, the train connection to Kashgar in 1999 and its continuation to Khotan in 2013.

Sven Hedin was well aware of how dangerous it was to venture into the desert on untrodden paths. It is not without reason that the Taklamakan is popularly known as the 'place of no return' or 'desert of death'. Hedin's inexperience as an expedition leader, his personal ambition and the most adverse external circumstances (extreme heat and dryness, insufficient water supplies, sandstorms and difficult-to-navigate sand dune fields, getting lost, etc.) led the expedition to complete disaster after four weeks. The drinking water they had brought with them was not enough for the long march through the desert from the Yarkand-Darya to the Khotan-Darya, their food and fodder supplies were soon exhausted, and no new water sources could be found. In the middle of the desert, the caravan had lost its way and was starving and dying of thirst.

Sven Hedin described the further course of events as follows: He had made the difficult decision to leave two completely exhausted expedition members who were no longer able to march behind in the so-called 'death camp' in the desert.¹ Nothing more was ever heard of them. Seven camels also died due to lack of water and exhaustion. Another expedition member managed to survive on his own with the eighth camel.

After several days, Hedin and his last remaining and completely exhausted local companion, Kasim, finally reached the riverbed of the Khotan-Darya. However, the river had dried up. Sven Hedin, the only one still capable of acting, nevertheless managed to find a lifesaving pool of water some distance away. He writes:

"Then I took the tin can out of my pocket ... and drank, drank, drank. In the space of ten minutes, I drank about three liters. (...) My hands, which had been shriveled, dry and hard as wood, swelled up again. My skin, which had been like parchment, became moist and supple again.

Never has life seemed more beautiful, richer and more valuable to me than on that night in the bed of the Khotan-Darya. The future flared up like a sea of light before me. I was in a state of utter ecstasy ...

*But then my thoughts flew back to Kasim, who was lying in the back of the forest, fighting for his life and unable to make the three-hour journey back here to the water. I had to rush to his aid immediately. The tin can was so small (...). But I had my boots! They were as good as any other container. ... I filled them to the brim, then pulled the strings to the ends of the spade handle, He lifted the whole thing onto his right shoulder and hurried back along the path with light steps I had come.'*²

¹ Retold here from the abridged popular edition of the two-volume travelogue originally published in 1899 (Hedin 1951).

² Ibid., pp. 91–94.

This is how Sven Hedin was able to save the life of his companion, who was dying of thirst, at the last moment. Soon afterwards, the two encountered shepherds who were tending sheep and cattle in the poplar forests on the banks of the dried-up Khotan-Darja. The shepherds helped them regain their strength. The third remaining member of the expedition also rejoined them. They were all finally able to return to Kashgar via Aksu on less dangerous routes.



Sven Hedin carries water in his boots to his companion Kasim²

In 1899, Sven Hedin published his two-volume bestseller 'Through Asia' simultaneously in German and English. The dramatic account of the catastrophic course of his first expedition into the Taklamakan Desert and his miraculous rescue quickly made Sven Hedin famous. From then on, he was regarded as a fearless explorer who spared no effort and pursued his scientific mission unwaveringly, but who also showed a chivalrous heart for the people and animals entrusted to his care. This ideal image was repeated time and again in Sven Hedin's later travel books and countless public lectures. It was first presented in the moving travelogue 'Through the Deserts of Asia', written and illustrated by Hedin himself. It also includes a sketch in his own hand, depicting the author as a lonely savior. In the riverbed of the Khotan-Darya, he sets off barefoot with his water-filled boots over his shoulder on the long journey through the night back to his exhausted companion.

² <https://archive.org/details/afg5133.0001.001.umich.edu/page/592/mode/2up> (accessed: 28 June 2021).

It was inevitable that some readers would be irritated by the often dramatic tone of Sven Hedin's diary-like travel books or even asked whether his account of the desert drama of 1895 was really true.

To verify this, the Austrian author *Bruno Baumann* (born 1955), himself an adventure traveler, tried in April 2000 to retrace the desert route between Yarkand-Darya and Khotan-Darya that Sven Hedin had travelled more than a century earlier, under the same conditions as his predecessor.¹ Baumann set off with four companions and six pack camels. However, he carried considerably more water with him than Sven Hedin had done before him. He also had better maps and was equipped with a GPS device.

Nevertheless, Baumann's caravan soon ran into serious difficulties. Four camels died of dehydration and exhaustion. With their last ounce of strength, they reached the dry riverbed of the Khotan-Darya and finally found a pool of water that saved them. Baumann had undertaken his desert crossing because he doubted Hedin's report. In essence, however, he confirmed it. At that time, it was just as risky and life-threatening for humans and animals as it is today to attempt to cross the roadless and waterless Taklamakan sand desert.

After his return to Kashgar, Sven Hedin had lost none of his drive. But he had learned his lesson. He continued his expedition in the same year. From then on, however, he always travelled on the safest routes possible, close to riverbeds or on existing paths and tracks.

In the winter of 1895, he first travelled along the southern Silk Road from Kashgar to Khotan at the foot of the Kunlun Mountains. Winter is a good time for expeditions because the desert rivers still carry water but are frozen over and can therefore be used as travel routes. Hedin now wanted to search for a lost desert city that he had heard about from locals. It was supposed to be located northeast of Khotan, near the desert river Keriya-Darya. With the help of local guides, the remains of an ancient city largely buried in sand were indeed found (see overview map above). Hedin came across frescoes with Buddhist motifs, clay figures and inscriptions, which he was unable to read, however. The British archaeologist Aurel Stein later researched the city discovered by Sven Hedin in detail and identified it as the lost Silk Road city of *Dandan-Oilik* (see chapter 6). The ruins of Dandan-Oilik, buried under the sand, were already mentioned by Xuanzang, who probably visited them on his return journey from India in 645.¹ However, when Marco Polo travelled through the same area in the 13th century, Dandan-Oilik had long since sunk into the desert and been forgotten.

¹ See Baumann (2000) on this subject.

Baumann also reports that he personally met the grandson of one of the two expedition members believed to be dead, Hedin. The grandson was certain that his grandfather had survived the expedition. Baumann suspects that Hedin had 'declared him dead against his better judgement' in order to 'better market his story through the added drama' (ibid., p. 305f.).

Sven Hedin and his companions followed the frozen but gradually drying riverbed of the Keriya-Darya northwards to its end in the desert sand. They then had to cross pathless terrain until the caravan reached the Tarim, which was also frozen, and was able to cross it on the ice. However, Hedin did not return to Khotan as planned. He later wrote rather nonchalantly:

*'I had no desire to return to my headquarters in Khotan by routes I already knew. I decided instead to take the long detour via Lop Nor in the east and then travel back to Khotan by the southern route which Marco Polo had used.'*²

He had effectively abandoned the idea of crossing the Taklamakan Desert from west to east. Initially, the small expedition travelled eastwards along arduous but safe paths through the riparian forests of the Tarim. They finally reached the oasis town of Korla on the northern route of the Silk Road in mid-March 1896. From Korla, the water-rich Konche-Darya River, which originated in the Tianshan Mountains, flowed into the Tarim. Hedin now continued along the now ice-free Tarim, partly even by boat. Far to the south, he finally came across the large freshwater Lake Kara Koshun, which Prschewalskij had already found. However, Prschewalskij had mistaken it for Lake Lop Nor. Sven Hedin, on the other hand, discovered a dried-up lake much further to the northeast, which he identified as the actual Lake Lop Nor. At the time, however, he was unable to explore it in more detail and map it. This was to be the purpose of Sven Hedin's *second*^{Xinjiang} *expedition*.

Sven Hedin's second Xinjiang expedition (1899-1901)

With this expedition, Sven Hedin wanted to map the entire length of the Tarim River to its end in the desert. As in 1895, he and his companions set out again from the village of Merket on the Yarkand-Darya. This time, however, he travelled much more comfortably and safely than on his ill-fated first desert expedition. Hedin had a river ferry converted so that he could travel the entire length of the river from west to east. In September 1899, during the wet season, he and his companions set off on the long journey in this boat. First they travelled along the Yarkand-Darya down to its confluence with the Tarim, then on the Tarim itself towards Lop Nor Lake.

¹ Wriggins (1999, p. 217).

² Hedin (1928, p. 136f.).

³ See Sven Hedin's two-volume work, first published in 1903, "In the Heart of Asia: Ten Thousand Kilometers on Unknown Paths," Hedin (1929).



Idyllic journey on the Tarim to Lop Nor Lake (September 1899), watercolor by Sven Hedin¹

After an almost three-month river journey of over 1,000 kilometers, interrupted several times, they reached the lower reaches of the Tarim. It consisted of a confusing network of branching river arms. The cold season was now setting in and the Tarim began to freeze over. It was decided to set up a winter camp on its banks for the next three months. From there, Hedin and his companions explored and mapped the surrounding area in the freezing cold. In search of the ancient Lop Nor Lake, they first travelled far to the east. The dried-up riverbed of the Kum Darya provided a route there. The Kum Darya was a former branch of the Konche Darya, which in earlier times flowed into Lake Lop Nor. At the end of March, they reached the dried-up and salt-encrusted bed of the old Lake Lop Nor.

Shortly after returning to his winter camp, Sven Hedin set off again, this time following the branching Tarim River southwards. As expected, he came across the shallow freshwater lake already discovered by Prschewalskij, which Hedin identified as Lake 'Kara Koshun. He was now certain that both lakes, Lake Lop Nor and Lake Kara Koshun had 'migrated" over time. In other words, he assumed that individual

¹ <https://archive.org/details/centralasiaandt02hedigoog/page/106/mode/2up> (accessed: 28.6.2021)

² Approximately where Sven Hedin found the desert lake known as Kara-Koshun, *Lake Taitema* is located today, which also serves as the terminal lake of the Tarim and the Cherchen-Darya coming from the south.

branches of the Tarim and Konche-Darya rivers, which spread out into the desert and are interconnected, were repeatedly flooded and therefore dried up. Other branches, which were formerly dry, were flooded with water again. This enabled them to fill 'their' terminal lake. Sven Hedin's hypothesis of the 'wandering lake' was thus born.¹ It was not until much later that he was able to further substantiate this hypothesis.

However, a completely different archaeological discovery, made purely by chance, initially had more far-reaching consequences: At the end of March 1900, one of Hedin's companions came across a large field of ruins near the north-western shore of the former Lop Nor Lake. It consisted not only of the remains of dilapidated buildings, but provided other archaeologically interesting finds. As it later transpired, this area was once the important garrison and trading town of *Loulan* on the ancient Silk Road. It was probably abandoned in the 4th century AD, most likely due to water shortages.

In the spring of 1901, after a lengthy excursion to the Tibetan highlands, Sven Hedin returned once more to Loulan to survey the site in detail and carry out further excavations. He proceeded with great care, as he was aware that the scientific exploration of historical finds was a task for professional archaeologists and historians. Hedin himself was primarily a geographer and surveyor and therefore had little to contribute to the cultural and art history of the Silk Road. Nevertheless, his widely read reports on the cities lost in the desert were an important catalyst for the now awakening international interest in researching the historical heritage of the ancient Silk Road. This will be discussed later.

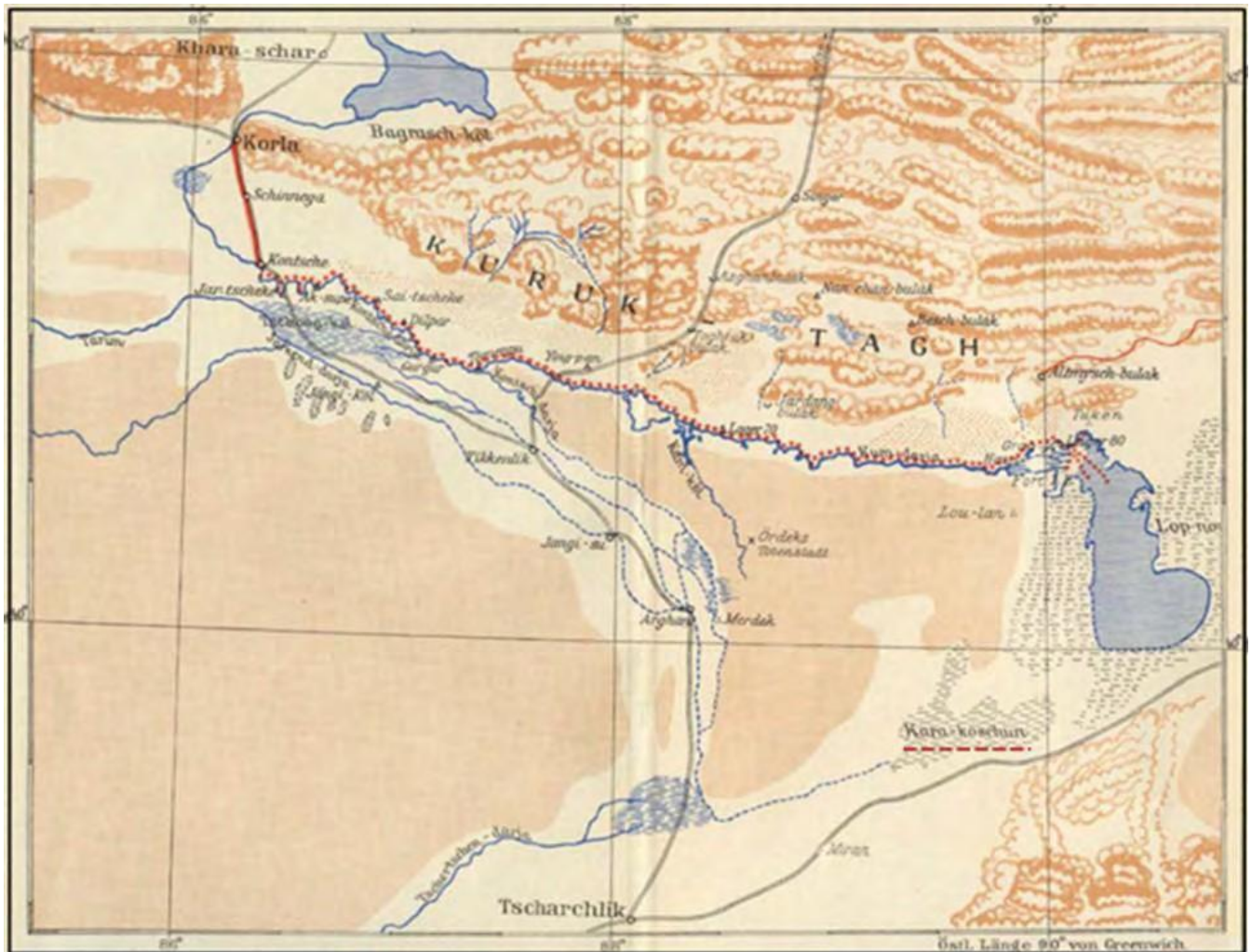
Sven Hedin's third Xinjiang expedition (1934)

But first, let us return to the 'wandering lake' and the still not entirely resolved controversy between Richtshofen and Prschewalskij. After 33 years, Sven Hedin, now a world-famous explorer and writer, returned once again to the Lop Nor region. Hedin's third Xinjiang expedition took place in the spring and summer of 1934. It was a detour from the major '*Sino-Swedish Scientific Expedition to the North-Western Region of China*', which took place in several stages between 1927 and 1935 under the leadership of Sven Hedin.

Hedin's travel and working conditions had changed fundamentally since 1895. In 1934, he and his companions were no longer travelling by camel caravan. Instead, they drove three trucks and a car over bumpy roads and tracks from Urumqi via Korla to the Tarim Basin.

¹ This is the title of a chapter in Hedin's two-volume travelogue from 1903 (Hedin 1929, vol. II, pp. 77–86).

² See Hedin (1941, 1942) as well as Wennerholm (1978, pp. 173ff.), Salomon (2013).



Hedini's route to Lake Lop Nor in 1934, with the dried-up Lake Kara Koshun¹

Hedini had learned that Lake Lop Nor had "migrated" again. Since 1921, the Kum Darya had been carrying water again. 'I realized that the waters of the Tarim system had returned to their old bed', he wrote.² In 1901, Hedini had travelled through the then completely dry riverbed of the Kum Darya to Lake Lop Nor, which was also dry. Now he wanted to check whether the lake had filled up again. And indeed, it had.

¹ The map is included as an appendix to Hedini's book "The Wandering Lake" (1941).

² Hedini (1941, p. 58).



Sven Hedin with companion in a dugout canoe on the 'wandering' Lop Nor Lake, 1934¹

After a three-week journey down the Kum Darya River, the expedition reached the large Lake Lop Nor, which was now also filled with water. The lake proved to be salty and quite shallow, but it was navigable. The former Lake Kara Koshun, which Prschewalskij had discovered further southwest in 1877, had meanwhile largely become swampland due to a lack of water supply. After these experiences, Sven Hedin was now able to conclude, in a Solomonic manner, that Prschewalskij *and* Richthofen had both been partly right and partly wrong in their classic controversy. Both lakes did indeed exist, but alternately and at different times.²

During his boat trips on the Kum Darya and Lake Lop Nor, Sven Hedin made a series of archaeological discoveries. An extraordinary find was made on a small hill not far from Loulan. A wooden coffin was excavated containing the mummy of a young woman who was still unusually beautiful even in death.

¹ Ibid., p. 121, excerpt.

² Ibid., p. 255.



"The Beauty of Loulan", Xinjiang Museum Urumqi¹

Sven Hedin describes what moved him when he made this irreplaceable discovery:

'Now we saw her, the ruler of the desert, the queen of Loulan and Lop-nor in all her beauty. (...) The shape and features of her face had not been altered by time. She lay with her eyelids closed, covering her slightly sunken eyeballs. A smile still played around her lips, one that millennia had not erased and that made this enigmatic being even more attractive and appealing. However, she did not reveal her secrets about the adventures of her life. (...) We left the unknown young lady in her coffin in the starlight for one night: (...) In the early light ... she was lowered back into the grave. This was then filled in as best as possible' ²

¹ https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/6/6f/Loulan_beauty_closeup.jpg (accessed: 28.6.2021).

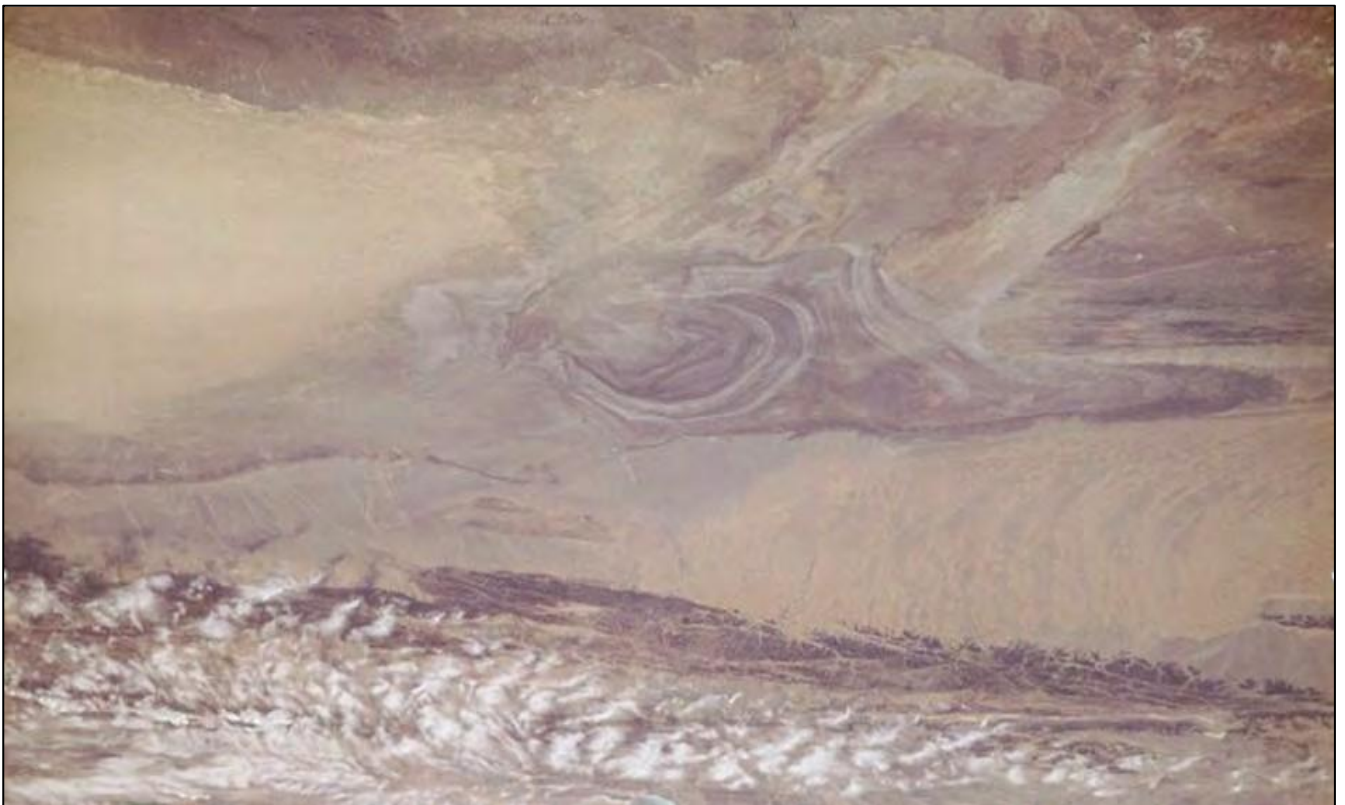
² Hedin (1941, pp. 95-97).

Sven Hedin's 'beauty was never found again. But in 1979, Chinese archaeologists excavated the mummy of an enchanting young woman near Loulan, which was very reminiscent of the find described by Sven Hedin. Under the name

'The Beauty of Loulan', she quickly became famous. Today she is one of the main attractions of the Xinjiang Museum in Urumqi. Her age is estimated at approximately 3,800 years.

During his three expeditions to Xinjiang, Sven Hedin actually proved that Lake Lop Nor has shifted repeatedly throughout its history. With his theory of the 'wandering lake#"', he provided a convincing explanation for this.

But now Hedin's theory itself is history. It may have been accurate in earlier times, when the course of the Tarim was hardly influenced by human activity. However, this is no longer the case today. Significant human intervention in the water balance of the Tarim Basin, the construction of dams, the extraction of large quantities of water for agricultural and industrial purposes, and the enormous population growth in Xinjiang have created new circumstances. These have led to Lake Lop Nor shrinking and becoming increasingly salinized due to water shortages. Since 1961 or 1962, the lake has completely dried up and disappeared. It is now only visible in aerial photographs as a small ear-shaped depression in the desert. For the same reasons, the old Kara Koshun Lake no longer exists either.



Dried-up Lop Nor Lake, satellite image from 1992, view from the south¹

¹ Source: https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/5/53/Lop_nur.jpg (accessed: 28 June 2021, edited).

The desert east of the former Lop Nor Lake has thus become barren and empty. From 1964 to 1996, it was used as a strictly sealed-off Chinese nuclear bomb test site. Only in recent years has work begun on rehabilitating the contaminated area and mining the minerals that are abundant there. Efforts to develop transport links in the desert have also been underway since then. Since 2006, a long-distance road has even run through the dried-up bed of the former Lop Nor Lake. Recently, government irrigation measures in the lower reaches of the Tarim River have created a new lake, *Lake Taitema*. These recent developments will be discussed in detail in the seventh chapter.

During his first two research trips to Xinjiang, Sven Hedin was primarily travelling as a naturalist and geographer. At that time, he was interested in exploring the 'white spots' on the map and solving the mystery of Lop Nor. With this primarily scientific ambition to discover new things and answer unresolved questions, he was similar to his great predecessor *Alexander von Humboldt*.

More precisely, Hedin's goals were similar to those pursued by Alexander von Humboldt on his *first* major expedition to South and Central America (1799-1804). At that time, he was able to pursue his research ideas completely freely and move around largely without restriction. Humboldt's second major expedition to Russia in 1829 mentioned above, was financed by Tsar Nicholas I.² In return, he was expected to conduct scientific investigations and provide practical recommendations on the existence and possible exploitation of mineral resources in Siberia. His own research initiatives or even critical comments on social conditions were not wanted. This research trip exemplified what it meant for a scientific free spirit and privileged foreign guest like Alexander von Humboldt to be financially dependent and at the same time to conduct research³ and report as objectively as possible. Today's scientists who conduct contract research also face this dilemma, as we will see in Chapter 7 below.

Oliver Lubrich, the modern editor of Alexander von Humboldt's writings, describes the problem as follows:

*'In his youth [1795], Alexander von Humboldt formulated the insight that 'Even the most intelligent men are robbed of their minds.'*⁴ (...)

*When Humboldt travelled through the empire of Tsar Nicholas I three and a half decades later [1829], he placed himself in a dangerous position of proximity to the prince. And his youthful warning was censored in Russia. In the translations, the critical sentence was either toned down or deleted. (...) After more than half a century [1849], Alexander von Humboldt revised his early work. In doing so, he added three words to the sentence about 'proximity to princes'. Now that the Russian travelogue [the Central Asia books published in 1843/1844] has been completed, this sentence no longer simply states that 'proximity to princes robs even the most brilliant men of their intellect', but rather: 'of their intellect and t h e l r f r e e d o m.'*⁵

¹ *Lake Taitema*, which was formed not far from Lake Kara Koshun and also served as the terminal lake for the Cherchen-Darya, dried up around 1972. It was not until the "ecological flooding" of the 2000s that Lake Taitema was revived (see below, Chapter 7).

² Lubrich (2009, 2019), Daum (2019).

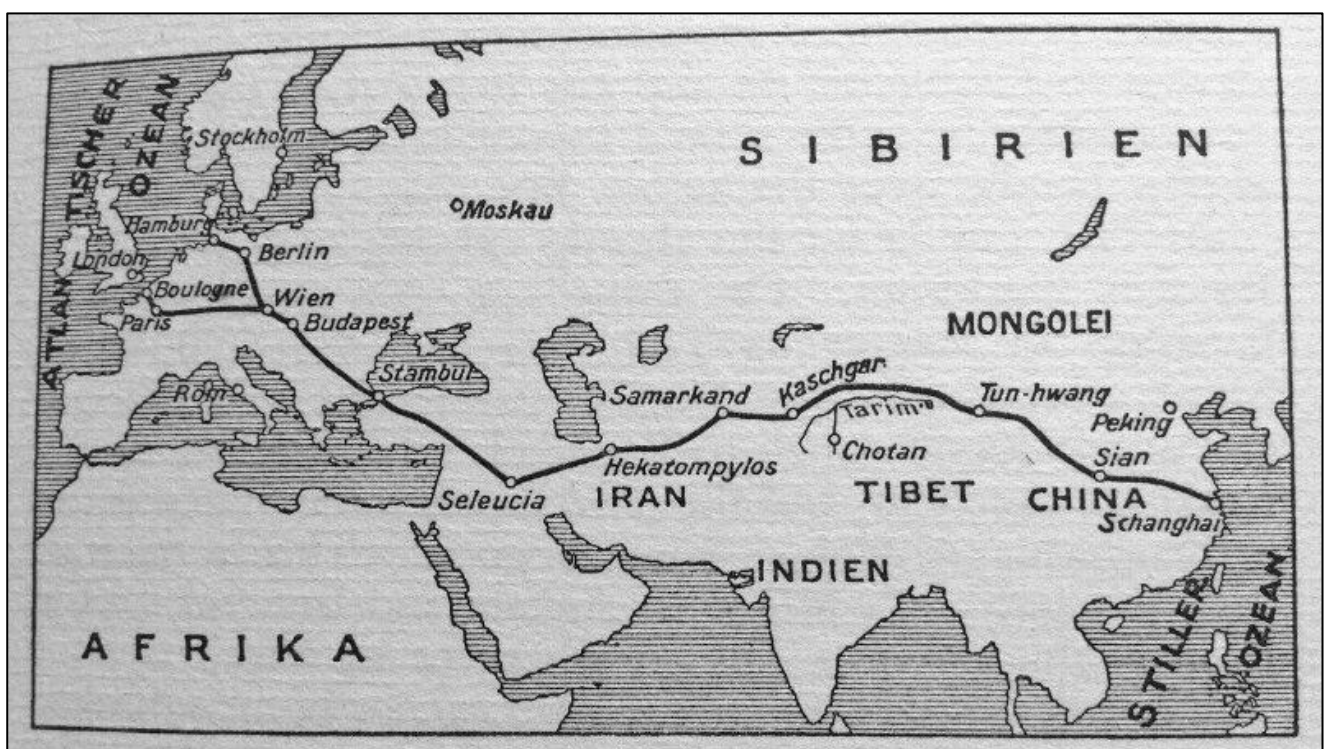
³ At that time (until 1861), serfdom, which Humboldt vehemently rejected, still prevailed in Russia. The Siberia he travelled through was a place of exile for criminals and dissidents. As a guest of the Tsar, he was unable to report on this (cf. Suckow 2014).

⁴ The quote is taken from the story "Die Lebenskraft oder der Rhodische Genius" (The Life Force or the Rhodian Genius) by Alexander von Humboldt which originally appeared in 1805 in the magazine 'Die Horen' published by Friedrich Schiller.

⁵ Lubrich (2019, pp. 185, 198; emphasis in the text as in the original, explanations in square brackets).

During his third trip to Xinjiang in 1934, which took place in connection with the major 'Sino-Swedish Scientific Expedition to the Northwestern Region of China' (1927-1935), Sven Hedin was no longer as free in his decisions as he had been on his earlier research trips. The expedition was largely financed by the Chinese and Swedish governments. Funds from the German government were also involved. Initially, the expedition's mission was to explore the possibility of establishing an air link between China and Germany.¹ After this proved unrealistic, one of its main objectives was to explore possible routes for the construction of two motorways to the remote province of Xinjiang, which until then had been almost completely cut off from the Chinese heartland and was virtually inaccessible by modern means of transport.² Sven Hedin made concrete proposals to the Chinese government, which were later largely implemented.

For Sven Hedin, this transport planning assignment was also an opportunity to reflect on the revival of the ancient Silk Road, which his academic teacher Ferdinand von Richthofen had once brought up for discussion.



Sven Hedin 1936: Possible route of a motorway from China through Eurasia to Europe³

¹ See Böhm (2003), Salomon (2013, p. 56ff.).

² The first railway connection between Xinjiang and central China (the Lanzhou-Xinjiang Railway) reached Urumqi in 1966 and Kashgar in 1999. The railway gap to Kazakhstan and thus to the Russian rail network was only closed in 1990 with the opening of the Alashankou border station in northern Xinjiang.

³ Sketch by Sven Hedin from 1936, reprinted in Hedin (1942, p. 200).

At one point in his report on the final stage of the Chinese-Swedish expedition, Hedin waxes lyrical, describing his vision of a future Silk Road as follows:

*'In my mind's eye, I saw the new motorway ... stretching along the northern Lop Nor, along the Kum Darja to Korla and on to Aksu and Kashgar. There in Kashgar, after faithfully following the caravan and wheel tracks of the old Silk Road, it would by no means end. (...) For our modern road engineers, it is a minor task to build a road with hundreds of curves over the 4,000-metre-high pass [to Osh in the Ferghana Valley].'*¹

In Osh, you can reach the existing motorways in Russian Turkestan. From there, you can continue without difficulty or danger to Tashkent, Samarkand, Bukhara, Merv and across the Iranian border. (...) From there, the route continues through Asia Minor to Ankara and Istanbul. From there, the route through the whole of Europe is open.

*Without the willing cooperation of Russia, this infinitely long motorway cannot become a unified whole. However, with the necessary financial sacrifices in China and the agreement of Soviet Russia, the project is ... relatively simple. Indeed, compared to another structure built by the Chinese, namely the Great Wall, this road construction is a trifle.'*²

Sven Hedin's transport and geopolitical vision of the future from 1936 bears a striking resemblance to the southern route of the current Chinese 'New Silk Road' concept.

Today, there is indeed a Eurasian overland connection. However, it runs much further north, through the Russian Federation. It dates back to the Trans-Siberian Railway and its Central Asian branch lines, which were already in operation in Sven Hedin's day. The same applies to this northern route today as Sven Hedin said about his planned southern route back then: Its use is only possible in '*willing cooperation with Russia*'³ – a statement that has taken on new significance since Russia's attack on Ukraine in 2022 and the ensuing dynamic of political and economic sanctions and counter-sanctions. We will return to this in Chapter 14 below.

¹This probably refers to the 3,615-metre-high Taldyk Pass, which today connects Kashgar with Osh via the Pamir Highway.

²Hedin (1942, p. 203).

³Hedin (1942, *ibid.*)

Chapter Six

Asymmetrical encounter between cultures in distant Xinjiang: German excavators in the competition between nations

Archaeological raids in the supposed 'no man's land'

With Sven Hedin, the era of cartographers and surveyors in Xinjiang reached its peak. They were primarily concerned with the scientific exploration of the 'white spots' on the map. They were also interested in information that could be used for military and transport purposes. At the turn of the century, however, a second generation of explorers appeared on the scene. Archaeologists, art historians, religious scholars and linguists. They wanted to trace the cultural heritage of the Silk Road in Xinjiang. They benefited from the fact that in the period before the First World War, the imperial powers – above all Great Britain, France, Russia and Germany – competed with each other to track down cultural treasures around the world and bring them to the museums of their capitals.

The collection of relics – that is, of 'genuine' remains from the lives of saints or even splinters from the cross of Christ – has a long tradition in Christianity. This tradition found its secular continuation in the collection of art objects and antiques from all over the world. These, too, are only valued as 'originals'. Originals have a special aura about them. Only they enjoy special prestige and high market value, not copies.

For centuries, collecting original works and precious objects was the privilege of princes and wealthy patrons. Their galleries and cabinets of curiosities were only shown to selected guests. At that time, hardly anyone thought of museums being open to the public. The change only began with the opening of *the British Museum* in London (1759) and the *Louvre* in Paris (1793). These quickly became museums open to the public, where national pride was cultivated. Other European capitals, such as Berlin, St. Petersburg and Vienna, followed suit. It was recognized that well-equipped museums were suitable places to bind the educated middle classes to their country's cultural heritage and fill them with patriotic pride. Magnificent exhibits from distant lands were a most welcome addition to this – especially if it could be justified on the grounds that they had been saved from decay and oblivion and subjected to professional scientific research.

Colonized countries such as India and Egypt were unable to defend themselves against Europe's newly awakened interest in their antiquities. Others, such as the Ottoman, Persian and Chinese empires, were also too weak to effectively protect their historical treasures. From the perspective of the imperial great powers, the entire Orient and Africa were a kind of political and cultural 'no man's land' where Western treasure hunters could go about their business fairly unhindered.¹

¹ See Trümpler (2008), Jacobs (2020).

This was also true of Xinjiang. However, at that time, hardly anyone knew about its remarkable cultural heritage. Xinjiang had no buildings from the Islamic period as spectacular as those in Samarkand or Bukhara in neighboring Uzbekistan.¹ But as it turned out, the dry desert climate of Xinjiang had preserved important evidence from pre-Islamic times. One of the first to recognize this was Sven Hedin with his chance discoveries at Dandan Oilik. He thus initiated the transition from the generation of surveyors to the generation of archaeological explorers in Xinjiang.

As described above, during his first expedition to Xinjiang in the winter of 1895–96, Hedin came across the ruins of Dandan Oilik near Khotan, where he discovered temple ruins, sculptures, and fragments of ancient manuscripts and inscriptions. He understood that these were Buddhist relics from pre-Islamic times. However, due to a lack of expertise, he was unable to carry out a systematic archaeological evaluation of the finds himself, but he was able to draw attention to them. By the end of 1897, European newspapers were already publishing widely acclaimed reports on Sven Hedin's archaeologically significant discoveries.

This came to the attention of Aurel Stein, a young scholar who had precisely the scientific tools that the geographer Sven Hedin had lacked on his trip to Dandan-Oilik.²

- *Aurel Stein* (1862–1943) was born in Hungary and later became a British citizen. After studying ancient Oriental languages (Sanskrit and Old Iranian) in Vienna and Leipzig, he obtained his doctorate in Tübingen in 1883. He then studied archaeology in London and Oxford. From 1888, Stein worked in the colonial service in British India and quickly rose through the ranks. In 1899, he took on a senior position at the Indian Education Service in Calcutta, which gave him plenty of scope for his own research.

Stein immediately recognized the archaeological significance of Sven Hedin's discoveries. He promptly applied for government funding for a research expedition to the Tarim Basin. He emphasized that Hedin's sites had to be secured for the British Crown as quickly as possible before researchers from other countries got there.³ The colonial government of British India in Calcutta quickly approved Aurel Stein's application and granted him its full support.

After an arduous journey across the wintry Karakorum Mountains to Kashgar and on to Khotan, Stein and his men reached their destination in Dandan-Oilik in December 1900. There, they excavated temples, building ruins and discovered silted-up canals and former orchards.

¹ See Kreckel (2008).

² Mirsky (1973, p. 70).

³ Ibid., pp. 79–83, Hansen (2012, pp. 12f.), Hopkirk (1986, pp. 85ff.).



SMALL CELLA OF BUDDHIST SHRINE D. II, DANDĀN-UILIQ,
SEEN FROM WEST AFTER EXCAVATION.

Buddhist shrine in Dandan-Oilik uncovered by Aurel Stein in 1900¹

It was significant that Stein, like most Xinjiang researchers of his time, believed that Western cultural heritage was superior to Eastern cultures. Therefore, in their eyes, the significant pre-Islamic art of India and Persia had to be based on Greek influences. After all, Alexander the Great of Macedonia had conquered these lands in the 4th century BC and, after his death, left behind the so-called 'Diadochi empires' in Central Asia, which carried on the Hellenistic heritage for some time. Western culture then reached Xinjiang via the Silk Road, which Aurel Stein referred to as *Serindia* (Chinese India). However, this remarkable cultural development came to an end with the advance of Islam into Xinjiang.

¹ https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Ancient_Khotan_BLER2_AKV1_FP246_FIG31.jpg (from: Aurel Stein, *Ancient Khotan*, Vol. 1, 1907, p. 31).

² 'Seres' is the Greek word for silk and for China.

The German researchers Albert Grünwedel and Albert von Le Coq, whom we will turn to next, followed the same line of thought. Von Le Coq chose the telling title *'In the Footsteps of Hellas in East Turkistan'* for his most popular book. He exclaimed enthusiastically:

'Here we found new territory! For instead of a Turkish land – which is the meaning of the word 'Turkistan' – we discovered that everywhere along the Silk Roads there were Indo-Germanic-speaking peoples, Iranians, Indians and even Europeans. (...)

*It is also particularly important to note that the Indo-European inhabitants of the country passed on not only the Buddhist religion to the Far East, but also Buddhist art. However, this art ... is based on late Hellenistic antiquity, as is ultimately the case in a similar way with the ... Western nations.'*¹

The time-bound nature of this Eurocentric perspective, with its enthusiasm for the Greco-Roman West and its Islamophobic and nationalistic undertones, is unmistakable to today's readers.

Looking back, the American art historian *Justin Jacobs* sums up the prevailing view at the time when he writes:

'Men like Stein, Le Coq, Grünwedel ... were primarily interested in tracking down the material remains of peoples whom they could somehow assign to the lineage of Western civilization.'

Generalizing further, he adds:

*'In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, most Western archaeologists displayed a remarkable ability to explore predominantly Muslim countries and find only various incarnations of Greeks, Romans and Jews.'*²

This one-sided narrow view is no longer possible today. It has to be acknowledged that Xinjiang, once a distant and half-forgotten region, was once a meeting place for many cultures and religions. Thanks to the Silk Road, Chinese, Mongolian and Turkic-speaking peoples left their mark there, as did Indian and Iranian cultures. The 'Western' heritage of Hellenistic late antiquity and early Christianity *also* played a part in this concert of cultures, as did the mysterious Tocharian people with their Western European-sounding language.

In pre-Islamic times, many religions coexisted relatively peacefully in the Tarim Basin: East Asian and Chinese traditions, Indian and Tibetan

¹ From Le Coq (1926, p. 10f.), quotation adapted grammatically and orthographically.

² Jacobs (2020, p. 7f.), own translation.

variants of Buddhism, Iranian-influenced Manichaeism, Zoroastrianism and Nestorian Christianity, which originated in the Mediterranean region.¹

With Aurel Stein's excavation of Dandan-Oilik in 1900, the international race for pre-Islamic artefacts along the eastern Silk Road was in full swing.² In addition to the British archaeologist Aurel Stein, Russian (Klementz, Koslow, Oldenburg), French (Pelliot), German (Grünwedel, von Le Coq) and Japanese archaeologists (Otani) also conducted their own expeditions in Xinjiang in search of the archaeological and cultural heritage of the Silk Road.

All of these expeditions followed a similar pattern. Sites of archaeological interest were located, excavated, carefully measured and documented. However, the primary interest was in manuscripts, antiquities and illustrations that could be exhibited and further explored in museums and research institutions abroad. They did not shy away from cutting entire frescoes out of cave and wall surfaces, packing them securely in wooden crates and transporting them away.³ The number of antiquities collected at the end of an expedition was proudly reported, like trophies. They were considered a kind of measure of success that could be boasted about.⁴

The Russian East Asian researcher and museum director *Dimitri Klementz* (1847-1914), who conducted the first archaeological expedition to the region in 1898, shaped the style. In his expedition report, written in German, he stated:

*'The materials (...) that we brought home from our expedition include 59 inscription samples, 40 original paintings and 12 smaller objects. (...) Only those inscriptions and paintings are mentioned here that we removed from the walls in their original form with the stucco. (...) The study and collection of antiquities (encounters) no obstacles whatsoever in that country today (...). Our own experience has taught us that not only manuscripts, copies and photographs, but even samples of wall paintings on fragile stucco consisting of mortar and straw can be transported to the intellectual centers of Europe without any significant damage..'*⁵

¹ See Klimkeit (1987).

² Stein was also heavily involved in the archaeological exploration of the *Dunhuang* oasis in the neighboring province of Gansu, where he acquired a significant collection of Buddhist manuscripts.

³ The Trans-Siberian Railway, which had a branch line to Tashkent from 1906 onwards (cf. Dreyer 2015, p. 14), could be used for the outward and return journeys and for the transport of the finds. Russian, German and French Xinjiang researchers in particular made use of this. British researchers were mostly dependent on the more arduous transport route via British India.

⁴ See Höfer (2009, p. 8), who lists the exact number of crates of finds transported by the four German Turfan expeditions – a total of 424 crates, each weighing approximately 75 kg. See also: von Le Coq (1926, p. 8f.).

⁵ Klementz (1899, pp. 47, 53).

Western art historians and archaeologists were firmly convinced that this would protect priceless cultural assets from loss or wanton destruction and preserve them for research. The museums of the 'spiritual centers of Europe' were considered appropriate and safe locations.

This was not entirely wrong. Many valuable antiques were indeed stolen later by treasure hunters, and numerous archaeological sites that could still be seen in Xinjiang at the time have now disappeared completely. Earthquakes and weather disasters, but also the turbulent civil war and revolutionary periods that Xinjiang has experienced since then, have taken their toll. Some archaeologically important sites have also fallen victim to modernization and redevelopment measures, while others have simply been demolished or ploughed under because they were considered useless or obstructive. Or they have even been deliberately destroyed, sometimes out of religious zeal, sometimes out of political fervor.



The now-vanished stepped temple in Kucha (Gaochang) near Turfan, photo from 1902¹

However, this is only half the truth: Chinese antiquities authorities and Uyghur scientists have long since taken it upon themselves to preserve and protect the historical heritage in Xinjiang and to carry out extensive restoration work. In their eyes, rescue attempts from abroad are presumptuous.

¹ Source: Tagesspiegel, 5 December 2016 (<https://www.tagesspiegel.de/kultur/museum-fuer-asiatische-kunst-buddha-und-die-bal-ken/14614582.html>).

It is also a historical fact that the seemingly civilized countries of the West were themselves embroiled in two bloody and barbaric world wars. Not only were their own cultural assets destroyed, but the cultural treasures 'rescued' and looted from Xinjiang were also exposed to great danger, especially during the Second World War. The treasures stored in Berlin's museums were particularly hard hit. It is estimated that 40-50% of the Xinjiang finds were lost due to war damage in bombed-out Berlin. Many of the irretrievable murals have survived only as photographs or drawings by Grünwedel.



War loss due to bombing: Buddha with bodhisattvas and kneeling Sogdian donors ²

¹ Härtel (1957, p. 7f.). Gabsch (2012, p. 51). Cf. Dreyer (2015, p. 14, 252ff.).

² Photograph of a fresco removed and "rescued" by Albert von Le Coq, Bezeklik, 9th century (https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/d/d9/Bezeklik_caves%2C_Pranidhi_scene_14%2C_temple_9.JPG; accessed: 28 June 2021).

Despite these losses, some magnificent examples of the archaeological treasures that German researchers once brought from Xinjiang to Berlin have been preserved. The best pieces have now found a new worthy home at the Humboldt Forum in Berlin. It is undeniable that many of them came to Germany under very questionable circumstances. But they are part of humanity's cultural heritage.

Today, in an age of advanced technical and digital reproducibility of works of art, one may well ask whether museums still need to cling to the old cult of relics and authenticity. As is well known, this means that only a few particularly valuable originals can be displayed in public under high security, while the majority of museum holdings remain hidden in secure depots.

Be that as it may, the exhibits from Xinjiang that survived the turmoil of this century and are now housed in the Humboldt Forum in Berlin can almost all be traced back to the four German "Turfan expeditions" of 1902-1914. These expeditions marked the first direct encounter between Germany and distant Xinjiang.¹ Let us now take a closer look at this.²

German Turfan expeditions: Grünwedel and von Le Coq

At the turn of the 19th century, German Orientalists, led by Albert Grünwedel, worked closely with the Russian Academy of Sciences in Saint Petersburg. In 1898, the first historical-archaeological expedition from Europe set out from Saint Petersburg to Xinjiang, to the *Turfan* region (Uyghur: Turpan, Chinese: Tulufan) in the east of the province. As already mentioned, *Dimitri Klementz*, the leader of the expedition, brought back to Russia a wealth of evidence of a forgotten Buddhist culture – a culture that the Chinese monk Xuanzang had described in vivid colors over a thousand years ago after his visit to Kocho (Gaochang) (see above, Chapter 2).

Klementz's German colleagues were informed of his exciting discoveries immediately upon his return. As early as 1899, Klementz's detailed, richly illustrated report on Turfan and the antiquities discovered there was published (in German).³ Also in 1899, Sven Hedin's popular two-volume work 'Through the Deserts of Asia' was published simultaneously in German and English. In addition to his travel adventures, Hedin also described his archaeological discoveries in the Tarim Basin.

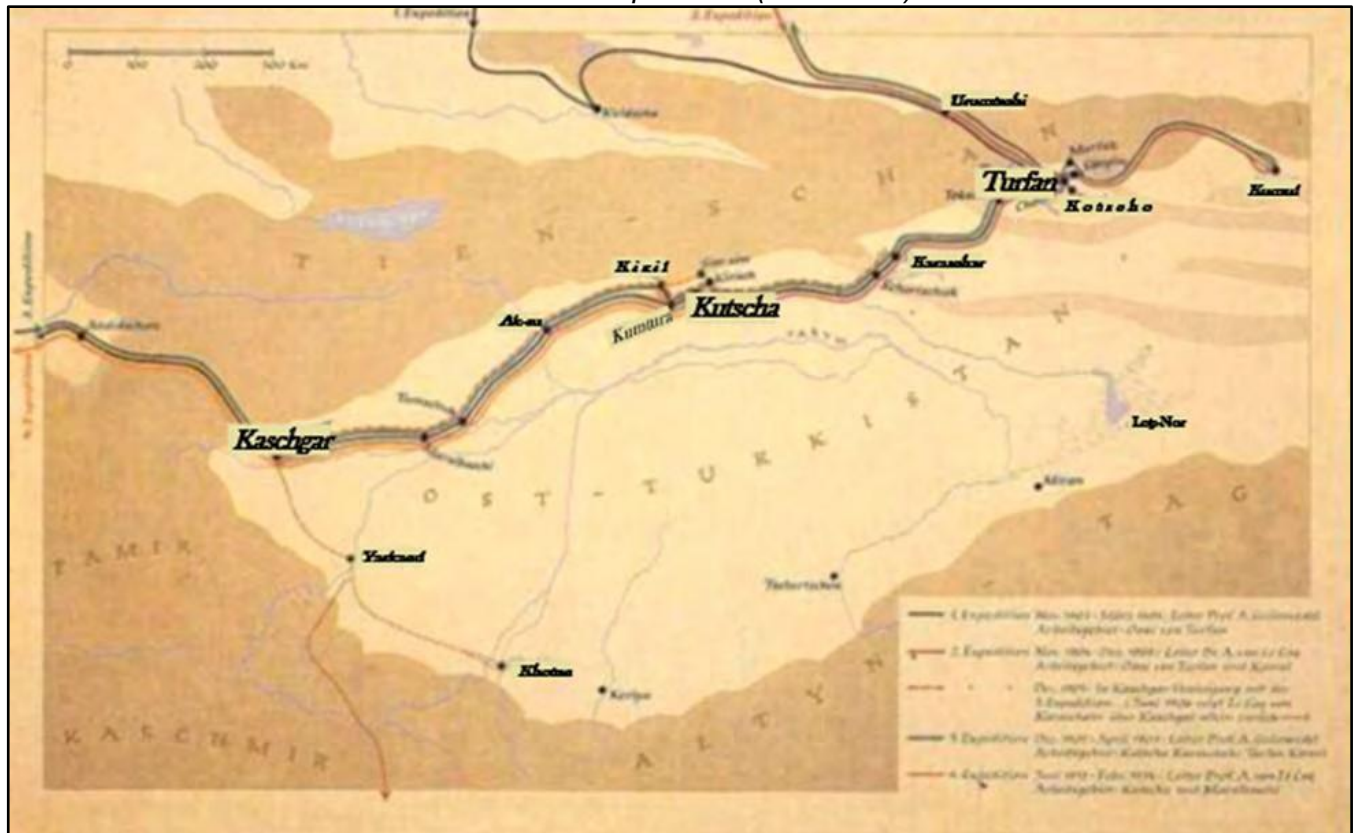
¹ Even before that, another encounter of a different kind took place, which attracted some attention in the German public: in the 1850s, the Munich brothers Adolf, Hermann and Rudolf *Schlagintweit* were travelling in the Himalayan region on behalf of the British East India Company to carry out land surveying and botanical research. Adolf Schlagintweit attempted to return to Germany alone by land, but was captured in the then break-away state of Kashgar and executed in 1857 as a suspected Chinese spy.

² Research expeditions to Xinjiang from other countries are not discussed in detail here. A detailed account of the international race between archaeologists on the eastern Silk Road can be found in Hopkirk (1986).

³ Klementz (1899).

In 1901, reports of Aurel Stein's excavations in Dandan-Oilik and Niya made the rounds among European researchers. The archaeological news from Xinjiang was hotly debated at two international Orientalist congresses in Rome (1899) and Hamburg (1902). There was agreement that further research on site was urgently required.¹

The German Turfan expeditions (1902-1914)²



In order to take up these ideas, a joint Russian-German expedition was planned. However, it did not come to fruition. In Berlin, the scientific and national ambition of the professional community now urged them to take action on their own as quickly as possible. *‘Those who were here ... could conquer a continent for science’* – these are the words used by art historian Carin Dreyer to describe the spirit of the time. In Germany, wealthy sponsors were soon found, including steel magnate Friedrich Alfred Krupp, who was no stranger to swift action.

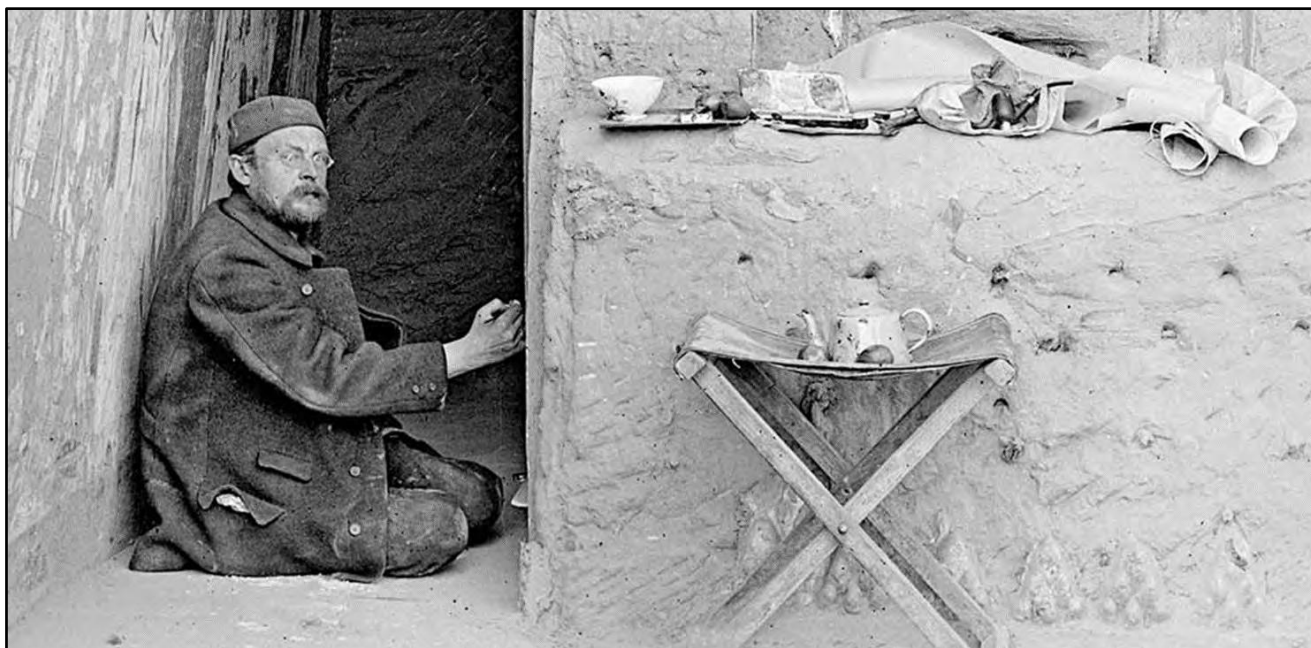
As early as 1902, a three-member group led by Albert Grünwedel set out on the first German expedition to Xinjiang on behalf of the Royal Museum of Ethnology in Berlin. They travelled overland on the Trans-Siberian Railway, but first stopped in Saint Petersburg. There, Dimitri Klementz, director of the Ethnological Section of the Imperial Museum, provided his German colleagues with valuable notes.

¹ See Härtel / Yildiz (1987, p. 12ff.).

² Source: Höfer (2009, p. 2), with own additions.

³ Dreyer (2015, p. 12).

Following Klementz's example, Grünwedel also chose the Turfan oasis as the starting point for his excavations in Xinjiang. He closely followed the experiences that Klementz had had there before him.¹



Albert Grünwedel copying a mural with tracing paper, Kizil, 1906²

In the period that followed, Turfan became the namesake for all further research expeditions carried out by German scientists on the northern route of the Silk Road until 1914. The leading figures in these ventures were Albert Grünwedel and Albert von Le Coq, two very different characters. Grünwedel led the first and third Turfan expeditions, von Le Coq the second and fourth.

- *Albert Grünwedel* (1856–1935) was primarily a museum curator, just like his Russian colleague Klementz. Both were searching for archaeologically significant exhibits for their museums. Grünwedel spent his entire professional life at the Berlin Museum of Ethnology, first as curator and, from 1904, as director of the museum's Indian department. But he also pursued distinctly scientific goals and was an honorary professor at Berlin University. Grünwedel was an Indologist and Tibetologist by profession. He was particularly interested in early Buddhism and Buddhist art and had the relevant language skills. He was less familiar with the history of China and the Turkic peoples. He did not speak Chinese or any Turkic language. On the other hand, as the son of a Bavarian painter, he was a talented draughtsman who could draw old He preferred (and often more accurately) to capture frescoes with his pen rather than remove them from their location.

¹ For the situation in present-day Turfan, see below, Chapter 7.

² Museum of Asian Art, Berlin https://www.smb.museum/fileadmin/_proceed/b/5/csm_Aku_62_2_STM_ST_2_Kap0_Medium1_Gruenwedel_8ebc87eb97.jpg

³ The following information is based on Dreyer (2015).



Kizil, Sixteen Sword Bearers Cave: photograph of the original fresco and drawing by Grünwedel¹

- *Albert von Le Coq* (1860–1930) was of a completely different disposition. He already had a successful career as a foreign trade merchant behind him and came from a wealthy family. At the age of 40, he began studying Oriental languages, Turkology and Archaeology, while at the same time working as an unpaid volunteer and eventually as Grünwedel's assistant at the Berlin Museum of Ethnology. While Grünwedel 'saw no point in accumulating materials in museums, Le Coq took a different view.'² could hardly get enough. Unlike Grünwedel, his appetite for transportable exhibits was insatiable. While Le Coq's ambition could still be curbed by Grünwedel during the earlier Turfan expeditions, he led the fourth and final Turfan expedition (1913-14) alone. He wanted to have as many paintings as possible cut out of cave and temple walls, including the mural pictured above from the *Cave of the 16 Sword Bearers*, which Grünwedel, with his sense of the essential, had already sketched beforehand.

Those paintings brought back by Le Coq from Kizil that survived the Second World War are now among the most spectacular exhibits at the Museum of Asian Art in Berlin's recently opened Humboldt Forum. Le Coq himself became curator of the museum headed by Grünwedel in 1914 and succeeded him as director in 1923. In this capacity, he organized the first comprehensive museum presentation of the Turfan finds, which caused a sensation at the Berlin Museum of Ethnology from 1928 onwards.

¹ Left: https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/8/8b/Sixteen_Sword-bearers.jpg, Right: von Le Coq (1928, p. 67).

² Dreyer (2015, p. 254).



Von le Coq with a local assistant at Kizil¹

When Albert Grünwedel set off on his **first Turfan expedition** (1902-1903) to Xinjiang, he was accompanied by the young scholar Georg Huth² and technical assistant Theodor Bartus, who also took part in all subsequent Turfan expeditions. Local workers were hired for the actual excavation work.

At the end of November 1902, the small expedition reached the Turfan Depression. Until March 1903, the main activities there were surveying and excavations in the walled ruined city of *Kocho* (Gaochang), the former seat of the ancient Uyghur princes. In addition, the nearby temple caves, which Dimitri Klementz had already drawn attention to, were explored, in particular the caves of Bezeklik. Grünwedel wrote about Kocho:

"Without a doubt, this is a forgotten city of particular interest (...). Its sheer size alone is remarkable. The inner, sacred city, which contains only temples and palaces, measures between

¹ Source: <http://idpuk.blogspot.com/2016/10/north-american-silk-road-collections.html>.

² Georg Huth (1867-1906) was particularly helpful to the expedition due to his knowledge of Chinese, ancient Indian and Turkic languages.

*the outer walls still standing at over 2250 m. Hundreds of stepped temples and fantastic buildings with vaults extend over a large area."*¹



Palm Sunday scene (Nestorian chapel, Kotscho, 7th/8th century)²

¹ Grünwedel (1904, p. 18).

² https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/7/7b/Nestorian_Temple_-_Palm_Sunday.jpg (accessed: 28 June 2021).



Manichaean clergy in the scriptorium (manuscript fragment, Kotscho, 8th / 9th century)¹

¹ <https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/a/a7/Manicheans.jpg>; accessed: 28 June 2021; BBAW (2007, p. 17).

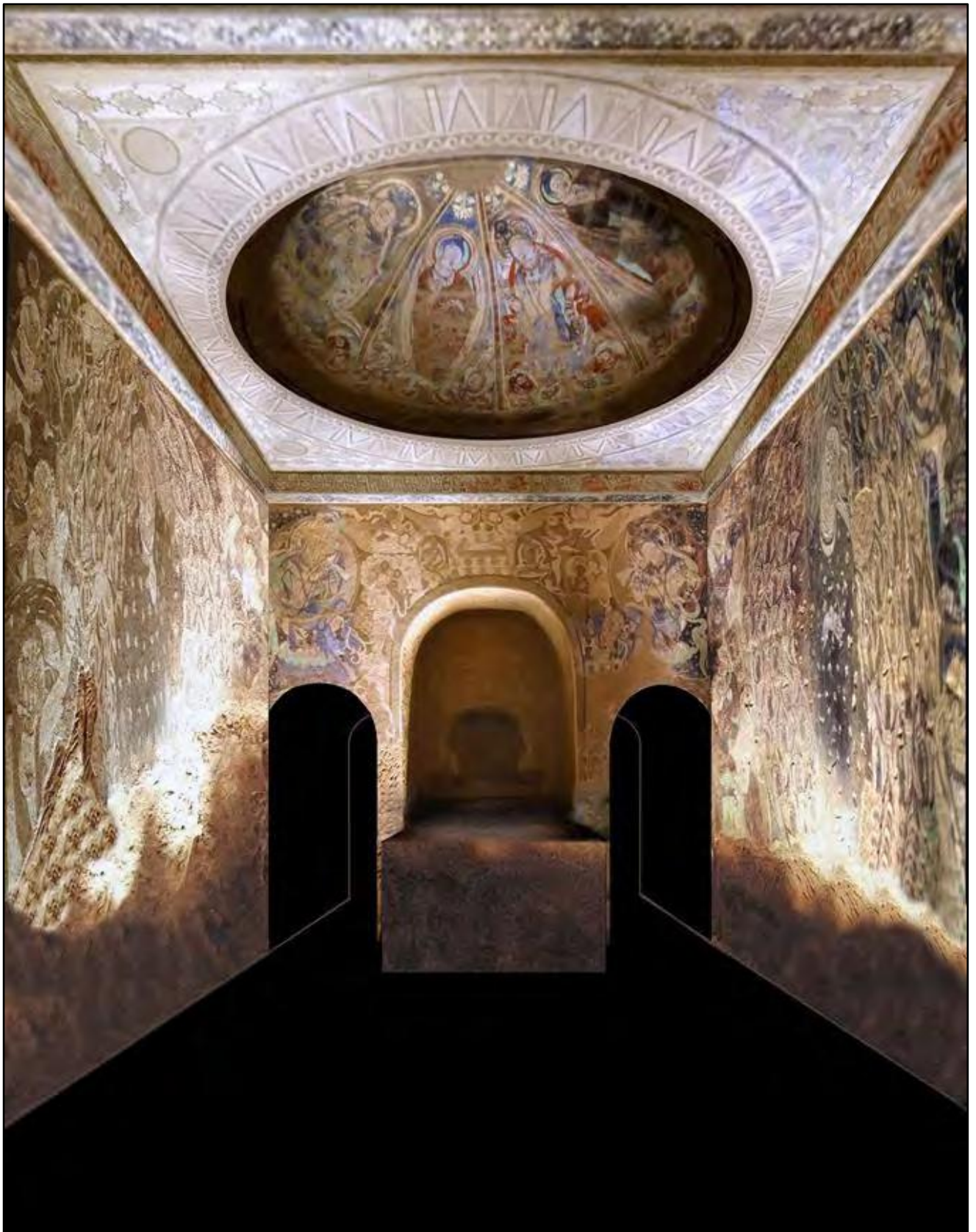
To his surprise, Grünwedel discovered that pre-Islamic Kotscho was not exclusively Buddhist, as it still was at the time of Xuanzang's visit in the 7th century. In addition to a considerable number of clearly Buddhist temple buildings and cave paintings, colored remains of a Nestorian Christian chapel were also found in Kotscho. Grünwedel also came across numerous traces of the Manichaean religion. The ancient Uyghur princes who had ruled in Kotscho since the 9th century were followers of this religion.

In the spring of 1903, Grünwedel and Bartus began their return journey, taking the northern route of the Silk Road from Turfan via Karashahr, Kucha and Kashgar. Near Kucha, they visited the ruins of the monastery town of Subashi, where Xuanzang had stayed twelve hundred years earlier. They also explored the Buddhist cave temples of Kumtura, about 25 km west of Kucha.

In Kumtura, there was a surprising encounter with two Japanese archaeologists. The two Japanese were members of Count Otani's Xinjiang expedition, which was competing with Grünwedel's expedition and which Grünwedel had already heard about. The Germans and the Japanese engaged in lively and collegial conversation for quite some time. Caren Dreyer writes: *'It is strange that, although the Japanese had visited the caves of Kizil the day before and planned to return later, they apparently did not tell the Germans about this place with its stunningly beautiful wall paintings. (...) So in 1903, Grünwedel and his people passed just a few kilometers past the place (...) where Grünwedel would later work with such great success. Most murals to be seen today in the Berlin Museum of Asian Art have been taken from there'*¹ The bitter international race for finds from Xinjiang is palpable here.

Today, a whole network of Buddhist temple caves known as *the 'Thousand Buddha Cave'* (Qianfo Dong) is known in Xinjiang and the neighboring province of Gansu. They include the *Kumtura* caves mentioned above and the *Kizil* caves, which were discovered by Grünwedel and von Le Coq in 1906-07 and proved to be of particular archaeological significance. Grünwedel had previously inspected the *Bezeklik* caves and several smaller cave complexes in the Turfan Depression. Further east, Aurel Stein and Paul Pelliot later came across the *Magao* Caves near Dunhuang, which provided surprising insights into Buddhist painting.

¹ Dreyer (2015, p. 76).



Reconstruction of the "Cave of the Ring-bearing Doves" (Kizil, 6th century), Humboldt Forum Berlin¹

¹ https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/0/0d/Cave_123_complete_with_sides.jpg. (Accessed: 28 June 2021).

The 'Thousand Buddha Caves' are areas comprising several hundred cave temples located close together, which were built during the heyday of Buddhism in Xinjiang between the 3rd and 10th centuries. They were dug into the soft sandstone or limestone on the edge of mountains on cliffs that were difficult to access. They were usually magnificently painted in honor of Buddha and his followers. However, often the donors of the cave temples are also depicted in the illustrations – kings and nobles, warriors or wealthy merchants.

Most 'Thousand Buddha Grottoes' follow a uniform construction principle that originated in India: One enters a vestibule and from there a large, completely underground prayer room (*cella*), which is often decorated with a painted dome or a barrel vault. The side walls, too, are usually richly painted. At the front of the main room is a large niche carved into the rock, intended for the central statue of Buddha (now often lost). To the left and right of this are passages leading to a narrow, barrel-vaulted corridor, also painted, which is dug deep into the mountain and allows worshippers to circumambulate the statue of Buddha. The 'Cave of the Ring-bearing Doves' pictured here, the showpiece of the Museum of Asian Art in Berlin's newly designed Humboldt Forum, is a good example of this.

After his first successful Turfan expedition, Grünwedel returned to Berlin in early July 1903. The press response was extremely positive, with the expedition being celebrated as a great national success. Emperor Wilhelm II was personally impressed and provided considerable funds for the research in Xinjiang to be continued soon. From then on, financing further expeditions, now known as the "Royal Prussian Turfan Expeditions", was no longer a problem.

Time was pressing, and the Germans wanted to stay ahead of the international competition. So the follow-up expedition set off for Xinjiang in September 1904. As Grünwedel was ill, Albert von Le Coq initially replaced him as expedition leader. He travelled to Kotscho together with the technician Theodor Bartus. When Grünwedel finally arrived in Xinjiang with his assistant Hermann Pohrt at the end of 1905, he took over the leadership again until the expedition was completed in the spring of 1907. Von Le Coq, who had to take a back seat as Grünwedel's assistant, also fell ill and returned to Germany in June 1906.

Personal vanity was probably the main reason why it was subsequently agreed to distinguish between a **'second' Turfan expedition** (1904-05) led by Albert von Le Coq and a **'third' Turfan expedition** (1906-07) led by Albert Grünwedel. In fact, it was a coherent undertaking with spectacular results. The vast majority of the finds and the most important finds came from the Kizil caves near Kucha, mainly magnificent wall paintings.

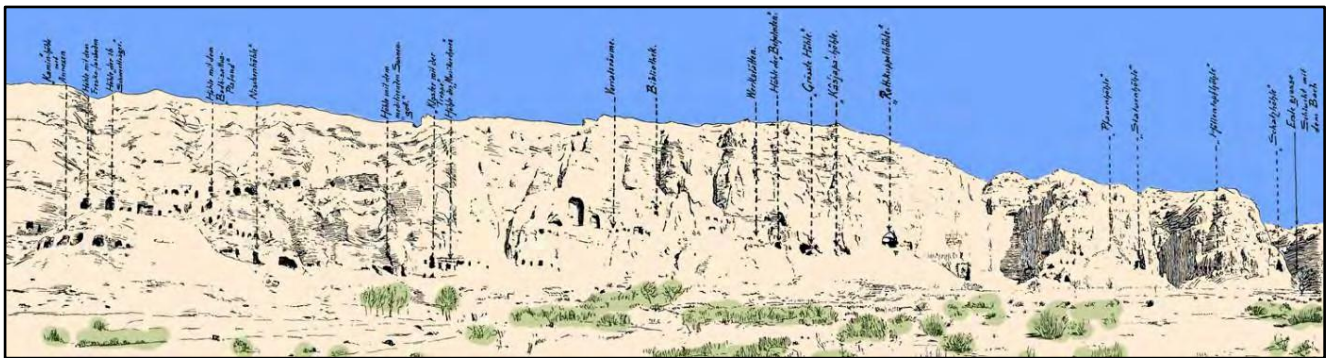
¹ See Kausch (2001, p. 257), Hansen (2012, p. 60ff.).

² Dreyer (2012, p. 19ff.).

³ For data, see: von Le Coq (2013b).

In the years following his return to Berlin in 1907, Grünwedel lost interest in Turfan research and turned his attention back to his field of Tibetan studies. Von Le Coq, on the other hand, represented Berlin's Turfan research to the outside world with his own publications and many high-profile lectures.

Meanwhile, at the end of 1911, the Chinese emperor Puyi had been deposed. At the beginning of 1912, the Republic of China was proclaimed under Sun Yat-sen. This also changed the situation in the distant province of Xinjiang. The last Turfan expedition therefore took place under significantly more complicated political conditions. However, it once again yielded a large haul, especially paintings from the Kizil caves: *'The fourth campaign was the one with the most finds,'* writes Carin Dreyer.¹ At the end of May 1914, just a few weeks before the outbreak of the First World War in Europe, the last of the 147 crates full of archaeological treasures arrived safely in Berlin.



¹ Dreyer (2015, p. 245).



Restored Kizil caves in 2018, with a monument to the Buddhist scholar Kumarajiva¹

It cannot be the task of this book to present in detail the incomparable Buddhist murals from the Kizil Caves and the other finds of the German Turfan expeditions from pre-Islamic Xinjiang.² The best preserved pieces are now on display at the Humboldt Forum in Berlin. They are also documented in detail and easily accessible in various excellent book publications and even on the internet.³

There is also an English-language publication from China with excellent illustrations of the wall paintings still present in the Kizil caves today.⁴ Some of the caves have now been thoroughly restored and made accessible.

Numerous temple caves in Kizil can now be visited with an expert guide. They are a magnet for tourists. The tour guides' criticism of the looting practices of German archaeologists is unmistakable. But there is also respect for their pioneering scientific achievements and resentment about the former lack of interest in

¹The Buddhist monk and scholar *Kumarajiva* (343-411) is said to have been born in Kucha as the son of a local prince and an Indian mother. As a precursor to Xuanzang, he translated several sutras from Sanskrit into Chinese. Photo: Marga Kreckel 2018, Map 1, P1010 664.

² E.g. Härtel / Yildiz (1987), Franz (1987) and, above all, Dreyer (2012 and 2015).

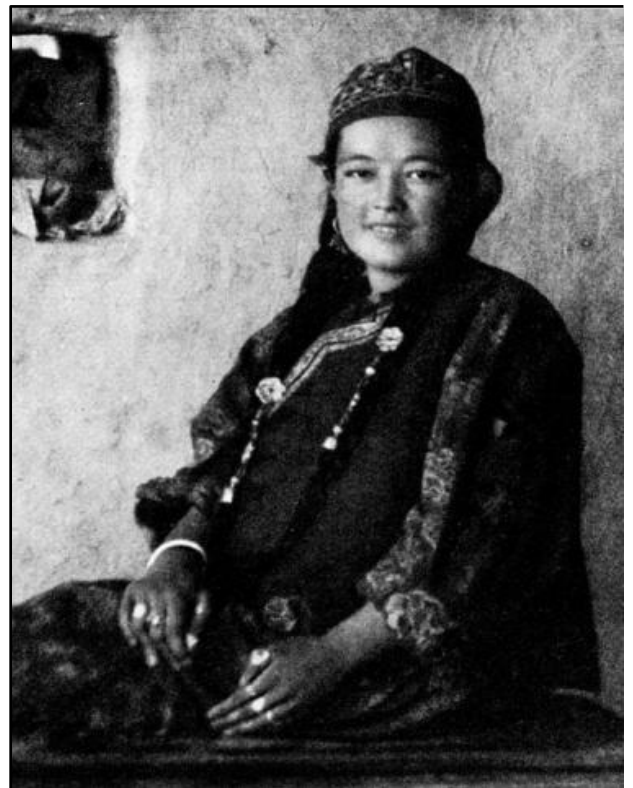
³ See in particular the English-language Wikipedia article "Kizil Caves", which documents a large number of wall paintings in detail.

⁴ Ma / Fan (2007).

Chinese Empire in Xinjiang's historical heritage. ¹ Fortunately, good cooperative relations have been established for some time between the Berlin Museum of Asian Art and the Research Academy in Kucha and the Xinjiang Museum in Urumqi. ² One can only hope that they will not fall victim to political tensions between China and the Western world.

Foreign scientists and local residents

The Turfan expeditions led by Grünwedel and von Le Coq were, as already mentioned, the first direct encounter between Germany and distant Xinjiang. However, it was a rather one-sided encounter. The same is true of the other explorers in Xinjiang who have been mentioned so far. Xuanzang, Marco Polo and Benedikt Goës, Sven Hedin, Grünwedel and von Le Coq: they all came to a country that was completely foreign to them. All of them pursued very idiosyncratic goals on their travels which had little to do with those of the people living in the Tarim Basin. In most cases, they did not even speak their language.



'Common male type' and 'noble female type' in the Turfan area, ca. 1905³

¹ See Ma / Fan (2007, p. 23f.).

² Dreyer (2015, p. 12).

³ From: von Le Coq (1926, p. 56, plate 13, edited).

The inhabitants of the country were only of interest to them insofar as they were important for the success of *their own mission*, as hosts, as laborers or even as adversaries. The local people, on the other hand, perceived the foreign explorers primarily as wealthy strangers with an exotic appearance and intentions that were difficult to understand.

Albert von Le Coq was something of an exception. A linguistically gifted Turkologist, he quickly mastered Uyghur (then known as 'Turki'), which was spoken in the oases of the Tarim Basin. He was also interested in the people he encountered there. However, he was not free from stereotypes and occasional romanticization. It was no coincidence that he called the book in which he reported on his last Turfan expedition '*Of the Land and People of East Turkistan*'. His books provide a somewhat more accurate picture of the relationship between foreign researchers and local residents. For example, he recounts a trusting conversation with one of his local servants. One day, the servant remarked:

'Sir, you Franks possess much more 'hikmät' [wisdom, knowledge] than we do! You fly through the air, you swim under the water, you have devil machines that run by themselves, and your guns hit targets far away, and you can shoot with them all the time.

*We cannot do that! But, sir! We have two things that you do not have! You forgive us, sir! But: first, our music! Yours is awful! (...) And then – sir, you forgive us! – beauty! You Franks all have such narrow faces, and your noses, yes, they are like those of horses, and your eyes are set so far back in their sockets that they are frightening! Look at me, sir! My eyes are not deep-set, my nose is small but broad, my face is round! That is beautiful!'*²

It is evident that von Le Coq had a clear idea of their respective roles: On the one hand himself, the superior gentleman from distant 'Franconia' and, on the other, the sincere servant who proudly emphasized the virtues of his own people.

The relationship was somewhat different when the German researchers dealt with members of the local ruling class. During their first stay in Turfan in the winter of 1904–05, von Le Coq and Bartus had already spent several months in private accommodation near Kotscho when the following occurred:

'One day, the Kasi [Kadi] and the 'great Achund', a spiritual dignitary, visited us, and the following conversation ensued: 'Sir, it is not good that you live alone. You must marry.' I replied, 'We are already married.' To which they replied, 'Yes, but your wives are many thousands of li (Chinese miles) away from here; you must take wives here. My daughter and the Kasi's daughter are willing to enter into marriage with you.'

¹ from Le Coq (1926, pp. 25, 58; 1928, p. 2).

² from Le Coq (1928, p. 162).

*This was an awkward opening. How could one get rid of these distinguished people without offending them? I first thanked them and then said: 'Friends, you know that the Chinese have spies (sin-tschi) here who send a report to Beijing every week, which is handed over to our envoy (iltschi). He sends the report to the great Emperor Gillehallim [Wilhelm] in the great country of Bă-lin [Berlin]. According to our law, we are only allowed to marry one woman. If the great emperor finds out that we have married here, what do you think will happen to us?' They stroked their beards, saying they didn't know, whereupon I explained to them that we would then inevitably be punished with the big stick. They were horrified by our barbarism and took their leave with expressions of regret and friendship.'*¹

This is what contact between seemingly equals looked like back then. The Germans were naturally convinced of their own superiority and the simplicity of their conversation partners. In today's Xinjiang, such a thing would hardly be possible; rather the opposite.

But the stories that von Le Coq told with such satisfaction went even further. A few weeks later, when von Le Coq and Bartus were preparing to return home, several dignitaries from the surrounding villages visited them to bid them a formal farewell.²

'(They) gave a speech along the following lines: 'Sir, you are now leaving. You have been here for a long time, and we have all become rich. (...) Unfortunately, you did not want to marry our daughters. But we have ... one more wish. Namely, when such important people from the court of the great Emperor Gillehallim ... come to us again, we would like to welcome them as required by the rules of the court of the great country of Bă-lin. (...)

I complimented them on their way out and called out to Bartus: 'Mr. Bartus, these gentlemen would like to know how to greet people in Berlin in a refined manner.' Bartus called back: 'I'll teach them that.' I went back to my work and when I had finished, I heard all sorts of commands being shouted outside and lo and behold! Bartus had lined up the fifteen old gentlemen, three across and five deep, and they bowed, first to the right, saying very clearly, 'Good morning, old liquor nose (Schnapsneese),' then they turned to the left, bowed and said, 'Good morning, old liquor nose.

*It was so funny that I had trouble stifling my laughter. The people took their leave in high spirits, and when Grünwedel arrived six months later, they came out, bowed most solemnly and greeted him according to the court custom of Bă-lin.'*³

¹ Ibid.

² Today, Chinese conversation partners sometimes gently mock the endless construction of Berlin's major airport or the considerate treatment of those who refuse to be vaccinated against COVID-19.

³ Ibid., p. 61f.

One may doubt the veracity of the anecdote recounted by Albert von Le Coq. But the fact that he was able to write down this piece of robust Berlin humor so impartially is symptomatic. It cannot be attributed solely to the rough manners that were customary at the time. Above all, it expresses the unshakeable sense of superiority that representatives of Western science and culture ('Western civilization') felt towards 'natives' of all kinds.

The keen interest shown by archaeological explorers at the turn of the century in the pre-Islamic history and art of southern Xinjiang was mostly accompanied by a disregard for Islam and the Turkish-speaking inhabitants of the region. Even Albert von Le Coq, who was himself a Turkologist, was no exception. As mentioned above, he saw himself as a researcher 'in the footsteps of Hellas in East Turkistan'.¹ For him, one thing was certain: *'Since the invasion of Islam in the 10th century, the culture of the country has been gradually declining.'* He also spoke quite naturally of the *'usual lethargy of the natives (Turks).'*²

This means that, not only in his scientific thirst for knowledge but also in his prejudices, Le Coq was a child of his time, which was marked by imperialism, racism and cultural arrogance – just like his rival researchers from other countries. This explains their archaeological raids on the Silk Road at that time, but it does not justify them. However, it should not detract from their scientific achievements either.

¹ Ibid., p. 9.

² Ibid., p. 7.

Part Two:
Uyghur heartland south of the Tianshan:
Economy, environment and ‘dual society’

Chapter Seven
Irrigation of the desert and expansion of agriculture

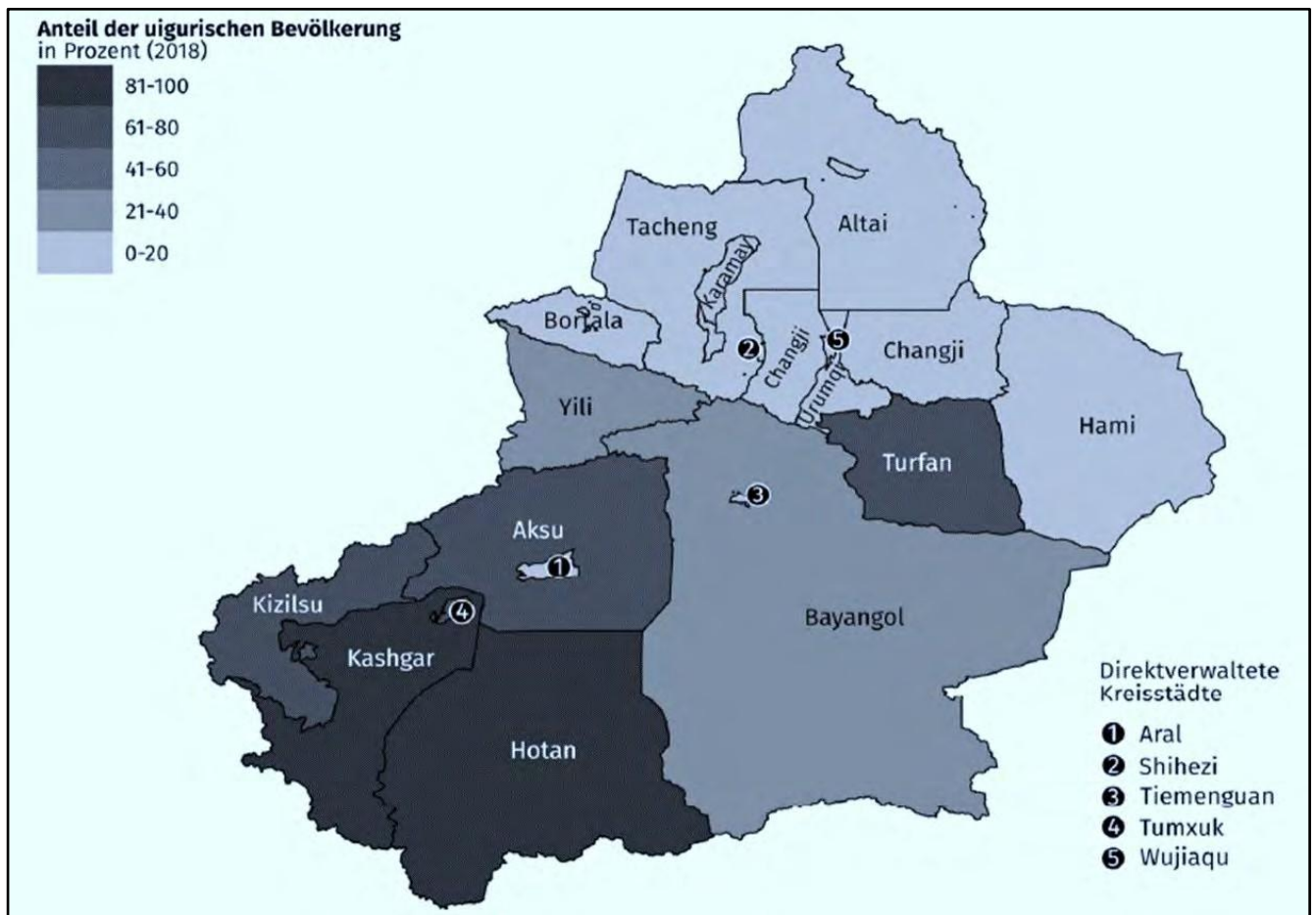
In the last few chapters, we have compiled five very different historical mosaic pieces. They all clearly show how strongly the image we have of Xinjiang today is still influenced by stories from times long past. The stories we have selected always focus on outstanding personalities who have achieved a high degree of fame. For posterity, they have therefore become authorities to whom people like to look for guidance. However, the accounts they have left behind are merely snapshots that can only be understood in the context of their respective times and the views and prejudices that prevailed at the time. Taken together, they reveal the extraordinary historical profile of the Xinjiang province.

However, our famous witnesses from earlier centuries cannot really help us when it comes to the question hotly debated among historians and politicians today as to whether Xinjiang has been ‘an integral part of China’ for over two thousand years or whether it can claim an independent ‘national’ identity for itself. Their accounts only reveal that since the earliest times there have been repeated long periods during which the territories of present-day Xinjiang (or *Xiyu*, the Western regions) were under strong military, political and cultural influence of China, and other periods when this was not the case.

It is not until 1759, when the troops of the Manchu Emperor Qianlong definitively conquered North and South Xinjiang for the Chinese crown that the new common name ‘Xinjiang’ was introduced, that we arrive on secure historical ground. Since then, the Xinjiang region, with its two parts, Dzungaria in the north and Altishahr in the south, has clearly been part of China. In the early years, South Xinjiang's connection to China was still quite loose. But since 1884, i.e. for almost 150 years, the whole of Xinjiang has been a politically and increasingly economically fully integrated province of China – albeit a province with its own unique cultural and historical profile.

Structural differences between northern and southern Xinjiang

With that, we will leave ancient history behind and turn our attention to the circumstances in today's Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (*Xīnjiāng Wéiwú'ěr zìzhìqū*), as the province has been officially called since 1955. In this and the next two chapters, we will focus on the part of the country south of the Tianshan Mountains, i.e. *southern Xinjiang*, today's heartland of the Uyghurs, which was also the focus of our five historical highlights in Part I.



Distribution of the Uyghur population within Xinjiang, by administrative district¹

As we have seen, southern Xinjiang (also known as Altishahr) is particularly strongly influenced by the myth of the Silk Road. It is currently enjoying a great deal of public attention, on the one hand because of the political disputes over the situation of the Uyghurs in China, but on the other hand also because of the extraordinary cultural and historical significance of southern Xinjiang, which was mentioned repeatedly in the last chapter.

The sober facts: around half of Xinjiang's population now lives in Southern Xinjiang. In 2018, this amounted to 13.2 million people, 12 million of whom lived in the Tarim Basin alone. A further 1.2 million

¹Source: Alpermann (2021, p. 6).

Live in the eastern neighboring districts of Turfan and Hami (Kumul).¹ Due to their geographical location south of the Tianshan Mountains, we also consider these two districts to be part of southern Xinjiang. Approximately 79% of the population living in southern Xinjiang today belongs to the Uyghur ethnic group (minzu).² With 17%, the Han Chinese are clearly in the minority in southern Xinjiang in purely numerical terms.³ However, they are significantly overrepresented in key political positions and in the upper echelons of economic life in the cities. In this respect, southern Xinjiang is a *'dual society'* (see Chapter 9).

In northern Xinjiang, where the capital Urumqi is located, the situation is quite different. As briefly described in the first chapter, the majority of the population here is Han Chinese (approx. 57%). Around 20% are Turkic-speaking Kazakhs, and only about 11% are Uyghurs.⁴

In the vast desert landscape of southern Xinjiang, the availability of *water* is the decisive factor. Permanent human life and economic activity are only possible here if there is sufficient water. This means that the population of Xinjiang can only grow as long as its water supply is secure.

The Tarim Basin, the actual hub of the Silk Road, lives primarily from the water of the rivers that flow from the surrounding high mountains into the Taklamakan Desert, which has no outlet. More on that later. First, we look at the Turfan Depression, located further east on the southern edge of the Tianshan Mountains, which gave its name to the German Turfan expeditions. The pilgrim monk Xuanzang, whom we met in the second chapter, once stayed there. Later, it became the centre of the ancient Uyghur empire of the princes of Kocho.

Karez irrigation and agriculture in the Turfan Depression

Just like the Tarim Basin, the Turfan Depression is a desert area with low rainfall and no drainage. At its deepest point, it lies 154 meters below sea level. The Turfan Depression is affected by extreme temperature fluctuations. In summer, temperatures reach up to 50 degrees Celsius in the shade, while in winter, icy north winds blow. The climate is inhospitable, with months of bitter frost, often below minus 20 degrees.

¹ Figures for 2018, based on residents duly registered under the hukou system. (Calculated according to Xinjiang Statistical Yearbook 2019, Tables 3-5 and 3-7). No detailed recent data is available from the autumn 2020 census. See the information provided by the Statistics Bureau of Xinjiang: <https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/ce/cqtrt/eng/news/t1884310.htm>, dated 16 June 2021.

² According to the 2020 census, 74% of Xinjiang's Uyghurs live in the four administrative regions of Aksu, Kashgar, Kizilsu-Kirgiz and Khotan, located in the far west of the Tarim Basin. There they make up 83.7% of the resident population (State Council 2021b, p. 7).

³ Official statistics last provided differentiated data on the different ethnic groups (minzu) in Xinjiang for the year 2018. It covers the entire "resident population", i.e. the officially registered inhabitants of Xinjiang according to the hukou system and "migrants" who have been living there for more than six months but are registered elsewhere. They include all residents of Xinjiang who are duly registered under the hukou system. The figures reproduced here are calculated according to the Xinjiang Statistical Yearbook 2019 (Tables 3-5 and 3-7). No detailed data from the autumn 2020 census is available to us at this time. See the information provided by the Statistics Bureau of Xinjiang: <https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/ce/cqtrt/eng/news/t1884310.htm>, dated 16 June 2021.

⁴ Around 9% are Islamic Hui Chinese. Source: Xinjiang Statistical Yearbook 2019 (Tables 3-5, 3-7, 3-8).

And yet, since ancient times, this has been a thriving oasis and cultural landscape. This miracle has been brought about by a few small mountain rivers, numerous springs and many abundant water veins. They carry the life-giving water from the rain- and snow-rich Tianshan Mountains in the north to the low-lying Turfan Depression.



Traditional underground tunnel of a karez (Karez Museum Turfan)²

A special feature of the Turfan Depression is the *karez system*, a sophisticated desert irrigation method that has been ensuring sustainable water management for a long time. Karez irrigation is largely underground and, unlike rivers and open canals, can therefore bring fresh water to fields and homes with almost no evaporation loss, even in the hottest summer months; in winter, it is protected from frost.

The first German-language description of the Karez system in Turfan was probably provided by the Russian East Asian researcher *Dimitri Klementz*. After his visit to the Turfan Depression in 1898, he reported

¹ The Bogda Shan Mountains, part of the Tianshan range, are over 5,000 metres high and located north of the Turfan Depression. They are partly forested and have an alpine character.

² Source: https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/d/d6/2017-07-23_Turpan_Karez_Folk_Park_24_anagoria.jpg. (Accessed: 28 June 2021).

in wonderfully convoluted but very precise scholarly German:

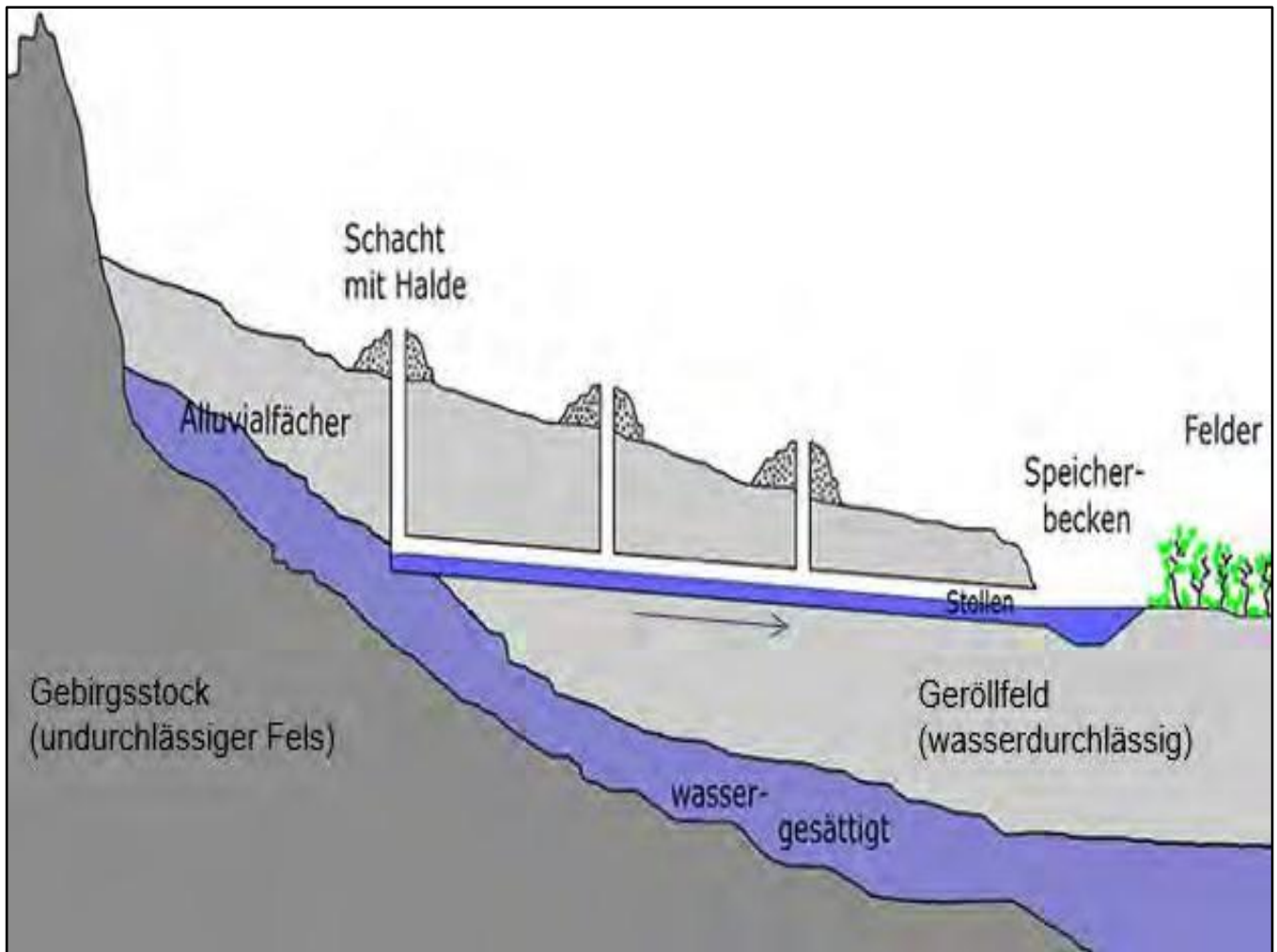
'The lack of natural irrigation has forced the inhabitants since time immemorial to resort to the construction of underground water pipes (kârîz). (...)

North of the Turfan Basin rise the last foothills of the Tien Shan. (...) Once a water vein has been reached at the foot of the foothills, which often requires a shaft up to 70 feet deep without any reinforcement, the natives drill a whole series of wells at short intervals from each other, calculating that each one will be shallower than the previous one, until finally, thanks to the ... sloping terrain, the earth's surface is lower than the water level of the upper well, and an open canal can be constructed. Then all the individual shafts are connected to each other by underground horizontal galleries. These are also constructed without timbering, which is why the builders are forced to dig those rows of wells at short intervals. Seen from the outside, such a qanat appears as a long row of mounds stretching out in a line. If you approach one of them, you will see ... a well with a water vein flowing at the bottom, and if you follow the line in the direction of the water flow, you will notice that the wells gradually decrease in depth until you finally reach the point where the water is conveyed in an open channel. This is where the seed fields, tree plantations and dwellings begin. Such an underground water pipe is rarely shorter than three versts (3.2 km). (...)

If we were able to rise to a sufficient height above the Turfan valley basin, ... it would appear to the observer as a monotonous grey desert, from which only here and there the oases stand out as narrow bands."¹

The schematic illustration of a karez from the present day corresponds exactly to Klementz's historical description. At short intervals, one can see vertical shafts surrounded by piles of spoil material accumulated during the construction of the shafts and the constant cleaning of the water-bearing tunnels. The shafts and tunnels are dug by hand, which is hard work. The underground water tunnels in particular have to be constantly checked, cleaned and maintained.

¹ Klementz (1899, p. 16f.).

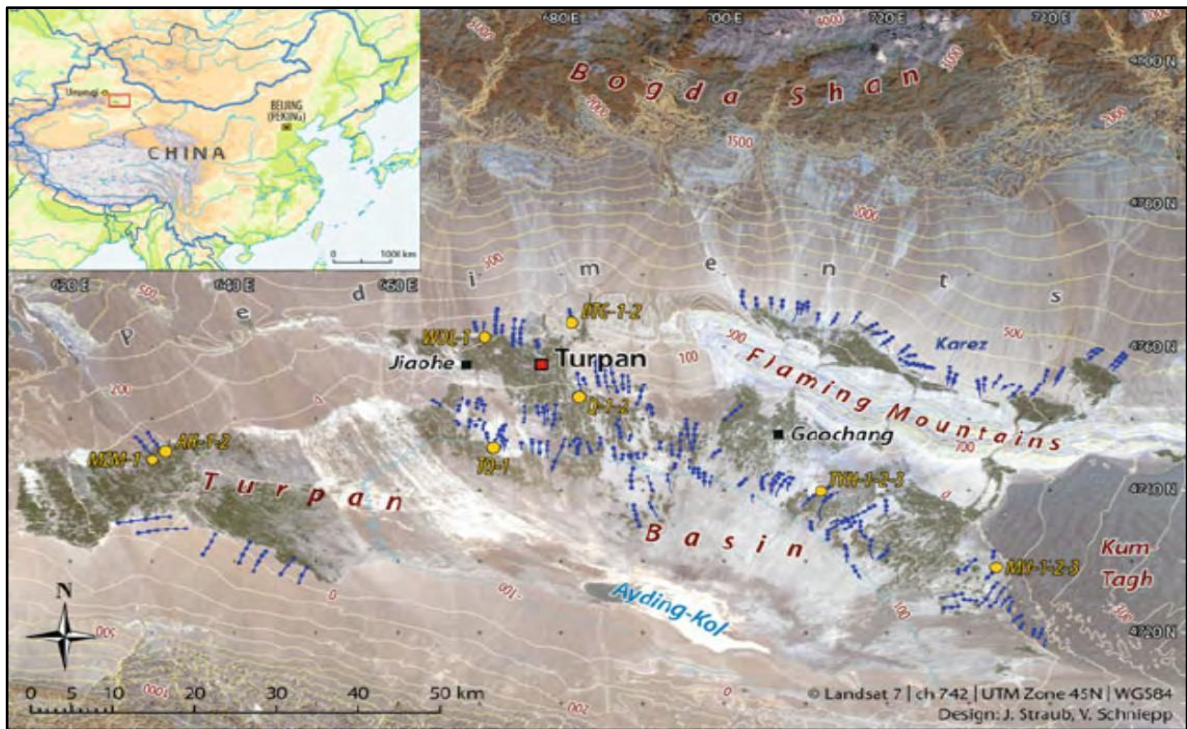


Karez irrigation system in Turfan, schematic representation¹

A karez can reach a length of several kilometers. It can be recognized by its many entrance openings, spaced 30-100 meters apart, which look like giant molehills. At its end, the water from the aquifer usually flows into a collection basin or open channels for irrigating the fields.

Nowadays, pipes are increasingly being used to transport the water further. As the schematic diagram shows, the karez come closer and closer to the surface the closer they get to the lowest point of the Turfan Depression. The remaining water eventually disappears into the salt marsh of the former end lake *Ayding Kol*.

¹ Source: Wiemeier (2016), edited excerpt.



Turpan Depression with Karez irrigation (dark blue) and former terminal lake Ayding Kol¹

Unlike Dimitri Klementz in 1898, we now have the opportunity to 'rise to a sufficient height above the Turpan valley basin' and refer to aerial photographs.² These confirm Klementz's vision very accurately.



Aerial photograph: Course of karez tunnels in a barren mountain slope with "molehills"³

¹ Source: Mächtle et al. (2019, p. 362).

² The Wright brothers' first motorized flight took place in 1903.

³ Source: Wiemeier (2016).

The Karez irrigation system is not only found in the Turfan Depression. It can be found in many desert regions around the world. Its origins probably lie in ancient Iran, where it is now known as the Qanat system.¹ However, the same irrigation system can also be found in the Arab world, e.g. in the ancient Syrian Silk Road city of Palmyra. Even far to the west, in Algeria and Morocco on the desert edge of the Atlas Mountains, there is the Foggara or Khetara system, which works in exactly the same way as the Karez system in Turfan. In the former Arab region of Andalusia in present-day Spain, it is known as *Galeria*. With the Spanish colonization of Latin America, it even reached the South American deserts.

There is no consensus on the historical age of the karez irrigation system in the Turfan region. In China in particular, many believe that it dates back to tunnel construction techniques used in ancient China.

Recently, however, an international team of archaeologists working in the Turfan region analyzed spoil material that had been piled up at the edge of old karez shafts. They found wood and plant remains that could be dated back to the 15th century. This suggests that the system originated in the Middle Ages.² Ultimately, however, some questions remain unanswered about the origin and age of the karez system in the Turfan region. German China expert Gert Wiemeier writes wisely on this subject:

*"Even if the karez irrigation systems in Turfan are not 2,000 years old or more, as Uyghurs or Chinese people would like to believe for various reasons, they are a remarkable achievement and masterpiece of the human spirit that deserves to be protected."*³

Thanks to the karez irrigation system, the Turfan region has become famous for one of its most important agricultural products, sugar-sweet seedless *grapes* and *raisins*. They are considered the best in all of China. Xuanzang already praised them. They are nothing short of a miracle, because given the scorching heat in summer and the arctic temperatures in winter, it is extremely surprising that grapes can thrive here. But human ingenuity has developed special methods to make this possible:

- The Karez system provides irrigation for the vines in summer. They are not grown on the bare mountain slopes, but in the flatlands, which are covered with green vineyards.
- The vines are trained on trellises to form pergolas, which not only provide shade in summer but also protect against moisture loss.
- In winter, the cold-sensitive vines are removed from the trellises and stripped of their leaves. They are then bent down into deep furrows in the ground. There they are buried and covered with soil. This protects them from freezing. In spring, they are dug up again and tied up – a labor-intensive but effective procedure.

¹ See Kreckel (2014, p. 52ff.).

² Mächtle et al. (2019, p. 369).

³ Wiemeier (2016, p. 4).



Lush vine arbours in summer, withering vines in autumn¹

¹ https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/3/34/Valley_of_Grapes_Turpan_%2814%29.jpg (accessed: 28.6.2021) and Marga Kreckel 2018, Map 1, P1010 392.



Burying the vines to protect them from frost in winter¹

- From the beginning of September, huge grapes can be harvested which are exceptionally flavorful and particularly sweet. They are also used to make wine, but this is more of a side activity in this Islamic wine-growing region. The main business is the production of sugar-sweet dark or light *raisins* from the predominantly seedless white grapes. Dark raisins owe their brown colour to drying in the sun.

¹ <https://p2d7x8x2.stackpathcdn.com/content/uploads/2013/11/NICHOLAS-ACQUROFF-WORKERS-BURY-VINES-NINGXIA.png>



Dark Turfan raisins are dried in the sun¹

- In most cases, however, the ripe grapes are brought into special drying houses that are ventilated by the wind and hung on special wooden and wire racks. After about 40 days in the wind and heat, they turn into delicious *yellow-green raisins*. The drying houses (uig. Chunche) have a very special significance in Turfan. They are wind-permeable structures made of unfired mud bricks that have been in use for centuries. In smaller family-run vineyards, they are located right next to the fields.



Production of yellow-green Turfan raisins in the drying house²

¹ Photo Marga Kreckel 2018, Map 1, P1010 368.

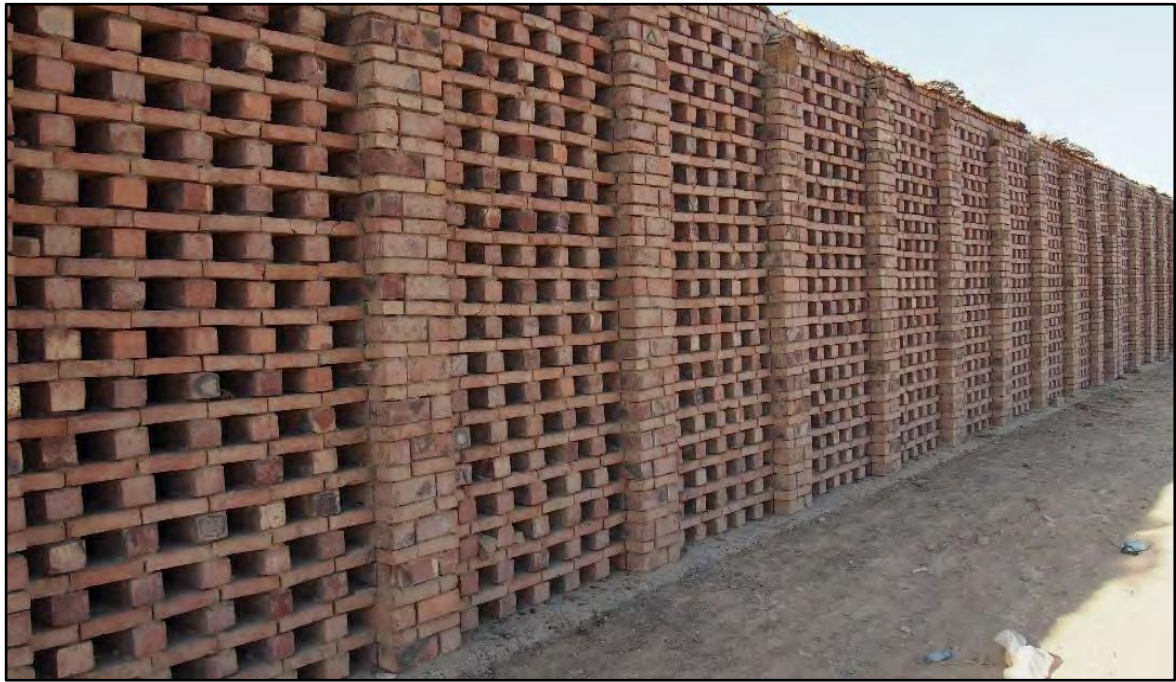
² Photo Marga Kreckel 2018, Map 1, P1010 371.



Rural vineyards with drying houses¹

In large *commercial wine-growing operations*, which are becoming increasingly common in the Turfan area, the drying houses stand in long rows in the wasteland, away from the irrigated cultivation areas. The grapes are also laid out to dry in the sun on the stony desert soil. This is also done on a large scale.

¹ Photos Marga Kreckel 2018, Map 1, P1010 381 and P1010 386.



Large-scale raisin production in huge drying houses – and in the blazing sun¹

¹ Photos: Marga Kreckel 2018, Map 1, P 1010 378 and Xinhua (http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2017-09/03/c_136579936_11.htm).

For vegetable cultivation, which is just as sensitive to frost, heat and wind as grapes, the Turfan Depression has developed original weather-resistant greenhouses

developed that are easy to irrigate. To the north, these greenhouses are protected from strong winds by solid clay structures, while to the south they are open. There, the vegetables thrive under plastic tarpaulins that protect them from evaporation. The greenhouses can also be quickly and effectively covered with large roll-up fabric tarpaulins to protect against sudden cold spells and excessive sunlight.



Greenhouses adapted to the Turfan climate¹

Traditional oasis farming in the Turfan region has always specialized in grapes, melons and pumpkins. Xuanzang raved about them. In more recent times, peppers and tomatoes have also been added. Cereals have always been grown on a more modest scale. However, grape cultivation is and remains the clear frontrunner, accounting for around 45% of irrigated fields and as much as 55% of water used for agriculture. With the increase in cotton cultivation in recent years, another competitor for scarce water resources has emerged.

¹ Photos Marga Kreckel 2018, Map 1, P1010403, P1010 405, P1010 406, P1010 407.

² Nagasawa et al. (2006, p. 39).



Cutting and drying peppers in the autumn sun¹

However, the increasing water shortage is mainly due to a completely different factor: the strong *growth in population*. Around 1900, approximately 50,000 people lived in the Turfan district; by 1949, the population had grown to around 145,000. By 1965, partly due to the influx of Han Chinese immigrants, the population had already reached 236,000. Thirty years later, in 1995, the number had more than doubled to 525,000.² Official statistics for 2018 put the population at 676,000 (still around 77% of whom are Uyghurs).³

Just over a third of the population of Turfan District is classified as ‘urban’. These are mainly people who live in the city of Turfan itself. Turfan (Uyghur: Turpan, Chinese: *Tulufan Shi*) is now a thoroughly modern city with a correspondingly high water demand: as everywhere else in the modern world, in Turfan today ‘water comes out of the tap’. It is pumped up from wells drilled deep into the groundwater. The karez system hardly plays a role anymore.⁴

¹ Photo Marga Kreckel 2018, Map 1, P1010 573.

² Lein / Shen (2006, p. 3).

³ Xinjiang Statistical Yearbook 2019, Tables 3-5, 3-8 and 3-9.

⁴ For more on the process of modernization and Sinicization in the city of Turfan, see the study by Loubes (1998).



Cityscape of Turfan today¹

Karez irrigation is also becoming less and less important in agriculture. It is being replaced by tap water, some of which comes from considerable depths. At its peak in 1957, according to official figures, there were still 1,237 functioning Karez tunnel systems in the Turfan district. By 2009, their number had shrunk to 238. Only 20-30% of agricultural land is still supplied by them today, down from 70% during the heyday of Karez irrigation about 50 years ago.

Not only has the use of karez irrigation declined sharply in recent decades, but at the same time, the number of deep wells pumping water from the groundwater has steadily increased. Depending on your point of view, you can lament this as a loss of cultural heritage and local tradition or welcome it as a gain in modernization. In any case, it represents an overexploitation of natural resources.

What is worrying in this context is the fact that most of the approximately one thousand abandoned karez tunnel systems *can* no longer supply any water at all – simply because they have *dried up*. They have dried up because the water table in the aquifer has recently fallen so low that it can no longer supply the horizontal karez tunnels with water.³ It is assumed that the many newly dug deep wells are responsible for this. They extract too much groundwater. This is where the human urge for expansion reaches its limits.

Water management, land use and ecology in the Tarim Basin

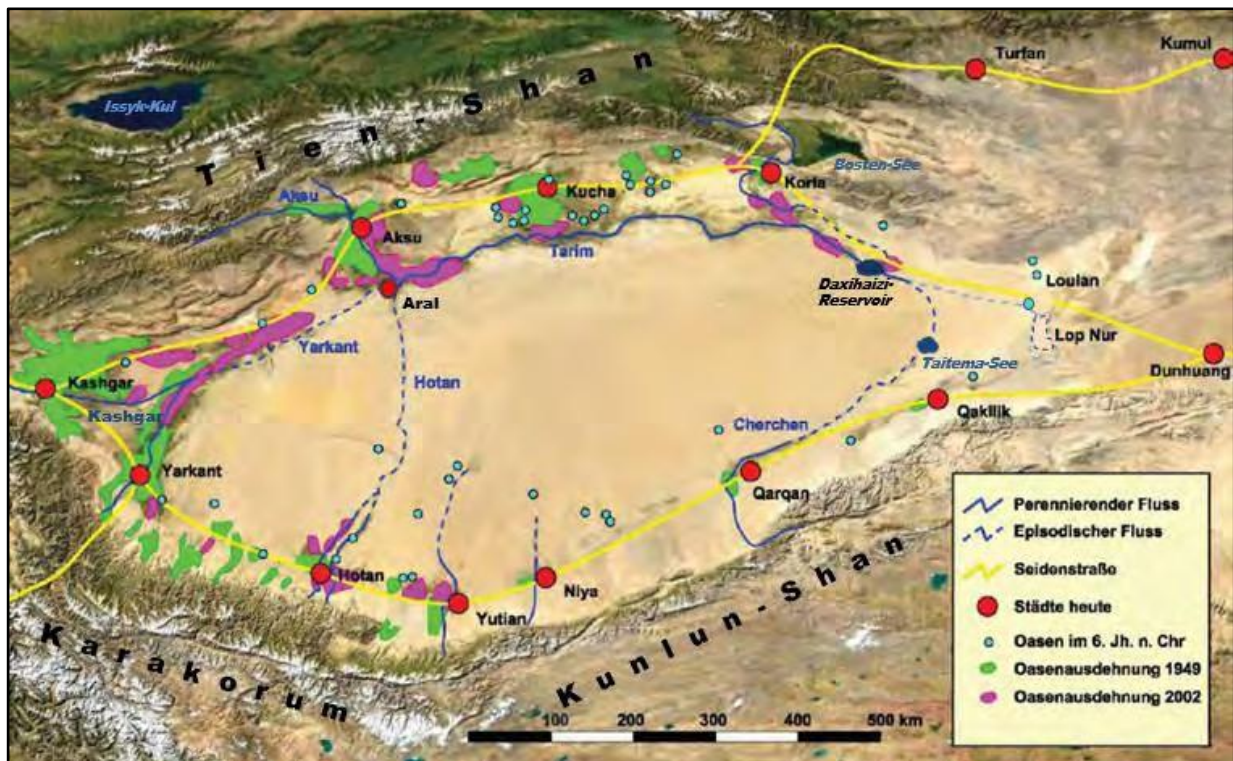
What is happening on a smaller scale in the Turfan Depression also applies on a larger scale and under slightly different geographical conditions to the Tarim Basin with its vast Taklamakan Desert: in both places, the issue of water management is becoming a major concern in view of rising population figures, changing economic and social demands and new ecological challenges. Just as in the Turfan Depression, climatic conditions in the Tarim Basin have not changed fundamentally over the last millennium, but the living conditions of the people who live there have. For the period when Xuanzang travelled through the region, approximately 1,400 years ago, the *population of the Tarim Basin* is estimated at around 220,000 inhabitants. Initially, it rose only very slowly in the following period. However, population growth accelerated rapidly in the last century. According to calculations made by Sven Hedin in the Tarim Basin around 1900,

¹ Source : <https://mapcarta.com/de/Turpan>.

² Hu et al. (2012, pp. 212, 217).

³ See Lein / Shen (2006), Nagasawa et al. (2006), Hu et al. (2012).

Around 1.8 million people lived there at that time. In 1949, the year the People's Republic of China was founded, the population had already grown to around 3.4 million. In 1980, shortly after the death of Mao Zedong and at the beginning of China's modernization phase under Deng Xiaoping, there were already around 6 million people in the Tarim Basin. Today, as already mentioned several times, there are around 12 million, including approximately 10 million Uyghurs.



Tarim Basin: Expansion of irrigated areas throughout history³

Such exponential population growth is now taking place in many parts of the world. However, the development is particularly alarming in the Tarim Basin. This arid desert region now has to feed around *fifty times more people* than in the past. This cannot be achieved through improved cultivation techniques alone, but only through an enormous *increase in agricultural land*. Since the days when Xuanzang travelled through the Tarim Basin, this area has *increased almost thirtyfold*.¹ The map shown here illustrates this expansion process. The greatest expansion of irrigated farmland (purple coloring) has only taken place in recent decades.

A few basic geographical facts must be kept in mind in order to understand what this enormous expansion means for the Tarim Basin:²

- As described in detail, the Tarim Basin, which slopes gradually from west to east but is largely flat, has an *extremely dry continental climate* with very cold winters, very hot summers, strong winds and frequent sandstorms. There is hardly any rainfall (about 50 mm per year), but much higher water evaporation (about 2000 mm per year).³

¹ Of course, there were certain climatic fluctuations in historical times, which led, for example, to desert cities such as Dandan-Oilik, Niya and Loulan having to be abandoned in the early Middle Ages due to water shortages.

² Information according to Gu-An et al. (2016, p. 99), Keilholz (2014, pp. 12, 15), Freeberne (1966) and Hedin (1903, p. 608).

³ Source: Disse / Keilholz (2013, p. 220), with own additions.

- Nevertheless, the Tarim Basin is not a completely uninhabitable desert. In the north, west and south, it is surrounded by *relatively precipitation-rich and glaciated high mountains*, which have provided a reliable water supply for centuries and enable the existence of individual oases on the edge of the Taklamakan.
- The water that the inhabitants of the Tarim Basin need for themselves and their agriculture comes from the mountain rivers that flow down into the Taklamakan from all sides. What remains of this water eventually collects in the huge desert river *Tarim*, which begins at the confluence of the three rivers Aksu-Darya, Yarkand-Darya and Khotan-Darya near the city of Aral, founded in 1957. Over the course of its approximately 1,300 km, most of the Tarim's water evaporates or seeps away. Only about one third of the Tarim's water can be used for human purposes. What remains of the Tarim River after its long journey through the desert eventually ends up in a drainless '*wandering lake*', as Sven Hedin once called it. In Sven Hedin's day, this was sometimes Lake Lop Nor, sometimes Lake Kara Koshun, which was located roughly where Lake Taitema is today (see Chapter 5). After Lake Lop Nor dried up in the 1960s, Lake Taitema became the final lake of the Tarim.² It is located not far from Charklik (Chinese: Ruoqiang) on the southern route of the Silk Road. Lake Taitema was also temporarily affected by drying up (see below).¹
- The Tarim River basin experiences seasonal fluctuations between *water abundance* and *water scarcity*. During the summer months from July to September, the Tarim River floods due to snowmelt in the surrounding mountains. Regular flooding then renders the floodplains largely uninhabitable. During the rest of the year, the water level drops significantly. Many of the Tarim's tributaries dry up completely during the dry season. Sven Hedin experienced this first-hand during his first desert expedition in April 1895, when he found the Keriya River bed completely dry.
- *Reservoirs* and *irrigation* canals¹ were therefore built to ensure a permanent water supply. Above all, however, during the dry season it was necessary to rely on *wells* to access the groundwater, which is usually not very deep in the flat desert landscape.
- The karez irrigation system, which has been so successful in the Turfan Depression, has not caught on in the Tarim Basin. This irrigation method is not suitable for the flat alluvial land of the Tarim and other desert rivers.³

International research initiatives have been formed to better understand the various irrigation problems and develop solutions for the current precarious situation in the Tarim Basin. They are primarily concerned with ecological issues that are not only significant for Xinjiang, but are also of broader interest in light of global climate change.

We took a closer look at one such research project. It is an interdisciplinary German-Chinese project entitled "Sustainable Management of River Oases along the Tarim River", abbreviated to SuMaRiO (Sustainable Management of River Oases along the Tarim River / China). The final report of the project, which was funded by the German Federal Government (BMBF) with 7.5 million euros between 2011 and 2016, was published in 2021 as an English-language book that has attracted some international attention.

¹ At the same time, Lake Taitema (like its predecessor, Lake Kara Koshun) also serves as the terminal lake for the Cherchen Darya, which flows from the south from the Kunlun Mountains into the Taklamakan Desert. Outside the flood period, the Cherchen Darya regularly dries up in its lower reaches.

² Keilholz (2014, p. 12).

³ See, for example, Giese et al. (2005), Disse et al. (2016), Kuba (2017), Cyffka et al. (2021).



Desert river Tarim with floodplain forest south of Kucha, towards the end of the flood period¹

The SuMaRiO research report lists no fewer than 51 authors. Most of them are professors or research assistants at German universities, 13 are scientists from Chinese research institutions, some have Uyghur names, others Chinese names. Together, they present themselves as an international team of scientists from various disciplines. There are no all-round research heroes among them, such as Alexander von Humboldt, Sven Hedin or Albert Grünwedel.

One can only imagine the delicate negotiations that must have taken place during this mega-project. As academically qualified experts, all those involved probably had more or less the same scientific wavelength. Nevertheless, there must have been extremely complicated balancing acts between the Chinese and German sides, as well as between the different disciplines involved in the project. Above all, however, the topic of 'sustainable management of riverine oases' with its ecological focus is itself fraught with pitfalls. Conflicts between economics, ecology and politics are inevitable.

We cannot pursue this further here. We would rather rejoice that such a German-Chinese joint project has come about at all in today's difficult times and has produced remarkable research results.

From the perspective of the SuMaRiO project, there were three main factors that led to a completely new constellation since the People's Republic of China took power in Xinjiang in 1949, and scientists were asked to develop possible solutions to its undesirable side effects.²

- The starting point is, *first*, that after 1949, the Chinese government under Mao Zedong pursued a deliberate policy of political integration, Sinicization and modernization of Xinjiang. The main instrument for this was the 'Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps'. and Construction Corps" (known as Bingtuan for short). These were paramilitary units made up of Han Chinese immigrants. Their tasks included reclaiming new land for agricultural use and establishing military farms. It is estimated that around 30% of Xinjiang's agricultural land was developed by the Bing-tuan Corps and is still farmed by them today.³ The corps' task was to act as the vanguard for the Development of Xinjiang in line with the Chinese state and party leadership, to open up new land and to serve as vanguard

¹ Photo Marga Kreckel, end of September 2018, map 3, P1010037.

² Cyffka et al. (2021).

³ See Rumbaur et al. (2014), Keilholz (2014), Disse et al. (2016) for more on this, cf. also Giese et al. (2005).

and role models for socialist agriculture. Securing the borders was also one of their responsibilities. Originally, the corps had primarily served to enable demobilized soldiers and former guerrilla fighters and their families to start a new life in Xinjiang. This was also linked to the intention of specifically increasing the Han Chinese population in Xinjiang, which inevitably led to accelerated population growth. The many Bingtuan facilities that exist today in southern Xinjiang are Han Chinese enclaves in a region predominantly inhabited by Uyghurs. The special role of the Bingtuan organization in the recent history of Xinjiang will be discussed in more detail below (Chapters 9 and 11).

- *Second*, population growth was accompanied by a gradual *process of industrialization*; coal, oil and natural gas production in Xinjiang was also systematically established and expanded. In the traditionally oasis towns of the Tarim Basin, a general *urbanization and modernization of life* based on the Chinese model began.
- *Third* – and this is the most important aspect in the context of the German-Chinese SuMaRiO project – the expansion of *cotton* cultivation (which is extremely irrigation-intensive) was deliberately promoted in the Tarim Basin as a means of modernizing and intensifying agriculture. In 1988, the Chinese government decided to make Xinjiang the centre of cotton production in China. *‘With this decision, the cotton cultivation area increased from approximately 15,000 km² (1988) to 65,000 km² (2004).’*¹

This led to a rapid increase in cotton cultivation in the Tarim Basin at that time. Uyghur family farms, which had re-emerged after the dissolution of the largely unsuccessful people's communes of the Mao era, benefited from government subsidies and began to plant more cotton. But the decisive impetus came from large Bingtuan agricultural enterprises, which made intensive cotton cultivation their specific task. They had the capacity to carry out the large-scale irrigation measures required for this and, politically Today, around 40% of Xinjiang's cotton yield comes from Bingtuan farms.²

In the Tarim Basin, the strategically most important driver of the cotton boom of the 1990s was the *Bingtuan city of Aral*. Aral (often referred to as Alar on maps) was founded in 1957 by the Bingtuan Organization. Today, the city has a population of 235,000, 92% of whom are Han Chinese.³

¹ Cliff (2013, p. 14).

² See the information in the official Bingtuan White Paper (State Council of the People's Republic of China 2015, p. 7). See also Alpermann (2021, p. 55).

³ Xinjiang Statistical Yearbook (2019, Tab. 3-7, 3-13).



Left: Futuristic Bingtuan Museum in Aral. Right: The glittering city of Aral on the Tarim River¹

One of the tasks of the SuMaRiO project was to investigate the ecological consequences of the accelerated expansion of cotton production in the Tarim Basin in more detail and to develop scientifically sound proposals for dealing with any problems that arise. These were then to be *made available to Chinese decision-makers in order to implement sustainable land and water management in the upcoming 5-year plan*.¹² The distribution of roles was thus clearly defined: the Chinese clients were in charge, and there was no longer any question of European dominance in this international research project.

Of course, we cannot go into detail here about SuMaRiO's very detailed scientific investigations. However, some basic insights into the changed situation in the Tarim Basin since the massive promotion of cotton cultivation can already be gleaned from their findings:³

In the far west of the Tarim Basin, in the region around Kashgar and Yarkand, almost all available river water has been used for the newly created cotton fields since the 1990s. The Kashgar-Darya and Yarkand-Darya rivers originating there have since supplied hardly any water to the Tarim. Further south, the Khotan-Darya remains dry for most of the year, as Sven Hedin learned to his cost. Today, the upper reaches of the Tarim are almost entirely dependent on the inflow from the water-rich Aksu-Darya, which is fed by the glaciers and precipitation areas of the Tianshan Mountains in the north.

- As can be clearly seen on the overview map above, the largest new cultivation areas are located in regions where abundant fresh mountain water is available. They are situated on the two former tributaries, the Kashgar and Yarkand Darya, as well as in the area around the ancient river oasis of Aksu and the newly founded Bingtuan city of Aral *on the upper reaches of the Tarim*.
- The medium-term forecasts are actually relatively favorable here: as SuMaRiO research clearly shows, the glaciers in the Tianshan Mountains are gradually retreating as a result of *climate change*. This means that they are likely to release larger amounts of meltwater into the Tarim Basin in the coming years. However, it is expected that this 'water boom' will gradually come to an end from the 2030s onwards due to climate change, and that the region will then suffer increasingly from water shortages.

¹ Photos: Marga Kreckel (2018), Map 3, P1010044 and P10100058.

² Disse et al. (2016, p. 369).

³ See Rumbaer et al. (2014), Disse et al. (2016), Cyffka et al. (2021).



Simultaneous flowering ...



...and ripening of cotton



Cotton harvest ...



...and salt-encrusted field¹

- The situation is even more difficult in the middle and lower reaches of the Tarim River. This is because one of the irrigation water evaporates or seeps away, leaving behind a layer of salt on the cotton fields. Therefore, "after each season, the soil must be washed out the salts. Often there is not enough water for this – or only. Salty water is available. Cotton farmers in the middle and lower reaches in particular often only receive water that is already contaminated with salts from cotton cultivation in the upper reaches."¹ After some time, many salt-contaminated fields have to be abandoned altogether and fall back into the desert.
- The large *floodplain forests* on the middle reaches of the Tarim, which consist mainly of deep-rooted Euphrates poplars and tamarisk trees (*tugai vegetation*), are also affected by the increasing river regulation and salinization of the Tarim. As a result, the riparian forests are declining and losing their ability to retain moisture. They can therefore no longer form a protective shield against the devastating sandstorms and thus counteract desertification. One of the fundamental problems of cotton cultivation is severe *soil salinization*: a large proportion

¹ Xinhua

² Thevs (2008, p. 2).

- The SuMaRiO researchers summarize the resulting problem as follows:

*"Intensive irrigation in the upper reaches of the Tarim River means that the lower reaches regularly dry up in spring. Farmers in the lower reaches therefore use ground-water to irrigate their cotton fields or orchards. This has led to a decline in the ground-water level and an increase in salinization. This destroys the natural vegetation and promotes desertification and the spread of the Taklamakan Desert. Dust storms and shifting sand dunes cause great damage to infrastructure."*¹

- But it gets even more dramatic: the actual *lower reaches of the Tarim*, where Sven Hedin had found lush riparian forests, thick reed beds and lively fishing, gradually dried up completely in the 1960s. The main cause of this is the ever-increasing withdrawal of water in the upper and middle reaches. Since 1972, the Tarim has therefore ended in the middle of the Tarim Basin, in *the Daxihaizi Reservoir*, a huge artificial reservoir with highly saline water. Lop Nor and Kara Koschun Lake, the two former 'wandering' terminal lakes of the Tarim described by Sven Hedin, had now completely disappeared, as had Lake Taitema, which had formed later in place of Kara Koshun Lake: south of the Daxihaizi Reservoir, the lower reaches of the Tarim had completely silted up over a distance of approximately 280 km. There were no longer any floodplain forests or wetlands overgrown with dense reeds. The Taklamakan Desert, with its severe storms and high shifting dunes, began to expand further eastward and merge with the Lop Nor and Kumtag deserts located there. The danger The progressive desertification of the entire area could no longer be overlooked (see overview map above).

From the perspective of the Chinese authorities, these were very threatening prospects for the future. In the 1990s, therefore, countermeasures began to be planned to halt the progressive salinization and expanding desertification in the lower Tarim River area.

Supported by considerable funding from the World Bank, regular *ecological flooding* finally began in May 2000 after a long period of preparation in order to reverse the drying up of the lower Tarim River and Lake Taitema. To this end, large quantities of water were diverted from Lake Bosten (Uyghur: Bagrash Köli), the huge freshwater lake east of the city of Korla, into the Daxihaizi Reservoir. From there, they are regularly fed into the lower reaches of the Tarim.

As part of the SuMaRiO project, the effects of ecological flooding between 2000 and 2015 were documented in detail.¹ More recent research findings, covering the period up to 2020, are now available, showing that over the past twenty years, around *8 billion cubic meters of low-salinity water* have been transferred from Bosten Lake to the Tarim via the Daxihaizi Reservoir.²

¹ Rumbaur et al. (2014, p. 5)

² Kuba (2017, pp. 27f., 147f.).



Daxihaizi Reservoir, surrounded by a dune landscape ¹



Ecological flooding from the Daixihaizi Reservoir into the lower reaches of the Tarim River, 2019¹

¹ <http://www.ecns.cn/hd/2017/10/24/098439225fd247dba9bbfa74974686d5.jpg> (excerpt; accessed: 21 June 2021).

² Source: <http://images.china.cn/site1003/2019-08/30/076f1089-35fa-44ca-ae87-8f1648571bfd.jpeg> (accessed: 28.6.2021).

The immediate goal of ecological flooding, the revitalization of Lake Taitema and the raising of the ground-water level in the lower reaches of the Tarim River, has thus been achieved. However, it is not yet possible to assess how well the ancient Lake Bosten will cope with this large withdrawal of fresh water. There are fears that it will dry up within a few decades.

At present, however, optimism seems to prevail. People are celebrating the fact that Lake Taitema – or, more precisely, a huge flat lake landscape with large overgrown wetlands – has re-emerged north of Charklik (Ruoqiang). Euphrates poplars, long believed to be dried up, have been revived by the rise in the groundwater level, and a large-scale reforestation program has been launched.



Revitalized Lake Taitema with poplar groves in autumn atmosphere, 2020¹

In 2012, it was decided that the Daxihaizi Reservoir would only be used as a fresh water reservoir for flooding the lower reaches of the Tarim River. Since then, Daxihaizi water may no longer be used for agriculture (except in special cases); it is primarily intended for environmentally friendly purposes. This is intended to protect this ecologically sensitive part of the Tarim Basin, the vicious cycle of cotton cultivation, soil salinization, deforestation and desertification can be broken for good.

Today, it appears that this has been achieved, at least for the time being: the "ecological flooding" of the Tarim has restored the area to roughly the condition that Sven Hedin found there in 1896. Back then, Lake Lop Nor had also dried up and the lower reaches of the Tarim were full of water. It ended in Lake Kara Koshun with its huge water-rich reed beds and marshlands, which were located roughly where Lake Taitema is now. As long as Lake Bosten is able to supply the fresh water required for the flooding, this is likely to remain the case.

¹ Source: http://german.china.org.cn/txt/2019-08/30/content_75154068.htm (accessed: 28.6.2021).



Reed landscape with water birds at Lake Taitema, 2020¹

But that is where the similarity ends. The lower reaches of the Tarim are no longer one of the most remote and wildest areas of China, as they were in Sven Hedin's day. Today, the busy G 218 highway runs along the riverbed. Since 2020, there has also been an express train line constructed on concrete stilts. Yes, and they are even advertising for tourists.²

¹ Source: <http://img.scooper.news/v2-EagleNews/Eagle-NewsImage/detail/20200919/b6e69d1f916f1385.jpg> (Accessed: 28 June 2021).

² According to the German edition of China News on 13 November 2019: "Early winter is the best time to admire the Euphrates poplar forests at Lake Taitema. It is located on the lower reaches of the Tarim River. Every day, numerous tourists come here to admire the breathtaking Euphrates poplars. Since 2000, a large amount of water has been fed into this section of the river to ensure the healthy growth of the Euphrates poplars. The forest covers an area of 30,000 hectares and forms an important protective barrier against desertification and the merging of the Taklamakan and Kumtag deserts." (http://german.china.org.cn/txt/2019-11/13/content_75404110.htm, Zugriff: 28.6.2021).



National Highway N 218 and Korla-Ruoqiang railway line at Lake Taitema (under construction, opening in 2020)¹

Instead of a conclusion

Before we address the current situation in light of rapidly changing transport conditions and economic policy structural measures, it is worth noting the *dual nature of cotton cultivation* in Xinjiang – or, more precisely, its *two dual natures*:

- One is the difficult-to-bridge *conflict between ecology and economy*, which has already been mentioned: the cultivation and harvesting of cotton brings jobs and income to Xinjiang. The textile industry that has now emerged in Xinjiang also thrives on local cotton. On the other hand, the economic benefits of intensive cotton cultivation are offset by the difficult-to-solve water and environmental problems.
- The other issue is the international *controversy over human rights violations* in the cotton industry in Xinjiang, which has been raging bitterly for several years. The West (the US, the EU, including the Federal Republic of Germany) officially takes the view that the cotton harvest in Xinjiang regularly involves forced labour by Uyghur workers who are interned in re-education camps. The Chinese side rejects this harshly. Reliable data on this are lacking. The boundaries between sound reporting and bias are blurred.

¹ http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2017-11/21/136769443_15112732199401n.jpg

It quickly becomes clear to any impartial observer that this controversy is not primarily about the actual working conditions of cotton pickers in Xinjiang, about whom little is known and in whom there is little interest. Rather, it is about publicly made accusations and counter-accusations related to the global political rivalry between the People's Republic of China and the United States (and its allies). These accusations have taken on strategic importance because they can be used to justify sanctions and counter-sanctions and to create polarizing enemy stereotypes (see chapters 9 and 12 below). This is unlikely to help the Uyghurs in their difficult situation in Xinjiang, but is more likely to lead to further hardening of positions.

We do not wish to get involved in this dispute here, but only report on a personal experience – which cannot be generalized – that we had at the crowded railway station in Kashgar at the beginning of October 2018. Hundreds of young, tanned Han Chinese and Uyghurs of both sexes, including many students, were crowded together there. They told us they were on their way to pick cotton. We did not find out how much they earned doing this, nor how ‘voluntary’ their harvest work really was. In any case, they seemed to be in good spirits.



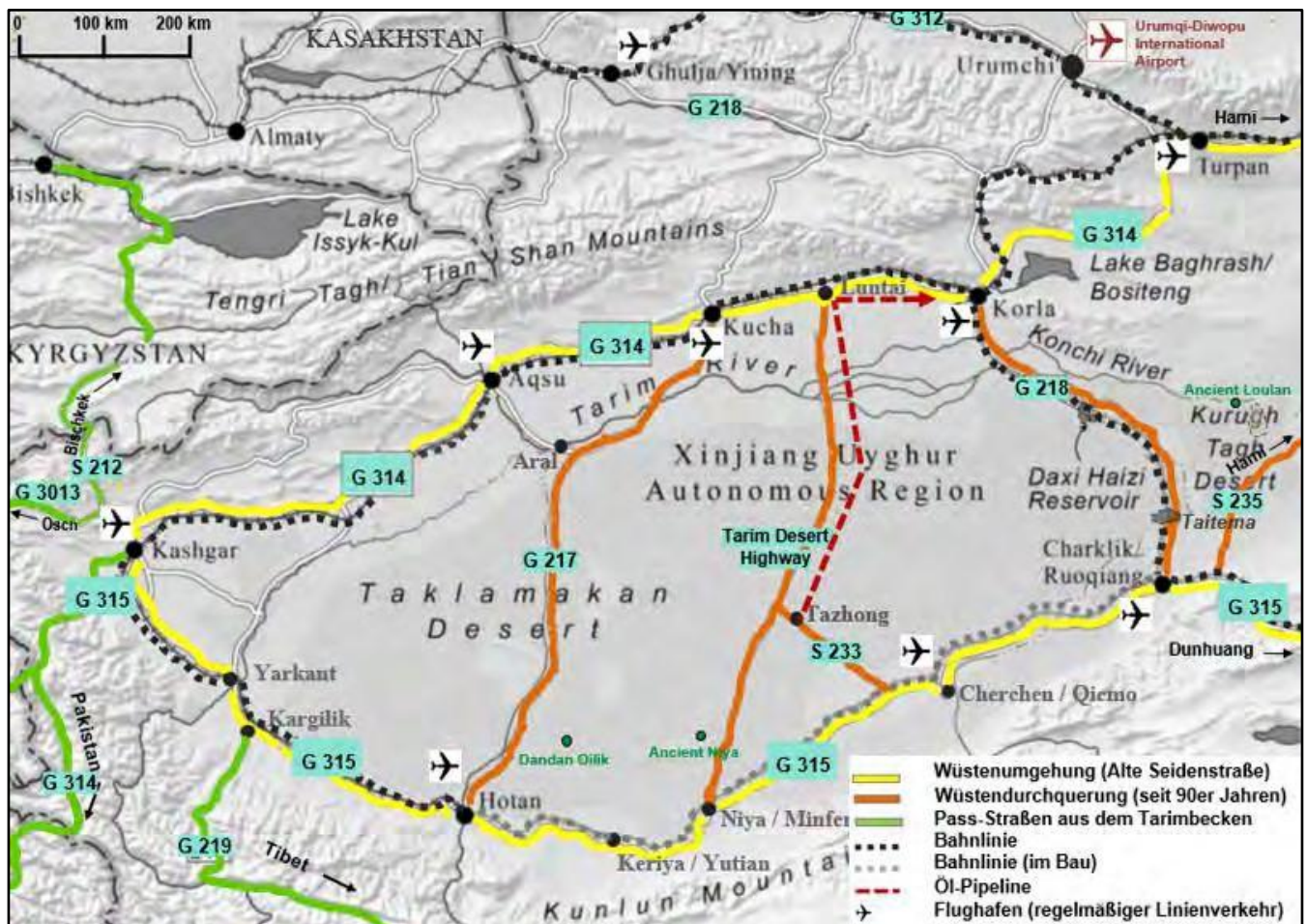
Young harvest workers in the waiting room of Kashgar railway station, October 2018¹

¹ Photo Marga Kreckel 2018, Map 5, P1010 00

Chapter Eight

Transport and economic development in the Tarim Basin

Over the centuries, the routes of the historic Silk Road have moved closer and closer to the edge of the Taklamakan Desert – to where there was sufficient water for the permanent survival of river oases. The ancient Silk Road cities of Dandan Oilik, Niya and Loulan, located further inland and long since abandoned due to water shortages, as discussed in chapters 5 and 6, are proof of this. In other words, long-distance travel on the Silk Road never *crossed* the Taklamakan Desert, but always *bypassed* it to a greater or lesser extent.



Highways, railways, air traffic and pipelines cross the Taklamakan Desert¹

Today, this rule no longer applies. Several north-south transport routes now run through the middle of the Taklamakan, as can be seen on the overview map: the northern route of the ancient Silk Road (National Highway G 314) is now directly connected to the southern route (National Highway G 315). There are currently four well-developed long-distance roads across the desert, as well as a railway line:

¹ Edited excerpt from an overview map reproduced in Joniak-Lüthi (2020, p. 5)

- the G 217 national road between Kucha and Khotan (approx. 650 km),
- the Tarim Desert Highway (called *Lunmin*) between Luntai and Niya (Minfeng), approx. 520 km long, with the S 233 junction at the Tazhong oil site to Cher-chen (Qiemo),
- National Highway G 218, which runs from Korla along the revitalized lower reaches of the Tarim River to Charklik (Ruoqiang), approx. 430 km long,
- the Korla-Charklik railway line, which runs parallel to it and opened in 2020. It will soon be extended to Khotan. To the east, it connects Xinjiang via Dunhuang and the Golmud railway junction in Qinghai Province with the Tibet Railway to Lhasa.
- Finally, there is also the approximately 700 km long regional highway S 235, which runs east of Charklik (Ruoqiang) past the dried-up Lop Nor Lake through the desert to Hami (Kumul).

Transport routes across the desert

The new roads and railway lines make it easier for people to travel. But private passenger transport is not the decisive factor here.¹ The landscape is mainly dominated by convoys of lorries and container trains, occasionally also military transports and coaches. They make it clear that southern Xinjiang is now fully integrated into China's mass consumer and industrial society and into the state and military structures of the People's Republic of China, which finances these transport routes.

- On the roads and railways, *consumer goods* are transported, ensuring that the department stores and bazaars in Xinjiang's larger cities now offer roughly the same standard of consumption as in the rest of China. Here, all Xinjiang residents who can afford it can purchase the same textiles, the same food, cosmetics and electronic products, and the same motor vehicles as everywhere else in China. Outside the cities, life is more spartan. But people hope that the new transport routes will also lead to an improvement in the supply situation here.
- On the other hand, all kinds of materials, raw materials, spare parts, machinery and semi-finished products are transported on the new transport routes. They are essential for the development of a functioning *industrial sector* in this remote region of China. Raw materials extracted in Xinjiang itself (coal, rare minerals, especially oil and natural gas) require an efficient transport infrastructure, as do agricultural products.

¹ Numerous regional airports and Urumqi International Airport are also available for affluent travellers and business travelers.

² See Joniak-Lüthi (2020, p. 6f.).

- Last, but not least, *military and administrative considerations* in China – as almost everywhere else in the world – are a powerful driving force behind the construction and maintenance of roads and railways in strategically important border areas. In view of the political conflicts that have arisen in and around Xinjiang in recent years, this aspect is particularly explosive.¹

As a foreign visitor to Xinjiang, one should be aware of these circumstances. This makes it easier to understand how the state-sponsored ecological revitalization of the dried-up lower reaches of the Tarim River has come about in recent years: As the overview map shows, the floodplain of the lower Tarim River also serves as the north-south route for National Highway G 218 and for the new railway line running from Korla to Charklik (Ruoqiang).² Both are large-scale projects that have been heavily subsidized as part of the Chinese government's 'Open Up the West' program (xibu da kaifa) launched in 2000, with funding coming from the same government source that financed the ecological flooding of the lower Tarim River.³

It had been recognized that, with the advanced drying up of the Tarim at that time, the floodplain forests that had always served as windbreaks were also disappearing. They were now being revived as a natural protective barrier against sandstorms. Their purpose is to prevent roads and railways from being repeatedly blown over or buried by shifting dunes.

In earlier times, there were footpaths and cart tracks in the floodplain forest of the lower Tarim, connecting the northern and southern edges of the Tarim Basin. At that time, a separate Turkic-speaking population, the *Lopliks*, lived there, as reported by Sven Hedin:

As early as 1934, when Hedin visited the area for the last time, there were plans to build a truly passable road here. Ethnologist Agnieszka Joniak-Lüthi reports on the first attempts to realise this:

- *"In the early 1940s, the government provided considerable funding for the construction of a road between Korla and Charklik. However, the approximately 10,000 farmers who had been mobilized for the road construction lacked suitable building materials. So*

¹ Ibid., p. 4.

² From Charklik (Ruoqiang), the new railway line continues westwards to Golmud in Gansu Province, where it connects to the Tibet Railway to Lhasa. On the other hand, an 825 km long railway line running eastwards from Charklik (Ruoqiang) to Khotan along the G 315 is nearing completion. It is scheduled to open in 2022. This will create a railway ring around the entire Tarim Basin, which also includes the particularly remote locations on the southern route of the ancient Silk Road.

(Source: www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202005/13/WS5ebb5fb9a310a8b241155576.html , accessed on 28 June 2021).

³ Becquelin (2004), Goodman (2004).

⁴ See Ståhlberg / Svanberg (2017), who report that the *Lopliks*, who lived from fishing and herding, were resettled in the 1950s.

They 'wove' a 4.5 m wide roadway from tamarisk and poplar branches, reeds and other plants. As no one took care of its maintenance, the plant mat road disintegrated within a few years. It was recycled by the locals as fuel.

- During the Cultural Revolution, between 1966 and 1976, a new attempt was made. It was decided to *"build parts of the road from bricks that could be produced locally could be produced locally. Thousands of kilns were hastily erected. Thousands of trees growing on the lower reaches of the Tarim.* The environmental consequences were disastrous. In addition, the road surface was not able to withstand truck traffic. The bricks were too porous and the road soon fell into disrepair again.'
- In the 1980s, the road was upgraded to National Highway G 218. It was given a simple asphalt surface. However, this too was only able to withstand the stresses of weather and traffic for a short time, and the road soon reverted to its original state as a sand and gravel track. A traveler who often used this road in the 1990s reports:

*'When the bus from Charklik arrived in Korla, the people and their belongings were completely covered in dust. You couldn't see out of the bus windows. They were also covered in dust, and the passengers looked as if they were made of dust themselves'*¹

Today, it is hoped that these conditions are finally a thing of the past. Above all, it has become clear that it is not enough to build roads and railways to a high technical standard. Given the extreme climate and high traffic volumes, continuous (and costly) maintenance measures are essential if the new transport routes are not to suffer the same sad fate as their predecessors.

The ecological floods described in the previous chapter, which have led to the revitalization of the riparian forests in the lower reaches of the Tarim River, also serve this purpose. They act as natural protection against sandstorms and shifting dunes for the newly built transport routes.



National Road G 218 in the riparian forests of the lower Tarim River, 2019¹

On other desert roads that cannot be protected by riparian forests, a 'green wall' of Euphrates poplars and tamarisk trees has been planted. With their deep roots, they can reach the relatively shallow water table. This has been done primarily on *the Tarim Desert Highway*, which runs through the middle of the seemingly completely dry desert.

¹ Quotes from Joniak-Lüthi (2020, pp. 5-7), own free translation.

² Source: <http://german.cri.cn/fotos/alle/3465/20191112/380028.html> (excerpt, accessed on 30 June



Tarim Desert Highway protected by 'Green Wall', Reed straw delivered to the roadside for safety work

1 http://en.people.cn/NMediaFile/2020/0630/FOREIGN202006301027000216920_365611.png, and:
<http://german.beijingreview.com.cn/Bilder/201806/W020180621600713834490.jpg> (accessed: 30 June



Snapshots of the never-ending maintenance work on the G 217 desert road¹

¹ Photos: Marga Kreckel.2018, Map 4, P1010080, P1010083, P1010101, P10100107.

The national roads G 314 and G 315, which do not run through the middle of the desert but follow the routes of the ancient Silk Road at the edge of the desert, bypass the shifting dunes of the Taklamakan. However, they are not spared from wind drifts. Mobile protective fences and other safety measures are used to combat them. This can be clearly seen in the evening photo taken from the train of the G 314 national road between Kashgar and Aksu. The impressive backdrop of the multicolored, treeless foothills of the Tianshan Mountains is also impressive.



Windbreak on the G 314 and the parallel Kashgar-Aksu railway line¹

¹ Photo: Marga Kreckel, October 2018, Map 5, P1010057.

Integration into the transport network of China's New Silk Road

The improvement in Xinjiang's transport infrastructure since the 1990s, especially since the launch of the Chinese government's 'Open Up the West' program in 2000, has been enormous. Since then, Xinjiang has left behind its marginal existence as a remote border province. and has moved closer to the centre of political attention in the People's Republic of China.¹

A key date in this regard is 7 September 2013, when President Xi Jinping announced the official launch of China's 'New Silk Road Initiative' in the Kazakh capital Astana. The initiative focused in particular on the establishment of a "Eurasian transport and trade belt" stretching from China through Central Asia to Western Europe. In this concept of the New Silk Road, Xinjiang plays a particularly key role as *China's bridgehead and bottleneck to the West*.

This explains the high expenditure on transport infrastructure in Xinjiang, especially in *northern Xinjiang* with its particularly favorable transport links. There are two easily passable border crossings for road and rail connections from China to the Eurasian transport corridor of the New Silk Road: the *Dzungarian Gate* (Alatau Pass, Chinese: Alashankou) and the *Yili Valley near Korgas*. These are currently the only two crossings from Xinjiang to the West that are truly suitable for mass transport. They are excellently developed and are heavily used by road and rail freight transport. This is also where the 'Yuxinou' container train, which has been running between Chongqing and Duisburg since 2011, crosses the Chinese border (see below, Chapter 14).

As for *southern Xinjiang*, the traditional main transit route of the ancient Silk Road, the same extremely high mountain passes still have to be crossed as in earlier times. They are snowed in for months and impassable. The overall geographical situation here therefore seems to argue against the creation of efficient international transport routes (see overview map above).

Despite all the transport difficulties, the city *of Kashgar*, located on the western edge of the Tarim Basin, has served as a trading hub on the historic Silk Road to Central Asia for many centuries. This did not change even after Xinjiang was finally incorporated into the Chinese Empire in the 18th century. At that time, Kashgar was granted the imperial privilege of being the only place in western China allowed to trade regularly with foreign merchants. The Kashgar bazaar has remained a busy trading centre of cross-border importance to this day.

Efforts are being made to revive this tradition under today's changed transport conditions. The mountain passes leading out of Kashgar are now well developed and generally suitable for lorry traffic. However, the roads are often so narrow and winding that in places they give the impression of small provincial roads.

¹ See Rippa (2017, 2020).

² Mühlhahn (2021, p. 104).



Heavy goods carrier on the Karakorum Highway, southwest of Kashgar¹

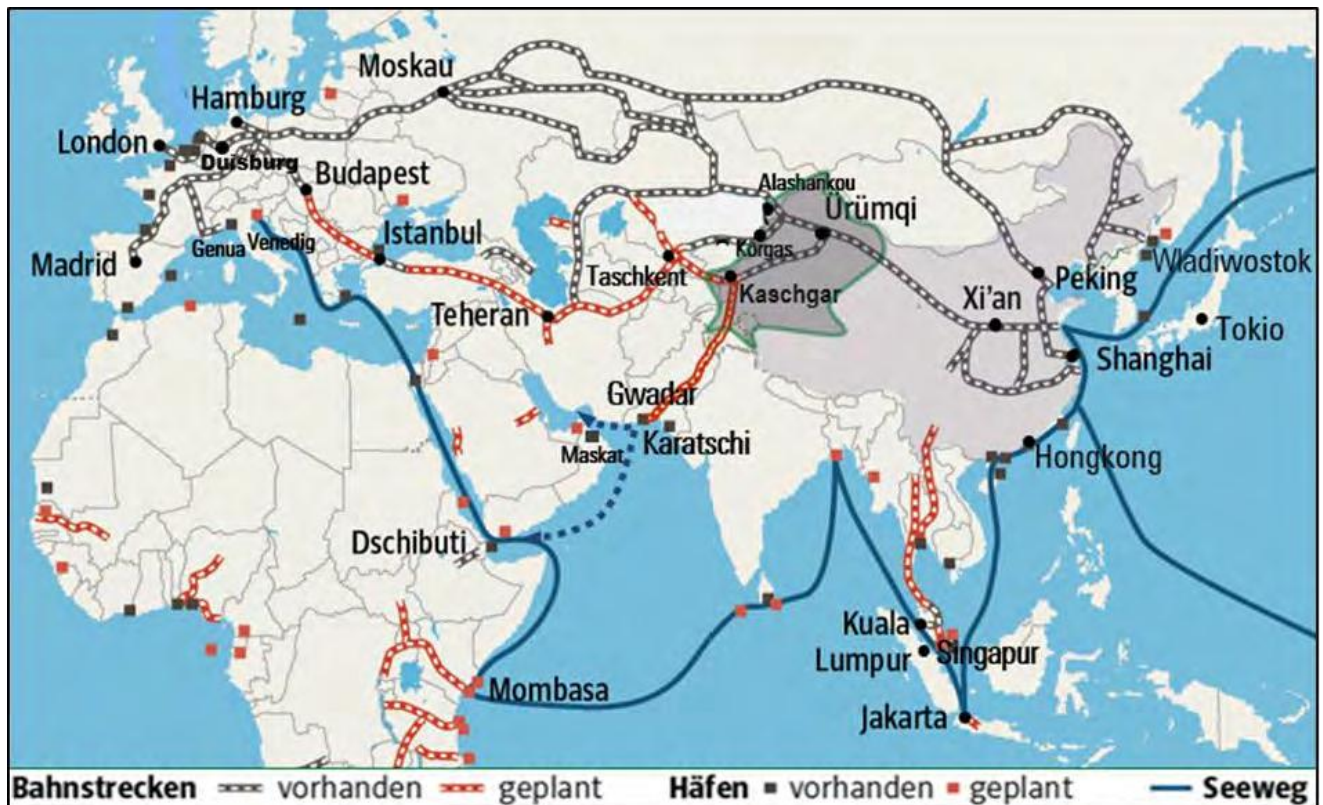
This means that the cross-border transport links in southern Xinjiang have so far lacked the high transport capacity and, above all, the year-round reliability that is expected of international long-distance trade routes:

- From Kashgar, the G 314 national road continues southwards as part of the *Karakorum Highway* towards Pakistan. The route runs over the 4,655-metre-high *Kunjerab Pass*, which suffers from extreme weather conditions and landslides, to northern Pakistan and from there on to Gwadar on the Arabian Sea (see overview map above, p. 215).
- From Kashgar to the west, the G 3013 national road leads to the border town of *Irkeshtam* and from there via the *Pamir Highway* to the 3,615-metre-high *Taldyk Pass*, which is often closed. From there you can reach Osh in the Kyrgyz Ferghana Valley, with connections to the Uzbek road and rail network.
- From Kashgar, there is also the provincial road S 212 over the 3,752-metre-high *Torugart Pass* in the Tianshan Mountains, which is often impassable in winter. This connection leads directly to the north of the Republic of Kyrgyzstan with its capital Bishkek.
- Finally, since 1957, there has been the G 219 national road, which leads from Yarkand via the *Mazar Pass* to Tibet and India, which is almost 5,000 meters high and only open for a few months of the year.

¹ Photo Marga Kreckel 2018, Map 4, P 1010 046.

However, the ambition of Chinese engineers, who are experts in large-scale technical projects, goes further. A reliable *train connection from Kashgar to the Kyrgyz Ferghana Valley* with a connection to the international rail network in Uzbekistan is currently being planned.¹

The construction of a second, technically even more challenging *railway line from Kashgar to Pakistan* is also planned. The route is to run through the impassable Karakoram high mountains to the Pakistani capital Islamabad and on to the Pakistani deep-sea port of *Gwadar* on the Arabian Sea, which has been newly expanded with Chinese loans.²



Xinjiang's strategic location in the global network of China's New Silk Road³

The train connection from Kashgar via Islamabad to Gwadar is part of the *China-Pakistan Economic Corridor initiative (CPEC)* agreed in 2015.⁴ It is to be completed by 2030 with Chinese loans. The railway line requires a far-reaching tunnelling through the mighty Karakorum Mountains, part of the Himalayan massif, an extremely ambitious project.

¹ However, the route for this rail link is still the subject of heated debate between the Kyrgyz and Chinese sides. See: <https://www.thethirdpole.net/en/regional-cooperation/china-kyrgyzstan-uzbekistan-railway-remains-uncertain/> (accessed on 21 November 2021).

² The Pakistani port city of Gwadar belonged to the Arab Sultanate of Oman until 1958. It is only 233 nautical miles from the Omani capital Muscat on the Arabian shore of the Persian Gulf (<https://www.entfernungsrechner.net/de/distance/city/287286/city/1177446>).

³ From: Süddeutsche Zeitung, 26 April 2019 (edited excerpt; <https://www.sueddeutsche.de/politik/china-seidenstrasse-handel-1.4422066>).

⁴ See Wagner (2018).

A high-performance railway line from Xinjiang to Pakistan would significantly shorten the trade route from China to the Persian Gulf, the Suez Canal and East Africa. It would also enable Chinese foreign trade to avoid the geopolitically sensitive sea route around Singapore through the Strait of Malacca.

The complex project would once again greatly enhance the strategic value of Xinjiang, especially the predominantly Uyghur southern Xinjiang. However, its realization is still uncertain.¹



Successful deep drilling in the Fuman oil field near Tazhong in the Taklamakan, 2021²

Another reason for the intensive development of transport infrastructure in Xinjiang is its large *oil and natural gas reserves*. Xinjiang 'holds approximately 30% of China's oil reserves and 34% of its gas reserves.'³ In 2019, 'Xinjiang contributed 14.4 per cent to China's oil production and 19.4 per cent to national natural gas production.'⁴ Further increases are conceivable.

The traditional oil location in Xinjiang has always been the city of Karamay, located in the north of the country. However, since the late 1980s, large oil and natural gas reserves have been discovered in the south, in the Taklamakan Desert. This is where *Tazhong* was established, an artificial oil town with approx. 300 inhabitants in the middle of the desert. It was not until the summer of 2021 that a new huge oil and natural gas discovery was reported in the Fuman oil field in the Tazhong area.⁴

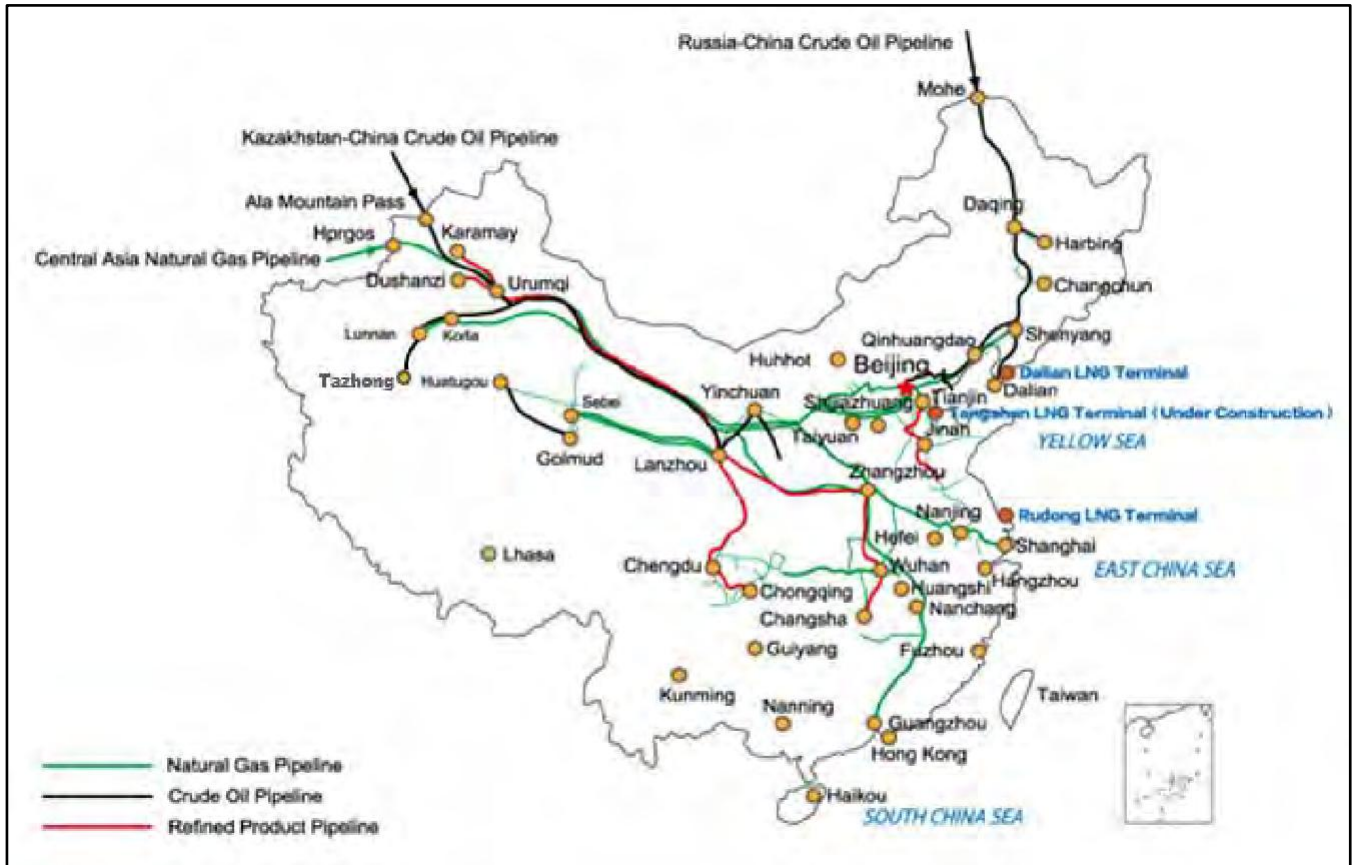
¹ See the highly skeptical studies by Garlick (2018) and Rippa (2020).

² Source: <https://video.cgtn.com/news/2021-06-20/China-discovers-900m-tonne-oil-and-gas-field-in-Xinjiang-11fqMREmf2E/vi-deo/2c3cdf6ea7164c1fb46f099dffd0d5e3/2c3cdf6ea7164c1fb46f099dffd0d5e3.jpeg> (excerpt, accessed: 30 June 2021).

³ Shi-Kupfer (2020, p. 6).

⁴ Alpermann (2021, p. 65).

The large oil and natural gas deposits discovered near the *Tazhong* site¹ were one of the main reasons for building the Tarim Desert Highway (1993-1995) right through the middle of the desert. Since 1996, a 300 km long oil pipeline has also run parallel to this, from Tazhong to Lunan² along the G 314 national road. From there, the crude oil from Tazhong is fed into China's international pipeline network via Korla and Urumqi.³



PetroChina Company: The most important oil and gas pipelines in Xinjiang and China (2011)⁴

As this chapter has shown, there are manifold economic, domestic and foreign policy reasons for the Chinese state and party leadership to develop Xinjiang, and especially the Tarim Basin, in terms of transport infrastructure. Of particular importance here is the fact that China, an economic giant with a voracious appetite for fuel, is increasingly dependent on oil and gas imports from abroad. That is why the large oil and natural gas discoveries in Xinjiang, China, are of particular interest. The operating company, PetroChina Company, a subsidiary of the state-owned China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC), can largely determine its purchase price itself, in line with Chinese state interests and independently of world market development.

¹ <https://www.hydrocarbons-technology.com/news/cnpc-makes-one-billion-tonne-oil-and-gas-field-discovery-in-tarim-basin/> (accessed: 30 June 2021).

² Lunan is a district of the large municipality of Luntai.

³ Cappelletti (2020, p. 62f.).

⁴ china.com.cn/ptr/trqygd/201404/40bc84a265034014aa80f57c6f2e316c/images/a2f9e96f7d3b4f678cba3066bfaf60be.jpg (accessed 30 June 2021, with Tazhong-Luntai pipeline inserted).

Chapter Nine

Economic modernization, uneven development and 'dual society'

Supporters and critics of China's Xinjiang policy agree on one point: Since Deng Xiaoping came to power after the end of the Cultural Revolution, billions of yuan from the Chinese state budget have been flowing into Xinjiang every year in the form of direct or indirect *subsidies*.¹ This has been particularly the case since 2000, when the Chinese government launched its "Open Up the West" campaign (*xibu da kaifa*).² The aim is to modernize the economically underdeveloped province and raise the standard of living of the population. The main goal is to achieve the full integration of Xinjiang into the People's Republic of China. The extent to which this has been successful remains controversial.

However, it is undisputed that Xinjiang has achieved *high economic growth* in recent decades and that the average net per capita income of the population has increased significantly.³ It now stands at around 75% of the income level of China as a whole and around 59% of that of the particularly prosperous eastern part of China.⁴

Since the end of the Mao era, the People's Republic of China has rapidly transformed itself from a poor country into a prosperous society, albeit with stark differences between east and west and between urban and rural areas, and with growing social inequality. Even though China continues to be ruled by the Communist Party, its economy has taken on distinctly capitalist traits – in line with the famous saying of the great economic reformer Deng Xiaoping, who advised his citizens to '*get rich*'. Since then (from 1979 to 2021), the disposable net per capita income of private households throughout China has risen by an incredible 8.2% per year on average⁵ – a growth rate that was only approximately achieved in the Federal Republic of Germany during the so-called 'economic miracle' in the post-war period.

¹ The exact amount of funds is difficult to quantify; see Wiemer (2004, pp. 164, 175ff.), Cappelletti (2020, pp. 49ff., 79ff.). A publication by the Chinese Embassy in Germany states: "From 2014 to 2019, *central government transfer payments* to Xinjiang rose from 263.69 billion yuan to 422.48 billion yuan, representing an average annual growth rate of 10.4 per cent and providing Xinjiang with a total of more than 2 trillion yuan in support over six years (<http://de.china-embassy.org/det/zt/7c/P020201111000629620602.pdf>, S. 4).

² Bellér-Hann (2012, p. 207), Alpermann (2021, p. 61f.).

³ Cappelletti (2020, p. 55, 131f.).

⁴ For the year 2019, calculated according to Xinjiang Statistical Yearbook 2020 (Table 10-3) and China Statistical Yearbook 2020, Tables 6-1 and 6-3.

⁵ China Statistical Yearbook 2022, Table 1-2 (<http://www.stats.gov.cn/sj/ndsj/2022/indexeh.htm>).



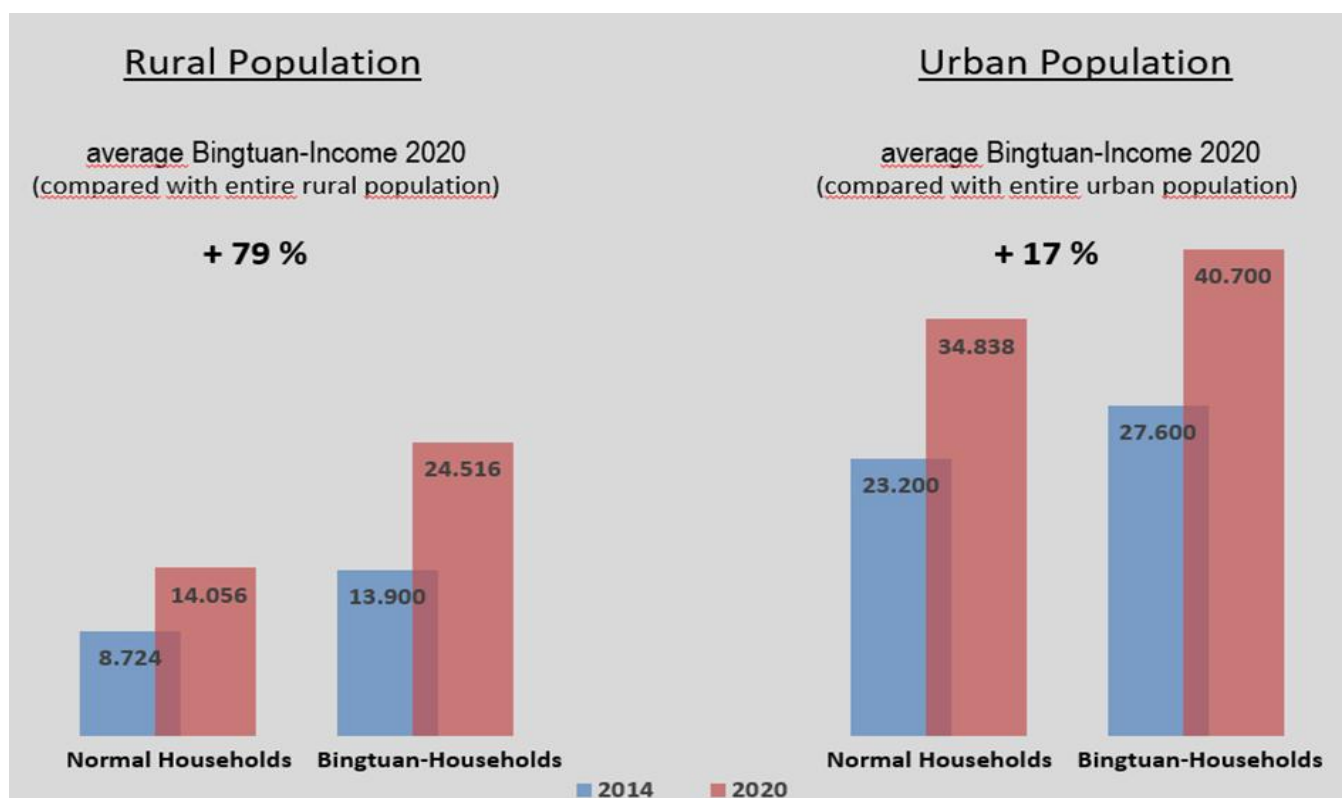
Uneven development between urban and rural areas, east and west in China, as of 2016¹

China's new prosperity has also had an impact on Xinjiang, albeit at a considerable distance from the more affluent east of the country. The latter is already on the way from an industrial to a service-based society. This is not the case in Xinjiang, which is economically much weaker and climatically more difficult due to its desert, steppe and high mountain terrain. The Chinese 'economic miracle' has not yet had its full effect here. Above all, it has not affected all the inhabitants of Xinjiang to the same extent. Since the end of the egalitarian communism phase after 1978, *income disparities* among the population have increased sharply there, as they have throughout China.

As everywhere else in China, there are significantly better-off and recognizably poorer population groups in Xinjiang, but this is particularly pronounced in Xinjiang. Statistically, this can be seen above all in terms of *place of residence*: as the following graph shows, the inhabitants of Xinjiang's cities now have an *average per capita income* that is approximately *two and a half times higher* than that of residents registered in rural communities. The income situation is also significantly better for the approximately 3 million predominantly Han Chinese Bingtuan members in urban and rural areas, who were already mentioned in Chapter 7.²

¹ Source: Federal Agency for Civic Education (https://www.bpb.de/cache/images/6/259646-st-galerie_gross.jpg?554A6, accessed on 30 June 2021).

² See also Chapter 11, where Bingtuan is discussed in more detail in the section on Shihezi.



Average annual net per capita income in Xinjiang, 2014 and 2020 (in yuan)¹

The cities in Xinjiang, where the better-paid jobs in the industrial and service sectors are, have grown steadily in recent decades:

- In 2000, according to official figures, 33.8% of the population in Xinjiang lived in cities and 66.2% in rural communities.
- In 2020, just twenty years later, the ratio has almost reversed in favor of the urban population, with 56.5% now living in cities and only 43.5% in rural areas.²

In other words, *the modernization process in Xinjiang was primarily a process of urbanization*. For ecological reasons, this is not an entirely unproblematic process in this arid region, as we have seen in the previous chapters.

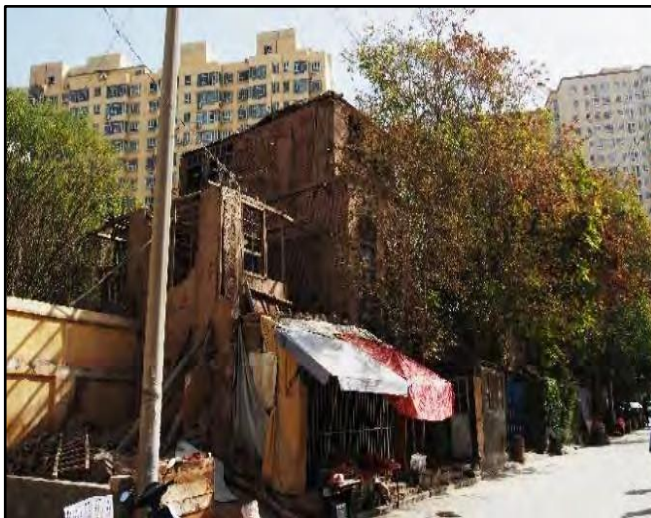
But the rapid urbanization of Xinjiang is not only associated with a pronounced urban-rural divide. Prosperity is also unevenly distributed within the cities themselves, as can be seen from the considerable *income differences among urban residents*.

¹ Sources, for 2014: State Council (2020, p. 9f.), for 2020: Alpermann (2021, p.76). The income data are based on an average exchange rate between Yen and Euro of 1:7.5, the average net per capita income for a typical rural resident in 2020 was €1,875, while for a typical urban resident it was €4,780. The predominantly Han Chinese Bingtuan members occupy a special position, with average incomes of approximately €2,370 in rural areas and €5,425 in urban areas.

By way of comparison, in Germany in 2018, the average 'disposable per capita income of private households' was €23,295 in 2018, with the district of Starnberg at the top of the list (€34,987) and our own hometown of Halle an der Saale (€17,218) in third-last place (<https://www.wsi.de/de/einkommen-14582.htm>).

² Data according to Xinjiang Statistical Yearbook 2020, Table 3-1, and according to the press release of the Statistics Bureau of Xinjiang dated 16 June 2021 (<https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/ce/cgtrt/eng/news/t1884310.htm>).

Official statistics distinguish between nine income levels for cities in Xinjiang – from the lowest level of ‘poor’ households with an average annual per capita income of 2,745 yuan (approx. 365 euros) to ‘middle income’ (32,467 yuan, approx. 4,330 euros) up to the ninth level of the ‘highest income’ (102,782 yuan, approx. 13,700 euros). However, the official statistics published by the Bureau of Statistics do not provide any figures on how many urban private households are in each income bracket.¹ We must therefore content ourselves with the general observation that in the cities of Xinjiang – as almost everywhere else in the world – there are considerable differences between citizens in terms of their financial living conditions. A mere glance at the photos below confirms this.



Kashgar: Coexistence of high and modest living standards²

¹ Xinjiang Statistical Yearbook 2020, Table 10-4.

² Photos Marga Kreckel 2018, Map 4, P1010295, P1010276 and P1010287.

In Kashgar, for example, the luxurious main shopping street, *Renmin Lu West*, is lined with chic apartment buildings offering a high standard of living. Just one street away, however, the living conditions are poor, with simple shops and dilapidated buildings. Everywhere in Kashgar, the great inequality in the standard of living of the population is visible, as are the authorities' strenuous efforts to renovate the city. We will discuss the problems associated with this in more detail in Chapter 11.

Regardless of the continuing inequality in living standards, however, the level of prosperity and provision has risen rapidly and noticeably for *all* population groups in Xinjiang – including poorer urban dwellers and the rural population. There has been something of an '*elevator effect*', as sociologist Ulrich Beck once called it: For (almost) all citizens of Xinjiang, whether rich or poor, material living conditions and consumption opportunities have changed for the better in just a few years. In this respect, they have all moved "one floor up" in terms of their standard of living. This effect is already evident on the streets: not only is the number of private cars increasing steadily, but the bicycles that used to be ubiquitous as a means of transport have almost completely disappeared. Battery-powered motor scooters have taken their place. Sixty-one per cent of households in Xinjiang now own such a vehicle, compared to only 40 per cent in 2016. In rural areas, almost all households (97 per cent, according to official figures) now own a motor scooter.²



Sleek battery-powered scooters everywhere – carrying a wide variety of loads³

The many less affluent citizens of Xinjiang in particular can therefore feel the immediate effects of their improved standard of living. This may make it easier for them to accept the existing major inequalities between them and the large urban-rural divide. In any case, this is the hope of the Chinese state and party leadership. For them, the general increase in prosperity is the path to the integration of all citizens into

¹ According to government statistics, 19.9% of private households in Xinjiang owned a motor vehicle in 2015, compared to 31.2% in 2019 (22.8% in rural areas). Source: China Statistical Yearbook 2016, Table 6-22; Xinjiang Statistical Yearbook 2020, Table 10-18.

² Source: Xinjiang Statistical Yearbook 2017 and 2020, Table 10-18 in each case.

³ Photos Marga Kreckel 2018 (Map 4, P1010380; Map 3, P1010341).

Chinese society.¹ In the case of Xinjiang, however, this has only been partially successful. As is well known, there has been increased political and social tensions and state disciplinary measures in recent years, which have particularly affected the Uyghur population group.

In southern Xinjiang, apart from the state-run 'Production and Construction Corps' (Bingtuan), the rural population consists almost exclusively of Uyghurs. The Han Chinese population is concentrated in the larger cities. Nevertheless, the Uyghurs continue to be in the clear majority there as well.² (Exceptions to this are the Bingtuan-dominated cities of Aral and Korla³, as well as Hami and Kumul, located far to the east.⁴

However, it should be noted that the statistically recorded urban population⁵ throughout Xinjiang has almost doubled since the turn of the millennium. In contrast, the number of citizens registered as rural residents has remained virtually constant.⁶ This means that cities in Xinjiang have grown very rapidly over the last twenty years. However, there has been *no dramatic exodus from the countryside to the cities*, nor has there been the emergence of huge urban slums, as is common in many developing countries. Even in southern Xinjiang, there is no evidence of any significant rural-urban migration. Rather, the growth of cities here is also predominantly due to the *immigration of Han Chinese*, most of whom come from more densely populated Chinese regions.

Put simply, this means that the cities in Xinjiang are becoming increasingly Chinese (see below, chapter 11), while the Uyghur rural population in the south remains more or less among themselves. Only relatively few Uyghurs who grew up in the countryside are moving to the city.⁸

¹ See the latest white papers published by the Chinese government (State Council 2020 and 2021a, 2021b).

² See Xinjiang Statistical Yearbook 2020, Table 3-7.

³ See Cliff (2013, 2016) on the oil and Bingtuan city of Korla.

⁴ See Bellér-Hann (2012) on the special situation of Hami/Kumul.

⁵ The distinction between rural and urban populations used in official statistics is based on China's strict registration system (*hukou system*), which has been in place since 1958. The hukou system assigns all Chinese citizens a permanent residence from birth, that of their mother. This means that people are classified as either urban or rural residents, which entails different rights and obligations. The hukou status acquired at birth is in principle valid for life, regardless of where people actually live. Originally, the hukou system served to prevent uncontrolled rural exodus and slum formation in large cities. In reality, however, there have always been many migrant workers in China, even though this was long considered illegal. The China Statistical Yearbook 2020 (Table 2-3) refers to a 'migrant population' in China of 236 million people in 2019. Since 2014, however, there has been a simplified option to apply for the hukou of one's current place of residence or at least to obtain a temporary right of residence there. See Chan (2019) for more on this.

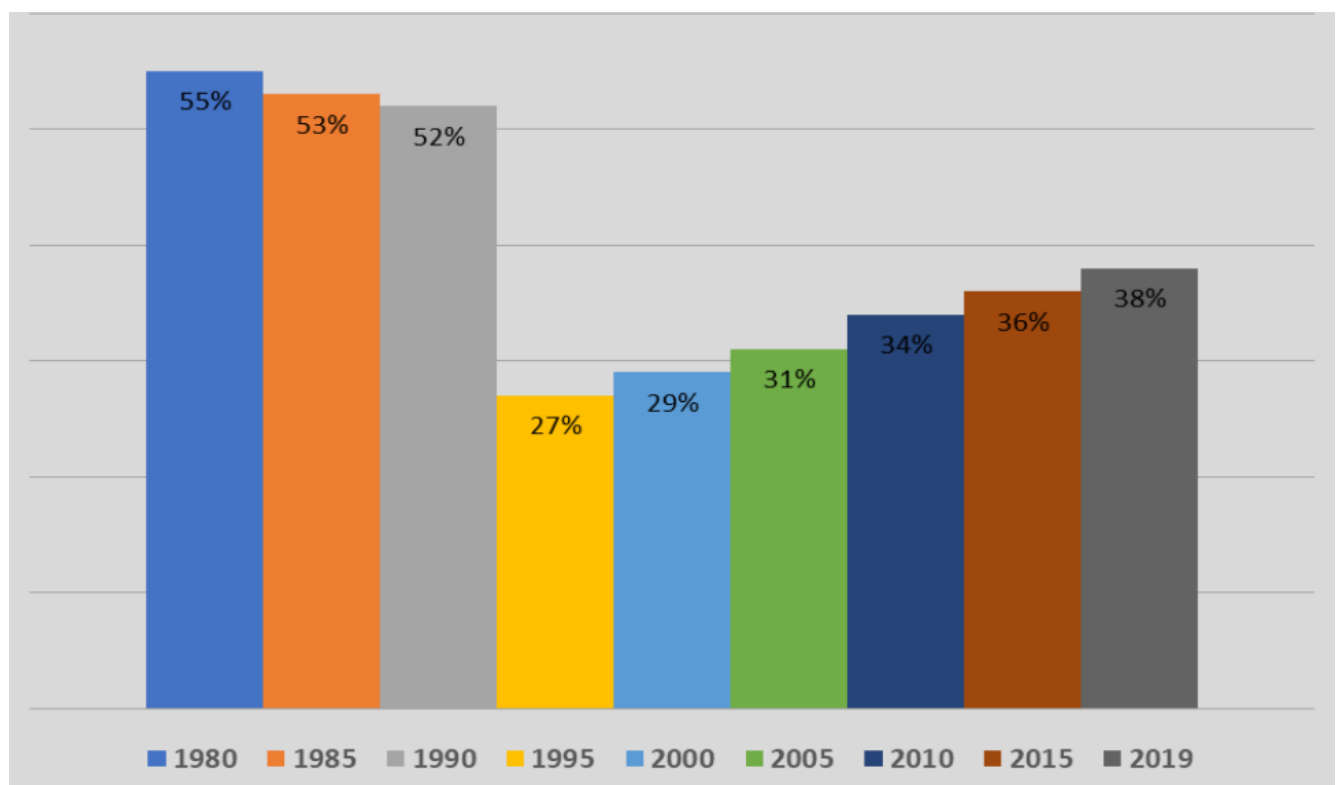
⁶ Official statistics show that between 2000 and 2019, there were consistently around 12.5 million rural residents in Xinjiang, while the number of people counted as urban residents rose sharply from 6.2 million to 13.1 million (Xinjiang Statistical Yearbook 2020, Table 3-1). See Cappelletti (2020, p. 131f.).

⁷ According to the latest census data, the Han population in Xinjiang increased by 2.17 million between 2010 and 2020, of which 1.95 million (approx. 90%) migrated from other provinces in China (Main Data of Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region from the Seventh National Population Census, dated 21 June 2021, <https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/ce/cgtrt/eng/news/t1884310.htm>). See also Joniak-Lüthi (2013), who particularly emphasizes the heterogeneous regional origins and diverse biographies of the Han Chinese living in Xinjiang.

⁸ See Alpermann (2021, p. 179).

The Chinese state and party leadership has always welcomed and promoted the *ongoing Sinicization of Xinjiang's cities*. It also supports the associated accelerated economic development of the cities, where more and more skilled and well-paid jobs have been created in the industrial and service sectors. However, they have also recognized that the rural population, especially in southern Xinjiang, is severely affected by underemployment and, in some cases, extreme poverty.

As the following graph shows, the income gap between the rural population and urban residents in Xinjiang suddenly widened significantly after 1990. In the 1980s, it was still around 50%, which is a common figure in other countries.¹ In 1995, just five years later, the statistically determined average income of the rural population was only 27% of the income of urban dwellers – a dramatic decline. The rural areas inhabited by Uyghurs in the south-west of the Tarim Basin and in the Turfan Depression were the most severely affected. They fell further and further behind.²



*Net income disparities between urban and rural populations in Xinjiang, 1980-2019.
Rural incomes shown as percentages of urban net incomes³*

¹ See, for example, the findings of the Munich-based Ifo-Institute for 1994-2016 (https://www.ifo.de/DocDL/sd-2019-16-fuest-immel-re-gionale-ungleichheit-2019-08-22_1.pdf).

² Cao (2010, p. 971f.).

³ Average annual net household income per capita in Xinjiang. (Calculated according to data from the Xinjiang Statistical Yearbook 2020, Tables 10-9 and 10-10)..

The figure above shows the ratio of urban to rural household net incomes. In 1980, for example, the average net income of rural residents was 55% that of urban residents. In 1995 it was only 27%, a dramatic decline. The data is based on a household sample that includes *all* registered residents of Xinjiang – including Bingtuan members. In the following period from 2000 to 2019, the statistical income gap between the rural and urban populations in Xinjiang narrowed somewhat, as the graph shows. However, the gap remains considerable. Nevertheless, government measures appear to have had a recognizable impact in Xinjiang in recent years.

They have led to a certain easing of the economic situation of the rural population. In southern Xinjiang, however, this has not really led to a relaxation of tensions between the Uyghur and Han Chinese populations. Instead, it has resulted in greater alienation and isolation of large sections of the Uyghur population living there:

- On the one hand, there are *improving material living conditions, and the educational and vocational level* of the younger generation is rising in southern Xinjiang. The Chinese party and state leadership has combined several objectives in its Xinjiang policy of combating poverty and unemployment among the Uyghur rural population.
- On the other hand, the government is also striving to systematically *promote the assimilation* of the Uyghurs (and other Turkic-speaking minorities) into Chinese society. For this reason, learning the *Chinese language and script* is becoming an urgent duty for everyone, including the Uyghurs (see Chapter 10 below).
- At the same time, however, Chinese policy in Xinjiang is always concerned with *combating the ‘three evils’ of separatism, terrorism and religious fundamentalism*. According to the assessment of the Chinese state and party leadership, parts of the Uyghur population are susceptible to this. As evidence, they cite the series of bloody attacks and acts of violence committed by Uyghurs between 2009 and 2015, which have since led to strict police control throughout Xinjiang (see below, Chapter 11).
- These different objectives converge in the concept of collective *‘re-education’* practiced in Xinjiang since 2014, which primarily affects Uyghurs. The rigorous re-education and disciplinary measures implemented in Xinjiang have become a real bone of contention between the Chinese government and the politicians of numerous Western countries.

In its official white paper ‘Employment and Labour Rights in Xinjiang’ from 2020, the Chinese government explains its actions as follows:

‘Four prefectures in southern Xinjiang (Khotan, Kashgar, Aksu and Kizilsu Kirgiz) ... are regions of extreme poverty. In addition, terrorists, separatists and religious extremists have long preached there that ... the teachings of religion are above the laws of the state. They have incited the population against learning the standard Chinese language and script, against modern science and vocational training ... Because of these teachings, some people there have outdated ideas. They suffer from their lack of education, poor employment opportunities and low incomes. (...) Between 2014 and 2019, Xinjiang provided training for an average of 1.29 million urban and rural workers, including 451,400 in southern Xinjiang.’¹

¹ State Council (2020, p. 5, p. 9). See also State Council (2019a, 2019b, 2019c, 2020, 2021b) and Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (2017).

Another official government text, originating from the Chinese Embassy in Berlin, goes into more detail about the ‘*vocational training centers*’ that exist in Xinjiang. They were established between 2014 and 2019 and served the purposes of ‘systematic education and training’ as well as ‘preventive counter-terrorism and deradicalization’

‘The vocational training centers offered a tailor-made teaching program that primarily included language courses, legal knowledge and vocational skills. The deradicalization course was integrated into the entire process of general and vocational education. The centers strictly implemented the principles of respect for human rights. (...).

The centers operated a boarding school management system that allowed participants to go home regularly and apply for leave to attend to private matters. The aim was not to punish people, but to help them reintegrate into society. They were given the opportunity to contribute to the support of their families. All participants in the centers have now graduated.

The vocational training centers have largely succeeded in eradicating terrorism and religious extremism in Xinjiang. Through education, the vast majority of participants have been able to recognize the folly and harm of terrorism and religious extremism and distance themselves from it. Graduates of the centers are now able to earn a living as workers, cooks, carers, artists, teachers or entrepreneurs. Many people in Xinjiang are convinced that without vocational training centers, there would be little peace and tranquility in their homeland today.’¹

The text therefore explicitly rejects the notion that the vocational training centers are ‘internment camps’ and instead emphasizes its own political credo: ‘*people from different ethnic groups in finding work is something completely different from ‘forced labour’.*’²

The statement from the Chinese Embassy thus appears to be part of China’s counter-offensive against the allegations that have been made since around 2017 by Western media and governments, NGOs and Uyghur exile organizations, as well as by independent academics.

The Chinese government is accused by Western countries of serious human rights violations and the forced internment of large sections of the Uyghur population. In addition, the linguistic and cultural identity of the Uyghurs is said to be under threat and the religious practices of Uyghur Muslims are allegedly being impeded. Reports of the existence of closed re-education camps in Xinjiang have caused a great stir. There, citizens ‘at risk of terrorism’, predominantly Uyghur men, are reportedly detained, harassed and forced into labour. As political rivalry between the world powers China and the USA has intensified, the Chinese government has even been accused of ‘genocide’ against the Uyghurs.³

Meanwhile, detailed accounts and documentation of Chinese control and disciplinary measures in Xinjiang are available in the *Western media*, on which Western criticism of Chinese policy in Xinjiang is based. They are easily accessible in the press and on the internet.⁴

¹ Chinese Embassy in Germany (2020b, p. 9). The text quoted here is written in the past tense, which could lead one to conclude that the vocational training centers no longer exist. It is difficult to discern what really is the case.

² See the balanced assessments by Theo Sommer (2021) and Björn Alpermann (2021).

³ Smith Finley (2019) provides a comprehensive overview of the state anti-terrorism, re-education and control measures in Xinjiang that have become known outside China to date.

⁴ See also Millward (2018, 2019), Zenz (2019), Sommer (2020), p. 46ff.), Alpermann (2021) and the so-called *Xinjiang Papers*, which were published by the New York Times in November 2019 (file:///C:/0%20-%20X%20i%20n%20j%20i%20a%20n%20g%20etc /0-RepressionXinjiang/NYT%202019-%20Leaked%20Fi-les.html), the *Newlines Institute* dossier from March 2021 (<https://newlinesinstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/Chinas-Breaches-of-the-GC.pdf>) and the Xinjiang Police Files from May 2022 (Zenz 2022).

Readers of this book who are able to recognize propaganda and wish to form their own opinion about the international controversy surrounding China's Xinjiang policy and the situation of the Uyghurs can examine these different perspectives and weigh them up against each other. It cannot be our task to go into detail about the entire, often highly polemical and heated confrontation.¹

Both the Chinese portrayal of events in Xinjiang and critical reporting and commentary from outside China are part of a global political and media context that is strongly influenced by the rivalry between China and 'the West'. This constellation forces people to take sides, makes them susceptible to propaganda and often clouds their view of the details as well as the longer-term context, similar to what once happened during the Cold War and is now re-emerging in the wake of the recent developments in global politics. Even scientists are not always immune to this, nor are professional journalists or politicians.

Leaving aside all political and ideological polemics, one can say about the situation in today's Xinjiang, especially in the southern heartland of the Uyghurs, that there has been a *systematic amalgamation of several goals that are perfectly understandable in themselves*: On the one hand, targeted vocational training measures and language courses are intended to enable the largely impoverished rural population to earn their own living. On the other hand, this approach is also intended to combat the 'three evils' of separatism, terrorism and religious fundamentalism.

This amalgamation hinders the integration of a large part of the Uyghur population into mainstream Chinese society, thereby reinforcing their ethnic isolation and alienation rather than reducing it. Uyghurs currently face the (mostly unspoken) general suspicion that they are 'backward' and uneducated, that they refuse to integrate into Han Chinese majority society, or even that they are actively fighting against it. The Uyghurs themselves feel that China's assimilation and deradicalization policies are primarily aimed at them and are being implemented with great severity. This tends to weld together the Uyghur population— especially since the "vocational training centers" are run under a very strict regime and participation is by no means voluntary.

However, there are other structural features that make the situation particularly difficult for the Uyghur population in southern Xinjiang and stand in the way of their smooth integration into the Han Chinese majority society.¹

- A unique feature of the Chinese province of Xinjiang is the Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps (Bingtuan), which we have already mentioned². They date back to the early days of the "peaceful liberation" of Xinjiang by Mao Zedong's army. It is primarily because of them that Xinjiang has become a dual Han Chinese-Uyghur society. Today, 3.1 million inhabitants of Xinjiang (12.5%) belong to the Bingtuan organization, which is subordinate to the central government in Beijing and consists predominantly of Han Chinese.³ Especially in rural areas of southern Xinjiang, where small Uyghur family farms are the norm, the large-scale Bingtuan farms form Han Chinese-dominated enclaves. For example, the Bingtuan farms alone account for 40% of Xinjiang's cotton production⁴. As can be seen from the graph at the beginning of this chapter, the average income on Bingtuan farms is 79% higher than that of the rest of the rural population, which is predominantly Uyghur. There are therefore 'major differences within rural areas ... which can also be interpreted as inter-ethnic disparities, since 86 per cent of the XPCC [= Bingtuan] consists of Han Chinese. It is not surprising that this can lead to tensions'²

¹ A detailed critical presentation of the main arguments for and against the Xinjiang conflict, which can be used as an aid to argumentation, can be found in Alpermann (2021, pp. 143–200).

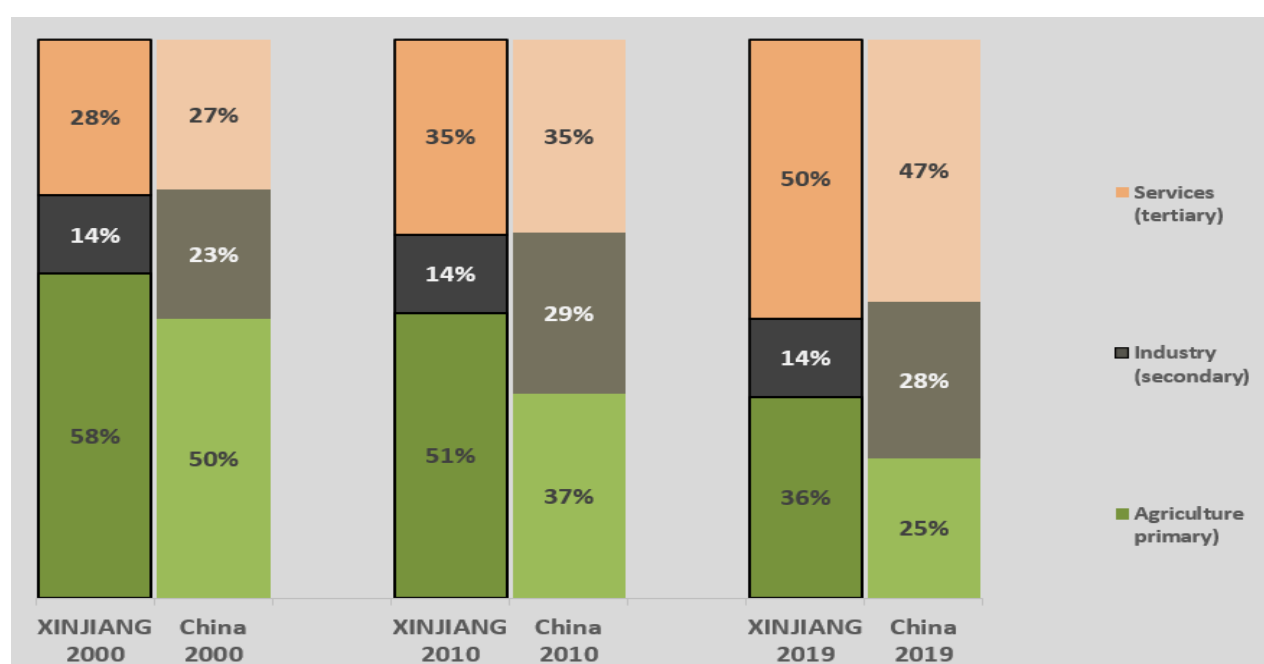
² See the numerous references and notes in Alpermann (2021).

- In addition, the very *unbalanced economic structure* of Xinjiang Province is striking, expressed in the formula 'one black, one white' (*yi hei, yi bai*), which refers to the preferential state support for black oil and white cotton as the central economic activities in Xinjiang. Both industries are clearly dominated by Han Chinese.¹

Building on these focal points, a textile and refinery industry has emerged in Xinjiang. In addition, agricultural products originating from the region are processed by a relatively strong food industry. The production of local tomato paste and ketchup has become particularly well known, covering around a quarter of the total global market demand.

On the other hand, Xinjiang lacks the broad range of industrial products found in the wealthy east of China. Industrial jobs are therefore less common here than in other regions of China.

The following graph comparing Xinjiang with China as a whole shows that the relative share of industrial jobs in Xinjiang has stagnated at a low 14% since 2000. In contrast, the number of people employed in the service sector has risen from 28% to 50% in just a few years. This is even above the average for the People's Republic of China.



Employees by economic sector, Xinjiang compared to China, 2000–2019²

¹ According to calculations by Hasmath (2019, p. 5), 88% of Bingtuan members are Han Chinese and 7% are Uyghurs.

² Official data, from Alpermann (2021, p. 66, Fig. 3).

Looking carefully at the table above, one might assume that Xinjiang has moved directly from an agrarian society to a post-industrial service society in just a few years, skipping the industrial society phase almost completely. However, this is quite unlikely.

Björn Alpermann attributes this unusual development primarily to the significant expansion of the government apparatus in Xinjiang.¹ It includes the important increase in state-funded security personnel in Xinjiang, who have been recruited since the beginning of the 'deradicalization' campaign. According to reports, many Uyghurs have found jobs in this sector, too. Presumably, this often leads to conflicts of loyalty.

All that is difficult to prove conclusively. However, it is indisputable that Xinjiang's economic power alone could not possibly support the huge tertiary sector for service activities. Only the considerable inflow of (predominantly state) funds from the Chinese heartland has made this possible. For the same reason, Xinjiang has a higher unemployment rate than China as a whole. In any case, the state-controlled economic sector is particularly strong in Xinjiang, while the private economy is comparatively weak.²

- As we have seen previously, the largely externally financed economic tertiarization process in Xinjiang is accompanied by rapid social *urbanization* and, at the same time, by the progressive *Sinicization of cities*. The highest incomes are earned in Xinjiang's cities – predominantly by Han Chinese workers. This is partly because they often have better professional qualifications than their Uyghur competitors.

Above all, however, they have the *Chinese language skills* that are indispensable in the Chinese-speaking environment of urban businesses and administrations, which are usually insufficient among older Uyghurs. Given the high complexity of the Chinese language and script, this shortcoming is unlikely to be remedied even with crash courses in Chinese at the 'vocational training centers'.

This does not apply to members of the small, well-educated Uyghur middle class who have already attended Chinese-language schools (the so-called "Minkaohan", see chapter 10 below). All Uyghur schoolchildren of the younger generation could become completely bilingual if modern language teaching methods were used. This is already partly the case today, at least for Uyghur youths growing up in the modern cities of Xinjiang.

- But even well-qualified Uyghurs who are also fluent in Chinese encounter an ethnically *divided labour market* that limits their chances of success, especially in the cities. There, a distinction must first be made between the extensive sector of *state-controlled* enterprises, authorities, educational and research institutions on the one hand, and the recently growing *private* sector on the other.²

¹ Alpermann (2021, pp. 55 ff.).

² Hasmath (2019, p. 8).

When it comes to filling high-level, well-paid positions in the *state sector*, it comes as no surprise that, in addition to qualifications and loyalty, *membership of the Chinese Communist Party* plays an important role. Alessandra Cappelletti estimates that only around 2.5% of the Uyghur population have a party membership card compared to around 7% in China as a whole.¹ On the other hand, there are also certain proportionality and protection rules in public institutions that ensure that members of minorities – including Uyghurs – are given opportunities. They often occupy well-paid, but representative top positions with little decision-making authority.

In the *private sector*, on the other hand, greater emphasis is placed on professional qualifications. But here, too, the rule of thumb applies that *'the better-paid jobs go to Han Chinese, while the more labor-intensive and poorly paid positions go to the Uyghurs'*.² In urban areas, the more successful Uyghurs are therefore mainly found as small self-employed persons, as operators of restaurants, shops, boutiques and craft businesses, which primarily serve their 'own' Uyghur clientele.³

It is evident that both population groups today tend to isolate themselves in their respective ethnically defined social circles, favoring their own people and confirming their mutual aversions. The current climate in Xinjiang, characterized by generalized contempt and intimidation, state surveillance and harassment of the Uyghur group, further binds them together. Above all, it also makes them unyielding towards Uyghurs who, as party members or members of the security apparatus, have come to terms with the existing power structures and benefit from them. They are often despised as traitors.

But the growing number of members of the younger generation who have learned Chinese as a matter of course are also facing serious conflicts of loyalty. Although they are able to navigate Han Chinese society with ease, most of them still want to remain Uyghurs. Above all, many younger and educated Uyghurs see themselves as modern citizens of the world for whom Xinjiang is not the centre of the universe. However, only a few of them have equal access to the Han Chinese-dominated high-end labour market in Xinjiang. Nevertheless, they try to go their own way.⁴

These younger Uyghurs, who speak perfect Chinese, are torn between the defensive lifestyle of 'normal' Uyghurs on the one hand and the dominant Han Chinese society and culture on the other. Sometimes, Uyghurs educated in Chinese are even referred to as a *separate minority*, the 'fourteenth' minzu of Xinjiang, whose members no longer really belong to the Uyghur community, but who have not yet fully integrated into Han Chinese society either.⁵

Conversely, especially in southern Xinjiang, there are also a few 'Uighurized' Han Chinese, as Agnieszka Joniak-Lüthi has shown in an ethnological study.⁶ These are Han Chinese who have lived in Xinjiang for several generations and were born there. They have adopted certain Uyghur customs. Occasionally, they also speak the Uyghur language or at least understand it. Nevertheless, their official Minzu classification as "Han" remains decisive.

¹ Cappelletti (2016, p. 288).

² Hasmath (2019, p. 11),

³ Ibid., p. 8; cf. overall: Hann (2022).

⁴ In a very readable ethnological study, Joanne Smith Finley (2013, chap. 7) describes and analyses in detail the ambivalent situation of this 'hybrid generation'.

⁵ This is an allusion to the thirteen ethnic groups (*minzu*) that are officially registered in Xinjiang (cf. e.g. Rudelson 1997, p. 128; Zang 2015, p. 40f.).

⁶ Joniak-Lüthy (2016).

At some point, however, the future may belong to such wanderers between cultures and official classifications, i.e. Sinicized Uyghurs and Uighurized Han, in which something new emerges. Southern Xinjiang, the heartland of the Silk Road, has seen many rulers, peoples, languages and religions come and go over the centuries. It has already undergone numerous cultural metamorphoses, each of which has taken several generations. If there ever was an 'indigenous population' in today's Xinjiang, we know very little about it today. The only thing that is certain is that it was neither Han Chinese nor Uyghurs.

In the foreseeable future of the coming decades, Xinjiang will probably continue to belong to the powerful People's Republic of China. So we must hope that the Uyghurs in the Chinese state will soon be given more breathing space again. Then the day may come when cultural divisions begin to be put into perspective and old wounds and enmities can gradually be overcome. But this will take some time, as we know from our own European history, where ethnic, religious or national animosities. The associated preferences and disadvantages are persistent and continue to resurface, as we can see again today.



Tour group in Hong Shan Park in Urumqi, 2018¹

Once again, we close this chapter with a very personal snapshot. It should not lead to generalizations, just like the one at the end of the seventh chapter: while walking in a public park in Urumqi in autumn 2019, we encountered this proud tour group, who asked us to take their photo. Quite obviously, they consisted of Han Chinese and members of 'minorities'. We do not know where they all came from, what brought them together, or which of them had a party membership card. But they too seemed to be in good spirits. What was really going on inside them is – as with most adults – difficult to say.

¹ photo Marga Kreckel (card 1, P1010 120).

Part Three:

Xinjiang – Chinese border region of two cultures

Chapter Ten

Two cultural languages, two writing systems, one national education system

Not only are there two ethnic groups of almost equal size living in Xinjiang, it is also a Chinese province with two main languages. Everywhere in the cities, you encounter bilingual inscriptions in Chinese and Uyghur, the two very different official languages of the Chinese 'Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region'.



Modern residential complex in Kashgar with Chinese and Uyghur information boards ¹

As we have seen, today Uyghur is the mother tongue of almost half of Xinjiang's population, while Chinese is the mother tongue of around 40%. The Uyghurs live predominantly in southern Xinjiang, where they are clearly in the majority. However, the official language of the entire People's Republic of China is Chinese. All Chinese citizens who have attended school are now expected to be able to read, write, understand and speak Chinese. This also applies to the Uyghur-speaking population of Xinjiang, for whom learning the Chinese language and characters is particularly difficult. This is a major challenge, especially for older people who have never received a thorough school education.

¹ Photo Marga Kreckel (Map 3, P1010 24)

In the last chapter, we already emphasized that the prospects of success for compulsory language courses for older Uyghurs in state-run 'vocational training centers' should be viewed with skepticism.

Europeans who do not speak Chinese find it difficult to imagine what it means to learn Chinese when you have grown up with a completely different mother tongue. Therefore, here is some background information on the Chinese language and script.

Chinese language and writing¹

When the People's Republic of China was founded in 1949, the vast majority of China's inhabitants were illiterate, probably 70-80% of the population.² The regional and local dialects spoken by the Han Chinese were often completely incomprehensible to each other. For example, direct verbal communication between residents of Beijing and Canton was almost impossible.³

However, thanks to modern Mandarin Chinese, which is now taught in schools everywhere and is also the language of politics and administration, mass media and advertising, all members of the middle and younger generations who have successfully attended school in China can now communicate with each other without any problems.⁴

¹ The following information is based primarily on the extremely clear account published in its first edition in 1923 by Swedish sinologist Bernhard Karlgren (2008), 'Writing and Language of the Chinese'. See Höllmann (2015) for more on this.

² This is an estimate. The first reasonably reliable figures on the educational level of the Chinese population are available for 1970. At that time, 39.5% of the population over the age of 15 in the People's Republic of China had no school education whatsoever. 40 years later, in 2010, the figure was only 5.3%. Among those over 75 years of age, the illiteracy rate was still 90% in 1970. This figure roughly reflects the educational situation in China in the first half of the 20th century.

Today, however, compulsory education has been implemented throughout China. However, among the older population, there are still around 40% who cannot read or write, or can do so only with difficulty, and who find it hard to cope in today's rapidly modernizing China (figures based on data from the World Bank: <https://knoema.de/WBEDS2017Jun/education-statistics>; accessed on 10 June 2019).

³ Cantonese, which is the colloquial language spoken in the south, in the region around the major cities of Canton (*Guangzhou*), Shenzhen and Hong Kong, differs considerably from Mandarin, which is spoken in the capital *Beijing* and has become the basis of standard Chinese (*Putonghua*). The number of Chinese regional languages, sub-languages and dialects distinguished by linguists varies. Some of them are as different from each other as Italian and French. Karlgren (2008, p. 18) even speaks of a 'Babylonian confusion of tongues' between the numerous Chinese dialects. Gladney (2004, p. 7f.) distinguishes between eight Chinese regional languages: *Mandarin, Wu, Yue, Xiang, Hakka, Gan, Southern Min and Northern Min*.

⁴ Regional languages and dialects still shape people's everyday lives. A 2014 study by the Chinese Ministry of Education found that only 7% of the population of the People's Republic of China spoke 'clear and fluent Mandarin'. Thirty per cent were unable to communicate in Mandarin at all – predominantly older people and members of non-Chinese-speaking minorities (South China Morning Post, 22 September 2014, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china-insider/article/1598040/3-10-chinese-citizens-do-not-speak-putonghua-says-education>).

After 1949, compulsory education began to be enforced throughout the People's Republic of China. In addition, in 1956, a somewhat simplified and standardized form of Mandarin Chinese spoken in the Beijing area, known as *Putonghua* (*English: common language*), was established by law as the standard spoken and written language for the whole of China. As part of this major language reform, Chinese characters were also simplified, making them easier to read.

A little later, in 1958, another particularly important and lasting innovation took place, the introduction of *Hanju Pinyin* transcription, usually abbreviated to *Pinyin*. With the help of the Pinyin method, Chinese syllabic writing can be transcribed into Latin letters.¹ This makes Putonghua suitable for computers and also readable for a Western-educated readership – albeit only after considerable effort. This is because Chinese cannot simply be transcribed into the Latin (or any other) alphabet and then learned in the same way as any European written language. Unlike German, Mandarin Chinese is not made up of 26 letters, but of 420 syllables, each of which can have many different meanings. The different meanings of these syllables can be recognized, among other things, by the respective pitch with which they are pronounced.

In modern Putonghua, there are four tones, which can be indicated in Pinyin transcription by different diacritical marks (accent marks) above the vowels (ā, á, ǎ, à).² Most of the 420 syllables also have their own meaning, making them monosyllabic words.³ However, they can also be combined to form multisyllabic words, resulting in countless new meanings. In this way, Chinese has a multitude of innovative multisyllabic word creations, similar to the German 'Werkzeug', where the two monosyllabic words 'Werk' and 'Zeug' put together create a whole new meaning, namely 'tool' or, if the syllabic word 'Schränk' added, 'Werkzeugschränk' ('tool cupboard').

The crucial difference is that it is very difficult to understand a Pinyin text written in Latin letters if you do not also know the corresponding Chinese characters. Only then can you read Pinyin texts fluently and write them correctly yourself. This can be illustrated well using the example of the syllable *ma*:

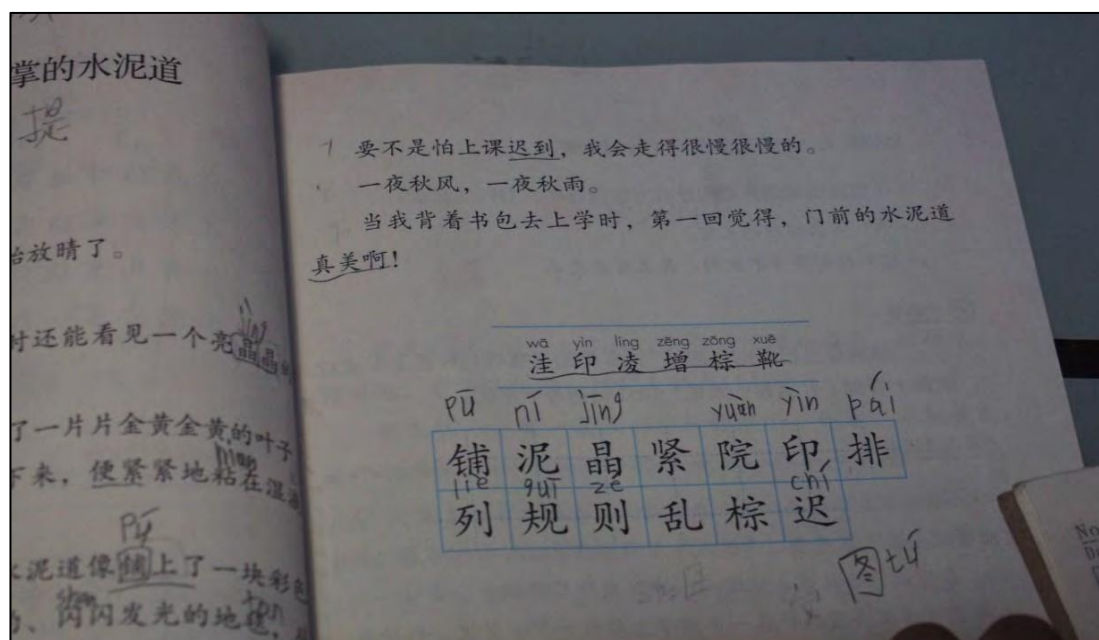
¹ Gradually, the Pinyin transcription has become established and has been recognized as the international standard transcription of Chinese since 1982. In practice, however, tone accents are usually omitted. Thus, the familiar word 'Peking' has become *Beijing* in international usage (but not Běijīng) and Sinkiang has become *Xinjiang* (not Xīnjiāng).

² There is also a neutral tone, which is written without an accent, e.g. in the particle 'ma', which indicates a question. In the very rare syllables without a vowel, consonants can also be given tone accents.

³ The following should be noted: unlike in English, there is 'neither conjugation nor declension in Chinese. Number and tense, if at all, can only be inferred from the context' (Höllmann 2015, p. 12).

If the Latin Pinyin transcription is written *without* accent marks, as is often the case, the syllable "ma" can have very different meanings. Depending on the context and tone, the syllable can mean, for example: 'twins' (syllable symbol: 孖), 'Mother' or 'clean' (syllable symbol for both meanings: 抹), 'flax', 'pockmark' and 'dull-witted' (all three meanings are written with the syllable symbol 麻). Other Meanings of the syllable 'ma' include 'horse' (马), 'number' (码), 'shame' (骂) and many more. When the syllable 'ma' is included in multisyllabic words, the number of meanings multiplies. This gives rise to many additional word meanings, and completely new word creations become possible.¹

If, on the other hand, the syllable 'ma' is written *with* an accent mark, this confusing variety is reduced. In principle, it would then even be possible to convert Chinese writing entirely to the Latin Pinyin script written with diacritical marks, similar to what happened with Vietnamese in 1945. However, there is considerable resistance to this in China:² Chinese characters are still used almost exclusively in writing. Books, forms and newspapers are printed in Chinese characters. Chinese characters are seen everywhere in public. Occasional inscriptions in Latin letters are not in Pinyin. They are usually in English and intended for foreigners or for advertising purposes. There is also no indication that this could change in the foreseeable future: Anyone who learns to read and write Chinese today must also learn the Chinese syllabary. Pinyin is not an alternative to this, but it does make learning easier.



Exercise book for pupils learning Putonghua and Pinyin³

¹ All word examples according to the online dictionary Leo (<https://dict.leo.org/chinesisch-deutsch>).

² Baron / Yin-Baron (2018, p. 172).

³ Photo Marga Kreckel 2018, map 1, P1010342.

Nowadays, Chinese schoolchildren usually learn the Pinyin transcription written in Latin letters first. This means that they no longer start with the tedious task of copying and memorizing individual Chinese characters, as was customary in the past. Once the children are familiar with the Latin Pinyin transcription, they can already read simple words and whole sentences. Only then does the actual cramming and memorizing of the many Chinese characters begin. For example, you need to know around 3,000 different characters to be able to read a normal Chinese daily newspaper to a reasonable extent. These are taught in primary school. University graduates should know at least 6,000 characters.¹

In today's age of widespread computer use and general digitalization, which would be inconceivable without the Latin (or other) alphabet, the comprehensive introduction of the Pinyin alphabetical transcription system in Chinese schools is proving to be an invaluable aid.



Uyghur schoolboy with smartphone doing his Chinese homework²

When students want to write a Chinese text today, they usually use a smartphone, tablet computer or PC. They type in a Pinyin word (using Latin letters), e.g. 'ma', because they want to write a message to their mother. The device then displays several Chinese characters that match the syllable ma, from which they select the one they want to use. In our example, that would be: mā, 抹. In this way, they can quickly

¹ Ibid., p. 168. In total, there are around 80,000 to 100,000 characters in classical Chinese, although the figures vary. However, most of the characters are completely obsolete or so unusual that even educated Chinese people can only decipher them with difficulty using a dictionary.

² Photo: Marga Kreckel 2018, Map 1, P1010 335.

put together a Chinese text digitally, syllable by syllable, which then can be printed out or sent directly.¹ In order to use this method and select the correct Chinese characters, one must be able to recognize, distinguish and understand the corresponding characters.

However, the digitized Pinyin method can also lead to *'more and more Chinese people having problems remembering the characters they once learned when writing by hand without a computer.'*² German sinologist Hans van Ess notes that in China, *'the computer is a real threat to traditional literacy. Those who only work with it quickly lose the ability to actively write more difficult characters by hand.'*³ On the other hand, modern technology already offers a remedy for this problem: There are smartphone apps that allow Chinese characters to be entered directly on the touchscreen, *with your finger or using a stylus. The software is now so advanced that even extremely messy characters can be recognized*.⁴

Overall, it is obvious that, compared to languages written in alphabetical scripts, learning Chinese characters requires extraordinary diligence and discipline on the part of students. In this respect, European schoolchildren have it much easier. It is therefore not surprising that diligence and discipline are particularly highly regarded in China and other East Asian countries where Chinese characters play a role.

Another advantage for China's younger generation is that they not only master the difficult Chinese language in speech and writing, but also learn the Latin alphabet with the indispensable Pinyin transcription, giving them easy access to today's global language, English.

Conversely, educated Europeans and Americans find Chinese, the second most widely spoken language in the world, much more difficult. For them, anything written in Chinese characters is usually a closed book, and they are dependent on interpreters. Educated Chinese, on the other hand, are fluent in both Chinese and English.

¹ Zhou Yougang (1906-2017), the legendary inventor of Pinyin, is reported to have used the digital writing method himself even as a centenarian. His 79-year-old son said in a Spiegel interview in 2014: *"My father does it that way too. However, he finds it easier on the larger iPad. His eyesight isn't so good anymore"* (<https://www.spiegel.de/spiegel/print/d-124838650.html>; accessed: 12 August 2019).

² Baron / Yin-Baron (2018, p. 172).

³ Ess (2012, p. 97).

⁴ Höllmann (2015, p. 43).

Chinese written language and central civil service examinations as factors of integration

Since ancient times, the Chinese Empire was ruled by dynasties of (sometime foreign) emperors¹ and inhabited by many peoples speaking many languages. The common Chinese syllabic script formed the basis of the imperial central administration with its literate and learned officials, the *mandarins*. In ancient China (as in all other advanced civilizations of earlier history), the general population was unable to read and write.

Anyone who was familiar with Chinese writing could easily communicate with each other, but only in writing – similar to how mathematicians who use the decimal system, which is now internationally standard, can communicate with each other. They can communicate using written numbers and formulas, even if they speak completely different languages. This means that classical Chinese writing is *not a phonetic script*, nor are our numbers. The Swedish sinologist Bernhard Karlgren therefore described traditional Chinese writing as a kind of ‘*written Esperanto*’:

The characters say nothing about the pronunciation of the word, and today's Chinese have no idea how they were once pronounced. It follows that every Chinese person reads a literary text according to the pronunciation of their own dialect currently in use. (...)

*A decree published in Beijing could be read and understood everywhere in this vast country, but to a Beijing resident, if read aloud by a Cantonese person, it would seem like complete nonsense. (...) For the same reason, although the Chinese can read ancient literature themselves, they are unable to understand it when it is read aloud.*²

Since 1956, with the introduction of Putonghua, this has gradually changed. Standard Chinese, which is now mandatory throughout China and disseminated through the education system and the media, has led to the written Chinese language becoming a colloquial language that is understood everywhere in China. Mutually incomprehensible dialects or even different languages have been replaced by a common national language that only has regional dialect differences – as in High German, which, as is well known, can be spoken with many regional dialectal variations, even with an Austrian or Swiss accent.

Long before the spread of Mandarin Chinese led to the standardization of the spoken language, a uniform examination system for selecting imperial officials had been established in China. Only those who had mastered classical Chinese writing to an exceptional degree and could demonstrate that they had thoroughly studied, often even memorized, a prescribed canon of philosophical and literary texts by Confucius and other Chinese classics and were able to interpret them appropriately could pass these civil service examinations. As early as the 7th century, This examination system (keju) was fully developed in the 14th century and remained largely unchanged in its basic form until 1905.³

¹ The two most important foreign dynasties were, as is well known, the Mongol emperors of *the Yuan dynasty* (1279-1368), descendants of Genghis Khan, and the emperors of *the Qing dynasty*, who originated from Manchuria (1644-1911), which brought the entire territory of present-day China under their control. In the intervening period (1368-1644), the Ming dynasty, which originated in eastern China, ruled the Chinese heartland. In earlier times, there were also long periods of political fragmentation, rival dynasties and foreign conquests on the territory of present-day China (cf. Chapter 1).

² Karlgren (2008, p. 28f.).

³ See Elman (2013).



Imperial palace examination, illustration from the 11th century²

Even in the remotest corners of the empire, *district examinations* lasting several days – written, of course – were held every two or three years for male candidates aspiring to a career in the civil service. They had to acquire the necessary knowledge in (fee-paying) private schools or with private tutors. Nevertheless, most candidates failed at this first stage of the examination.

For the small number of candidates who were successful in the district examinations, there were further examinations – first at the *prefecture* level, then at the *provincial* level – in which they were once again rigorously screened.

² Source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Song_Imperial_Examination.JPG.

The few candidates who had also cleared this hurdle were invited to take *the capital examination* in Beijing. Only the very best were ultimately allowed to take the *palace examination* – sometimes presided over by the emperor himself – as the fifth and highest level of this gigantic selection system.¹ Successful graduates of the palace examination were awarded the degree of *Jinshi* (roughly equivalent to a European doctorate). However, ‘only about one tenth of those holding the highest academic degree succeeded in rising to the highest offices of state.’² The decision as to which of them would ultimately be selected for the privileged circle of high mandarin officials was made at the imperial court, sometimes even by the emperor himself. In other words, the highest protection was no obstacle to advancement. However, the prerequisite for this was the successful completion of civil service examinations, which ensured that, as a rule, only highly educated individuals could attain positions of responsibility.³

The rigorous multi-stage examination system provided the Chinese Empire with excellently trained civil servants and a unified imperial administration. The rush of applicants preparing for the examinations throughout the country was always many times greater than the number of successful candidates. This meant that the many thousands of candidates who *failed* the examinations formed their own social class of cultured people who were highly familiar with Chinese writing and educational culture. They were recruited as local administrative staff, as well as teachers, lawyers, doctors, builders, traders, etc. Not only did they all know the generally accepted Chinese written language, but they also mastered their own local dialects or languages. This made them important mediators of China’s cultural integration and the spread of the Chinese standard language and high culture. They gave rise to a kind of *pan-Chinese educated middle class*.

In medieval Europe, the Latin language and education played a similar mediating role between different tribes and peoples as the Chinese written language and high culture did in imperial China. However, since no Latin Empire was able to establish itself in Europe after the fall of the Roman Empire in antiquity, the different national languages and cultures eventually gained the upper hand and increasingly marginalized Latin as a language used only by the church and scholars. Thus, in the course of history, many independent nation states with their own national languages gradually emerged in Europe, while the much larger Chinese empire repeatedly found political unity and was able to maintain a uniform written language and high culture.

¹ There are striking similarities here to the selection system for high-ranking civil servants in the Ottoman Empire, but also in modern France, which was shaped by the Napoleonic reforms (cf. Kreckel 2018).

² Osterhammel (1998, p. 73).

³ For more on the high social selectivity of the classical Chinese examination system, see Höllmann (2015, p. 18ff.). See also Osterhammel (1998, p. 73ff.), with further references.

The Han Chinese education system and the situation of the Uyghurs

It was therefore an ancient tradition of the Chinese empire to integrate all ethnic groups into the Han Chinese-dominated state. The common written language served as the connecting link. Over the centuries, Chinese writing and educational culture spread like a snowball to ever more distant parts of the empire, conveyed by the central administrative system and the associated civil service examinations.¹ Today the centralized examination system of the People's Republic of China, introduced in 1977, the *Gao Kao* (高考), performs the same national integration function as the classical Keju system did in the past.

In the case of Xinjiang, however, this integration process is encountering difficulties. Unlike in mainland China, where the Han Chinese clearly predominate, half of Xinjiang's population has its own Uyghur language, script and culture, as well as Islam. In the People's Republic of China, on the other hand, a uniform, Han Chinese-dominated secular education system was established after 1949, which was intended to reconcile several objectives:

- Given the illiteracy rate, which was still very high at the time (and almost total among the rural population), the first priority was to provide all children and young people with a basic school education.
- At the same time, however, the new education system was to be organized in such an efficient manner that it could keep pace with modern developments in science and technology.
- Finally, its task was the ideological education of all pupils and students, who were to be taught loyalty to the People's Republic of China and its communist state party. From Beijing's point of view, it had been self-evident since 1958 that only Putonghua, the modern Mandarin Chinese with its new Latin Pinyin transcription, could be considered as the language of instruction and communication for the whole of China.

In practice, however, compromises had to be made. This was because the newly established education system in the People's Republic of China also had to meet the requirements of Chinese minority policy. The Constitution of the People's Republic of China prescribed for children and young people of all 55 recognized minority ethnic groups (*minzu*), that they must obtain education in their own mother tongue.²

For the Chinese-speaking majority population (*Hanzu*) – i.e. over 90% of Chinese citizens – this was not a problem. But in the case of Xinjiang, especially South Xinjiang, where Uyghur was still the common language and *lingua franca* until 1949.³ the situation was completely different. Here, the reconstruction of

¹ This was beautifully elaborated in a famous lecture by the eminent Chinese sociologist and folklorist *Fei Xiaotong* (1988). See above, chapter 1.

² See above, Chapter 1.

³ Dwyer (2005, p. 12f.).

the education system after 1949 initially resulted in the establishment of separate mother-tongue schools for Uyghur children and for the children of immigrant Han Chinese.¹ Uyghur pupils also received Chinese lessons. Conversely, this was rarely the case.²

In practice, this led to the establishment of both Chinese- and Uyghur-language schools or school classes in cities with larger Han populations. In the villages (especially in southern Xinjiang), there were mostly only Uyghur schools, often of modest quality. For Chinese lessons in these rural schools, only Uyghur teaching staff were usually available, who themselves had difficulty speaking Chinese.

It must be understood that there are profound and almost insurmountable differences between the Chinese and Uyghur languages, scripts and cultures. The *Uyghur language* belongs to the Turkic language family, as does modern Turkish. Today's Uyghur differs only slightly from Kazakh, Kyrgyz, Uzbek and Turkmen, the national languages of the neighboring Central Asian republics.

All these Turkic languages are closely related. However, there are no similarities between them and Chinese. No serious attempt has ever been made to write modern Uyghur (or other Turkic languages) using Chinese characters. Only alphabetic scripts such as Arabic, Cyrillic or Latin can be used for this purpose.

In fact, in the first half of the 20th century, attempts were made to write Uyghur using Cyrillic and Latin letters. Ultimately, however, the *Arabic script* prevailed, which had already been used for Chagatai Turkish, the historical predecessor of Uyghur.

Unlike classical Arabic, which has 28 full letters and in which vowels are not written in most cases⁴, all vowels are written out in Uyghur script. Modern Uyghur has 32 letters, which can also be used to represent sounds that do not exist in Arabic, including the umlaut vowels ä (ئه), ö (ئۆ) and ü (ئۈ), which are very common in Uyghur, and the consonant p (پ). This means that, unlike the Chinese syllabic script, the Uyghur alphabet is a phonetic script, just like the Latin alphabet.⁵

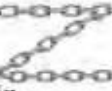
¹ On education in present-day Xinjiang: Dwyer (2005), Schluessel (2007, 2009), Ma (2009), Hann (2014), Leibold / Chen (2014), Smith Finlay / Zang (2015), Holdstock (2015).

² In principle, there is a requirement in Xinjiang that Han Chinese pupils should learn the Uyghur language (or another minority language) at school. In reality, however, this is hardly ever the case. Instead, English is usually chosen as the second language (Ma 2009, p. 204).

³ For the origins of modern Uyghur and other Central Asian Turkic languages, see Chapter 1. Old Uyghur, which is now extinct and was spoken in the medieval kingdom of Kucha, was written with its own alphabet.

⁴ In modern Arabic, unwritten vowels are indicated by diacritical dots above or below the consonants. This was not the case in the classical Arabic of the Koran.

⁵ See: https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Uigurische_Alphabete.

ئۇيغۇر ئەربەب يېزىقى ۋە ئۇيغۇر لاتىن يېزىقى ئېلىپبەسى							
پاڭا	پ	بېلىق	ب	ئەينەك	ئە	ئات	ئا
							
Paqa	p	Béliq	b	Eynek	e	At	a
خوراز	خ	چەينەك	چ	جۇۋا	ج	توشقان	ت
							
Xoraz	x	Cheynek	ch	Juwa	j	Toshqan	t
ژۇرنال	ژ	زەنجىر	ز	راۋاپ	ر	داپ	د
							
Jurnal	j	Zenjir	z	Rawap	r	Dap	d
فونتان	ف	غاز	غ	شىر	ش	سائەت	س
							
Fontan	f	Ghaz	gh	Shir	sh	Saet	s
ياڭاق	ڭ	گۈل	گ	كالا	ك	قوي	ق
							
Yangaq	ng	Gül	g	Kala	k	Qoy	q
ھارۋا	ھ	نان	ن	مۈشۈك	م	لامپا	ل
							
Harwa	h	Nan	n	Müshük	m	Lampa	l
ئۈزۈم	ئۈ	ئۆي	ئۆ	ئۇۋا	ئۇ	ئورغاق	ئو
							
Üzüm	ü	Öy	ö	Uwa	u	Orghaq	o
يولۋاس	ي	ئىت	ئى	ئېيىق	ئې	ۋېلىسپىت	ۋ
							
Yolwas	y	It	i	Éyiq	é	Wélisipit	w

ئەسكەرتىش: ئۇيغۇر لاتىن يېزىقى بەش قېتىملىق ئىلمىي مۇھاكىمە يىغىنى ئارقىلىق 2001-يىلى ئىيۇلدا بىرلىككە كەلتۈرۈلگەن. ئۇ لازىم بولغان ساھەلەردە ئۇيغۇر تىلى ئۈچۈن قوشۇمچە خىزمەت قىلىدۇ. ئەگەر «éÉ, üÜ, öÖ» لەرنى كىرگۈزۈشكە ئىمكانىيەت بولمىغاندا، بەلگىلىمىگە ئاساسەن ماس ھالدا «eE, uU, oO» لەرنىمۇ ئىشلىتىشكە بولىدۇ. تەپسىلاتىنى <http://www.ukij.org> دىن كۆرۈڭ.

2006 Waris Abdulkérím Janbáz

Uyghur alphabet chart for schoolchildren¹

¹ https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/0/0c/UEY_ULY_Elipbesi_Kichik.jpg.

Europeans who make the effort to learn the 32 letters of the Uyghur alphabet can spell out any text written in Uyghur and pronounce it reasonably correctly – unlike the countless characters of the Chinese syllabary. If, as a European, you are also somewhat familiar with Turkish, Persian or Arabic, you will soon be able to find your way around Xinjiang surprisingly well with the help of Uyghur inscriptions. The same is likely to apply to educated Uyghurs when confronted with Arabic, Persian or Urdu texts.

However, until well into the 20th century, there were very few Uyghurs, and almost no Uyghur women, who were literate at all. The illiteracy rate was very high in Xinjiang at the time due to the political turmoil of the period, and was probably even higher than in the rest of China at the time of Xinjiang's 'peaceful liberation' by the People's Liberation Army in 1949.

Nevertheless, Xinjiang had its own school and educational tradition, which was particularly evident in the oasis towns. In contrast to the Chinese education system, which had no religious ties and had been based on Confucian moral philosophy since ancient times and later also on Marxism, the Uyghur education system was always closely linked to the religious institutions of Sunni Islam. Xinjiang traditionally had the two-tier education system common in all old Islamic countries, which distinguishes between primary school (Uyghur: *mäktäp*, Arabic: *maktaba*) and secondary school or college (Uyghur: *mädräsä*, Arabic: *madrasa*).¹

Until the mid-20th century, Uyghur primary schools were usually located in and controlled by mosques. Lessons focused on teaching the Arabic alphabet, basic reading, writing and arithmetic, and religious knowledge. However, the main emphasis was on memorizing and reciting verses from the Koran.² Many children attended school only sporadically and for short periods, with only a few continuing until the age of 14. Girls were not included. Most children left school early with very limited reading and writing skills. The knowledge of the teachers (*molla*) was often modest as well, especially in rural areas. The mallas depended for their livelihood on donations or school fees paid by parents. Most of them had not received any formal teacher training.

¹ The following remarks on the former education system in Xinjiang are based on Bellér-Hann's account (2008, pp. 326–338), which refers to the period between approximately 1880 and 1949.

² There is no strict institutional distinction between higher education and university education in the Islamic educational tradition; the transition is rather fluid (cf. Kreckel 2018, p. 11ff.).



Local teacher with his eight pupils, Kashgar 1915¹

On the other hand, especially in the vicinity of prestigious urban mosques, there were also Uyghur primary schools with highly educated teachers, where pupils received a thorough education lasting several years. They could then continue their education at a higher school or university (*madrasa*)⁽²⁾, of which there were several in the larger cities of Xinjiang, closely linked to the numerous mosques that existed there. In the city of Kashgar, for example, there are said to have been seventeen or eighteen madrasas with a total of about 2,000 students (*talip*) around the year 1900. The most famous madrasas had respected professors (*mudärris*) who had often travelled extensively. The Islam practised there was strongly influenced by the Sufi orders that had been active in Xinjiang for centuries – a popular, less militant variant of Islam (see above, chapter 4).

¹ https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/d/d0/A_Kashgar_School.jpg?uselang=de (accessed: 1 August 2020).



Porch of the old madrasa at the Apak Khoja Mausoleum, Kashgar¹

The urban madrasas were boarding schools with classrooms and small living quarters for the students. They were maintained by pious Islamic foundations (Uyghur: *wäxpä*, Arabic: *waqf*). The wealthier madrasas were able to pay their lecturers and grant scholarships to needy students. Otherwise, they were dependent on donations and payments from the students. The curriculum focused on religious content and Koranic exegesis. In addition, Islamic law, Arabic and Persian grammar, and basic knowledge of logic, geography, history and astronomy were taught on a case-by-case basis, provided that the appropriate teaching staff was available. Natural sciences, technical sciences and medicine were practically non-existent. The Chinese language was not taught in the madrasas. Graduates mainly had career opportunities as Islamic legal scholars, civil servants in local administrations or religious foundations, and teachers in primary schools.

In Xinjiang, as in other Islamic countries, there were in the late 19th and early 20th century attempts to reform traditional Islamic teaching and introduce a more scientifically oriented (*pānni*) education in primary schools and madrasas. The model for this was the modernization efforts in the late Ottoman Empire ('Tanzimat') and early Turkey under Mustafa Kemal Atatürk.² However, the traditional two-tier system of *māktāp* and *mādrāsā* remained in place in Xinjiang, and with it the close ties between the Uyghur education system and Islamic institutions and the Sufi tradition.

¹ Photo Marga Kreckel 2018, Map 4, P1010 156.

² Cf. Schluessel (2009).

It was only in the course of the educational reforms initiated by the People's Republic of China in the 1950s that a curriculum was introduced in state schools and universities in Xinjiang that was no longer based on religious content but on scientific and practical subjects – although it was also based on ideological objectives, which led to serious damage, particularly during the period of the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), which was hostile to tradition and religion.

The traditional Uyghur education system is now officially outlawed and banned. However, according to hearsay, it still takes place in private contexts.

Bilingual education in Xinjiang

Over the past few decades, with the growth of the Han Chinese population and the general promotion of the Chinese language in the media and public life, modern Mandarin Chinese (Putonghua) has increasingly become the common language of communication and administration in Xinjiang, including in the south of the country. Uyghur has thus largely lost its once dominant public role, first in the cities of Xinjiang and increasingly in rural areas as well. Nevertheless, Uyghur has remained the language of everyday life, private life and religious life for the Uyghurs.

This is why there has been a significant shift in focus in the education sector in recent years: After the end of the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), during which there was hardly any organized teaching in state schools and universities, it was common practice in Xinjiang in the 1980s and 1990s for Uyghurs to conduct all school and university lessons, as well as entrance and final examinations, in their Uyghur mother tongue; only Chinese lessons were held in Chinese. Only Chinese language classes were held in Chinese.

In recent years, however, so-called '*bilingual*' schools and school classes have been established throughout Xinjiang. This has effectively reversed the previous situation. From then on, Chinese became the only language of instruction for Uyghurs in all school subjects. The exception was the subject 'Uyghur Language and Literature', which continued to be taught in Uyghur. Many Uyghurs see this development as discrimination against their language and a threat to their Uyghur culture. They fear the complete Sinicization and standardization of education in Xinjiang, from nursery school to university.

An additional factor is the *pronounced exam and competition orientation of the entire Chinese education system*, which has also become fully established in Xinjiang. The traces of the old imperial system of centralized civil service examinations (*keju*) are still clearly visible. As already mentioned, after termination of the Cultural Revolution in 1977, a strict national final examination and

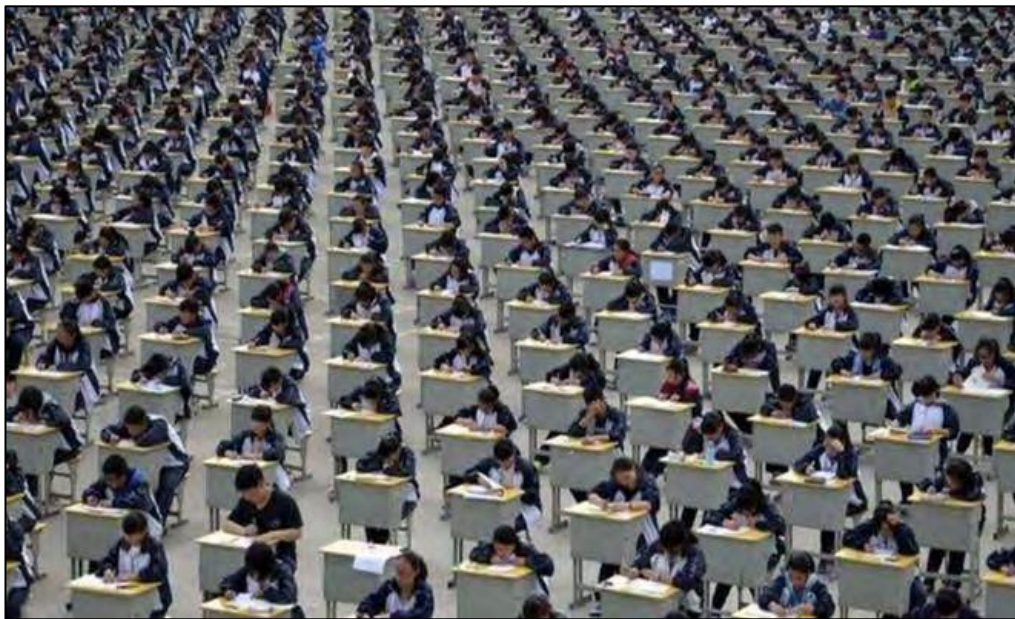
¹ Dwyer (2005), Hamut / Joniak-Lüthi (2015).

² See: Dwyer (2005), Ma (2009), Schluessel (2009), Hann (2014), Hamut / Joniak-Lüthi (2015), Baranovitch (2020).

university entrance examination (*gao kao*) was introduced throughout China.¹

Since the 1990s, regular centralized selection tests for civil servants have also been reintroduced. These are highly selective, keju-style performance tests controlled by the Communist Party. The party ensures that only those individuals who demonstrate a high degree of loyalty to the party are appointed to top political and administrative positions – but they must *also* have excellent educational qualifications.²

The Gao Kao, the general national final examination and university entrance examination, is held annually on fixed days in June for all secondary school graduates throughout China, often in huge examination halls. The whole country is then in a collective state of emergency. Everywhere, the same centrally set tasks must be completed at exactly the same time during the Gao Kao. The score achieved determines whether or not a student is admitted to university and which university they have a realistic chance of getting into.



*Gao Kao exam today*³

The greater the reputation of a university, the higher the Gao Kao score required to gain admission. Only the very best students are accepted to study at one of China's top universities, such as Peking University (popularly known as *Beida*), Tsinghua University, also located in Beijing, or Fudan University in Shanghai. That is the norm. In reality, applicants with 'connections' (*guanxi*) and influential parents receive special treatment and shortcuts, but this cannot be discussed here.

¹ See Vickers/Zeng (2018).

² Heilmann/Shih/Hepp (2016, p. 107f.).

³ <https://www.thedailychina.org/gaokao-a-chinese-high-school-students-nightmare/> (accessed 1 December 2019).

It is possible to take the Gao Kao exam with the same content either in Chinese or in one of the recognized minority languages, including Uyghur. However, even with above-average exam results, graduates who have taken the exam in Uyghur (known as *min kao min*) find it very difficult to secure a place at university, as they usually lack the in-depth knowledge of Chinese required for specialist studies.¹ Originally, Xinjiang's oldest and largest university, *Xinjiang University* (Xinjiang Daxue) in Urumqi, founded in 1924, offered degree programs in Uyghur. However, these were discontinued in 2002, making the Gao Kao examination taken in Uyghur a dead end. In Shihezi, at the second comprehensive university in Xinjiang, Chinese has always been the only language of instruction. Young Uyghurs who want to keep all their options open are therefore advised to choose a Chinese-language school education instead of a Uyghur one and to take the final examination in Chinese (as *min kao han*).

With the mandatory introduction of the new 'bilingual', but de facto Chinese-language mainstream school in Xinjiang, this issue may soon resolve itself. From this perspective, it is only logical that the bonus system practiced in Xinjiang for years, whereby Uyghur participants in the Chinese-language Gao Kao exam were awarded additional credit points, was completely abolished in 2017.² The complete integration of Xinjiang into the Han Chinese education system, which has been sought since the founding of the People's Republic of China, would thus be definitively accomplished. However, the question of whether this will also improve the career opportunities of young Uyghurs educated in Chinese remains unanswered.³ For those educated primarily in Uyghur, they are likely to deteriorate further.⁴

From the perspective of the Chinese central government and the Han Chinese majority population of China, these problems are merely temporary phenomena. In their eyes, they will be overcome as soon as all Uyghurs have completed Chinese-language compulsory schooling and the 'backward' educational conditions in Xinjiang have been abolished. Then the 'snowball' of superior Han Chinese educational culture, mentioned in the first chapter, would finally have arrived in Xinjiang.

However, this does not seem to be the case so far. Experience to date shows that many younger Uyghurs who are educated in Chinese and well qualified professionally are consciously sticking to the Uyghur way of life. They only speak Chinese at work and in Han Chinese public life, but Uyghur at home and in their private lives.

In many ways, the Chinese system is not unlike the situation in France, with its highly selective, centralized and examination-oriented education system. It favors French speakers and marginalizes minority languages like Alsatian, Breton, Basque and Provençal.

¹ To compensate for this shortcoming, Uyghur-speaking first-year students must complete an additional preparatory year in Chinese at the university before beginning their actual studies.

² Zenz (2017).

³ According to calculations by Zenz (2017), there is now little difference in Xinjiang between the exam results of Uyghurs educated in Chinese and those of Han Chinese in the Chinese-language Gao Kao. However, the participation rate of Uyghurs with a Chinese education (the so-called Min Kao Han) in the Gao Kao is significantly lower than that of Han Chinese.

⁴ See Hasmath (2019), Alpermann (2021, Chapters 6 and 7) and above, Chapter 9).

Personal contacts or even marriages with Han Chinese are very rare. Joint celebrations and meals are avoided, not least because of the Islamic ban on pork, which virtually all Uyghurs adhere to, regardless of whether they are practicing Muslims or not.

This means that, for pragmatic reasons, they adapt to the Chinese-dominated reality of Xinjiang. When it comes to their personal lifestyles, however, they want to remain Uyghurs. Children are raised as Uyghurs. They are expected to learn the Chinese language, but this does not mean they should become Chinese. Conversely, there is little evidence of the Han Chinese population opening up to the Uyghur language; this is limited to exceptional cases.



Uyghur schoolgirl doing her Chinese homework at the kitchen table, Turfan 2018¹

Xinjiang thus remains a land of two very different cultures, but one in which the Chinese language and culture are becoming increasingly dominant. In the previous chapter, we drew attention to the difficulties faced by younger Uyghurs educated in Chinese (*min kao han*) in gaining a foothold in Xinjiang's ethnically segregated labour market, as well as to their ambiguous social position between the Chinese and Uyghur worlds.

Somewhat untroubled by these issues, Uyghur children go to their state schools every day. There they learn the Chinese language and script with great intensity. They do their homework and spend their free time together, during which they normally speak Uyghur to each other. They live their lives and are just like any other schoolchildren. Who can blame them?

¹ Photo Marga Kreckel 2018, Map 1, P1010 335.

² See the excellent study by Smith Finley (2013) and various relevant essays in the anthology by Smith Finley / Zang (2015). Alpermann (2021, pp. 95-103) provides a careful summary of the problems associated with the nominally bilingual, de facto Han Chinese education system in Xinjiang.



Images above: Uyghur schoolchildren in Kashgar, 2018¹

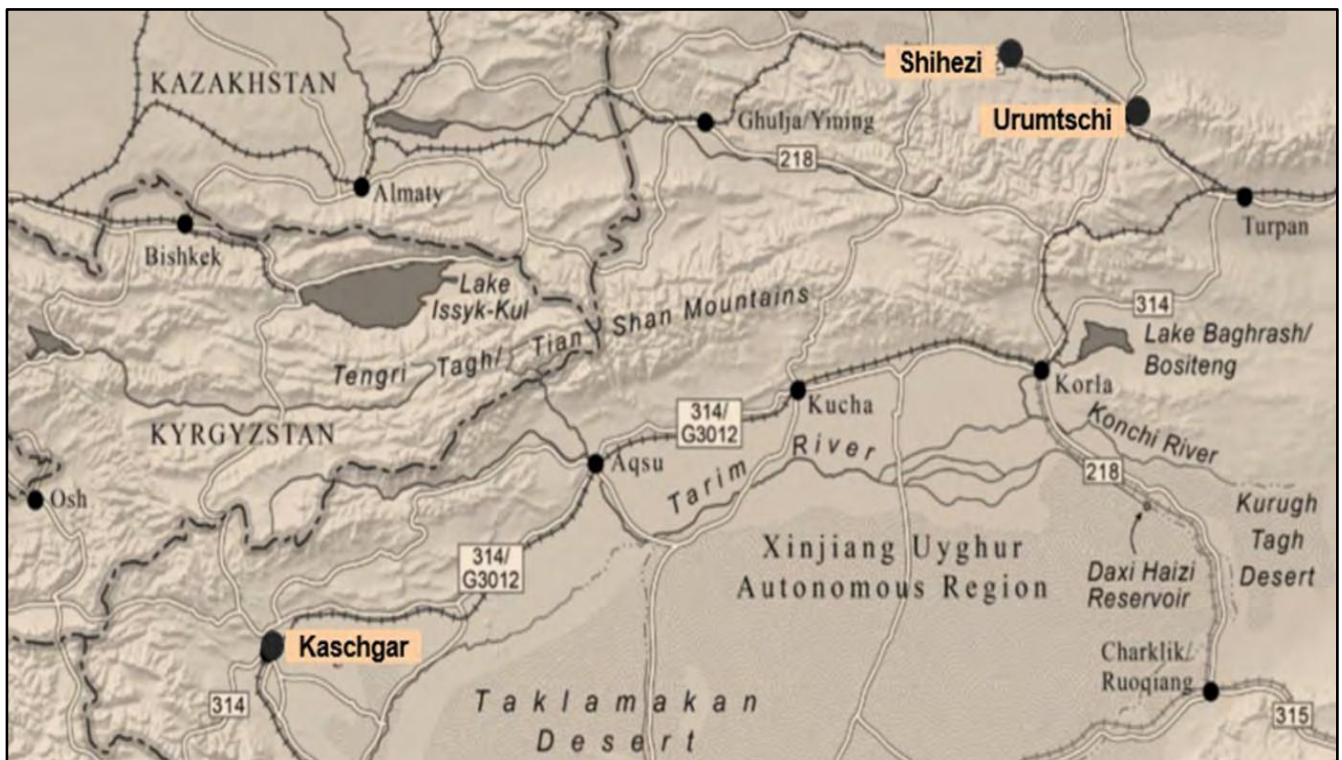
¹ Photos Marga Kreckel 2018, map 3, P1010 337, 603, 620.

Chapter Eleven

Desert cities in Xinjiang between Sinicization and Modernization:

Kashgar, Shihezi, Urumqi

Xinjiang is not only a region with two main languages, but also a land with two vibrant, highly diverse cultures, Uyghur and Chinese. This becomes immediately apparent in Xinjiang's cities. To shed more light on this, the next chapter presents three very different examples in more detail, namely the three largest cities in Xinjiang: *Kashgar*, the 'metropolis of the Uyghurs', located in the far west of southern Xinjiang, the Bingtuan city of *Shihezi* and the provincial capital *Urumqi*, both located in northern Xinjiang.



Kashgar, Shihezi and Urumqi, the three largest cities in Xinjiang¹

Encounter between two ancient urban cultures in Xinjiang

For centuries, the direct influence of Han Chinese culture and language was quite limited throughout Xinjiang. It was mainly confined to Chinese merchants in the oasis towns along the Silk Road. Outside the cities, it was hardly noticeable. It was not until 1759, after the Qing dynasty conquered the whole of northern and southern Xinjiang, that there was any significant Han Chinese (and Manchu) presence in the cities of Xin-

¹ Source: Joniak-Lüthi (2020, p. 5), edited excerpt.

jiang, especially in the city of Urumqi (formerly Dihua), which was then designated as the new seat of government. Since that time, Han Chinese, mainly military and administrative personnel, have also moved into the almost exclusively Turkic-speaking oasis towns in the south. Separate Han Chinese new towns were built for them.

The renowned French architect and ethnologist *Jean-Paul Loubes* has studied the parallel development of these new towns and the traditional old towns in southern Xinjiang in great detail and developed an ideal-typical urban development model for Xinjiang. We base our findings here on his research.

Loubes observed that since their conquest by the Qing dynasty, the cities in southern Xinjiang have followed the pattern of the 'dual city' (*ville duale*)²: New Chinese settlements were established far outside the existing Muslim old towns. From then on, the old and new towns existed side by side, at a clear spatial distance.

The new Chinese towns were primarily garrison and administrative towns, with their own fortifications and city gates and a predominantly Han Chinese population. The much larger Muslim old towns, which were also walled, contained the mosques, the bazaar, the craftsmen's quarters and the residential areas of the local population. This meant that there was no integration between the long-established Turkic-speaking population and the Han Chinese, if only because of the physical distance and the different functions of the old and new towns.

Loubes has now made an interesting observation. He has found that the new Chinese cities in Xinjiang are generally based on the ancient, Confucian-influenced model of the square *Chinese ideal city*³. The Chinese city model follows a strictly north-facing chessboard pattern of streets.⁴

Marco Polo described a similar rectangular structure for the imperial city of Beijing (then known as Khanbaliq), which was newly built in the 13th century.

imperial city of Beijing (then known as "Khanbaliq") in the 13th century:

*"The city is huge ... the layout is square, each side is the same length as the other (...). The bright wall is crowned with battlements. There are twelve gates, and above each one rises a palace building. Each wall face has five palace buildings, because there is also one in each corner. These palace-like buildings serve as arsenals for the garrison. The streets of the city are wide and dead straight; you always have a clear view from one end to the other, for each leads from one gate to another."*⁵

This rectangular and clearly laid out city structure was preserved in Beijing until the 19th century and can still be clearly seen today on the city map of central Beijing.

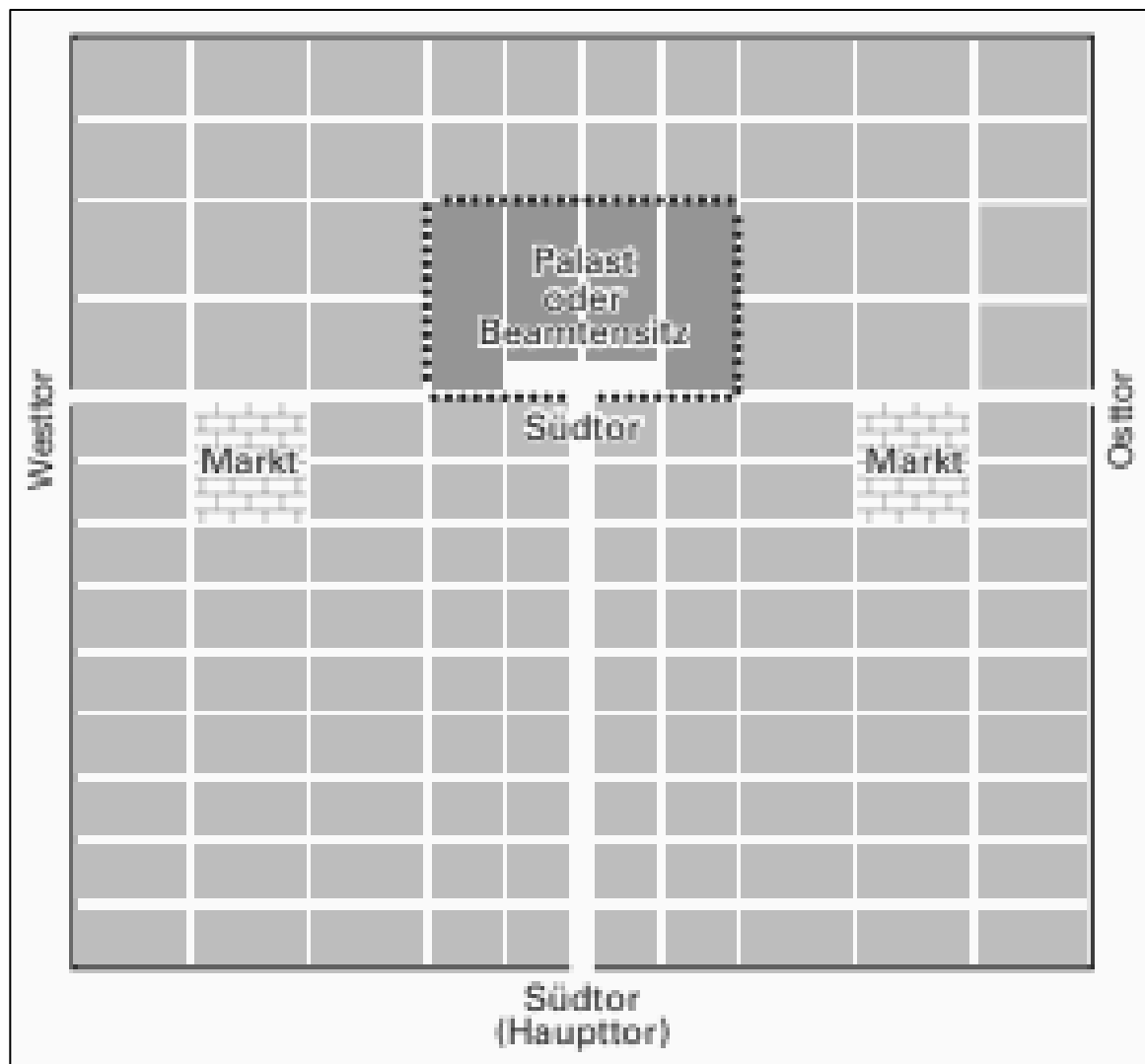
¹ Loubes (1998, 2015).

² Loubes (2015, p. 45ff.).

³ This ideal is said to be based on an ancient Chinese interpretation of the world, according to which the sky is round, while the earth on which the sky rests is square. This also applies to earthly cities (Taubmann 1993, pp. 421-423).

⁴ Taubmann (1993, pp. 421-423), Heckl et al. (2003, 148ff.), Loubes (2015, pp. 103f.).

⁵ Polo (2003, p. 123f.)

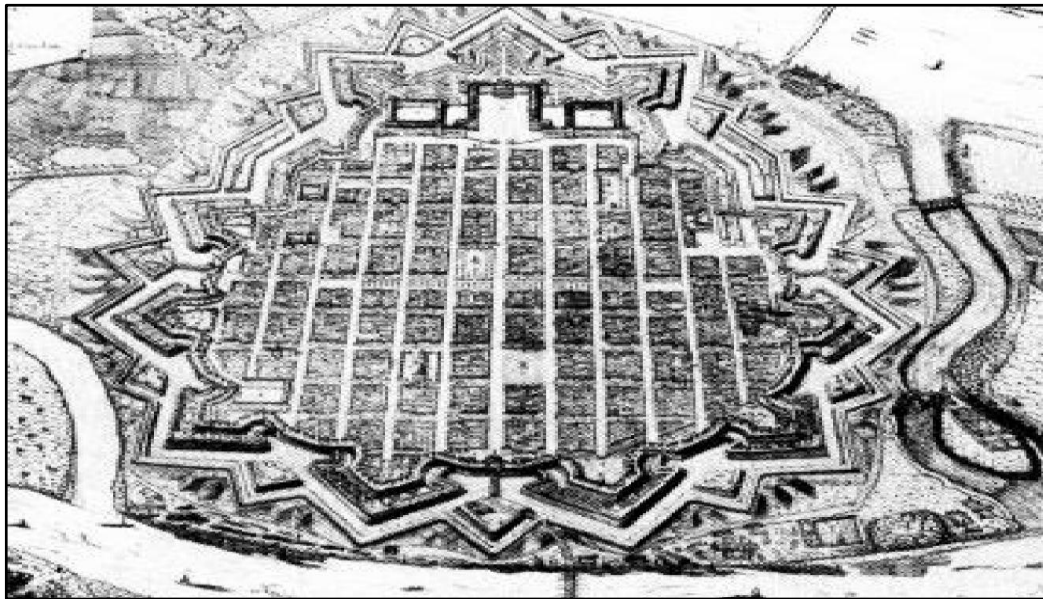


Structural diagram of the traditional Chinese city¹

Unlike China, cities in the Western world usually have no planned structures. They feature winding streets, irregular squares and rounded fortifications.

It was not until the Age of Enlightenment that people began to design 'rational' cities in Europe as well. Just think of Mannheim, the newly founded capital of the former Elector Palatine, with its squares, which – despite all the changes – still characterize the cityscape today.

¹ Source: Heckl et al. (2003, p. 148), see: <https://www2.klett.de/sixcms/media.php/229/104104-4119.pdf>.



Residence city of Mannheim, 1758¹

But back to Xinjiang. There, the Chinese new town, modelled on the rectangular layout of the Chinese 'ideal city', was usually located far outside the old town inhabited by Turkic-speaking locals. This looked very different from the Chinese ideal city. The old oasis towns corresponded to the traditional *Oriental Islamic city model*, characterized by winding bazaar streets, narrow squares, countless mosques and a labyrinth of confusing dead ends, passageways and transitions with enclosed courtyards.² In addition, there was the institution of the mahalla (Uyghur: *mähällä*), which was widespread throughout the Turkic-speaking world. These were demarcated residential quarters within the old towns with their own mosque and Koranic school, their own self-government and a strong sense of neighborly help and control. The inhabitants of a mahalla often belonged to the same clan. They were subject to an elder (*Aksakal*, literally "white beard"), who often also acted as their justice of the peace and mullah and represented his mahalla as a spokesperson to the authorities.³

According to Jean-Paul Loubes, the typical development of the oasis cities in Xinjiang followed the following step-by-step pattern (see illustration below):

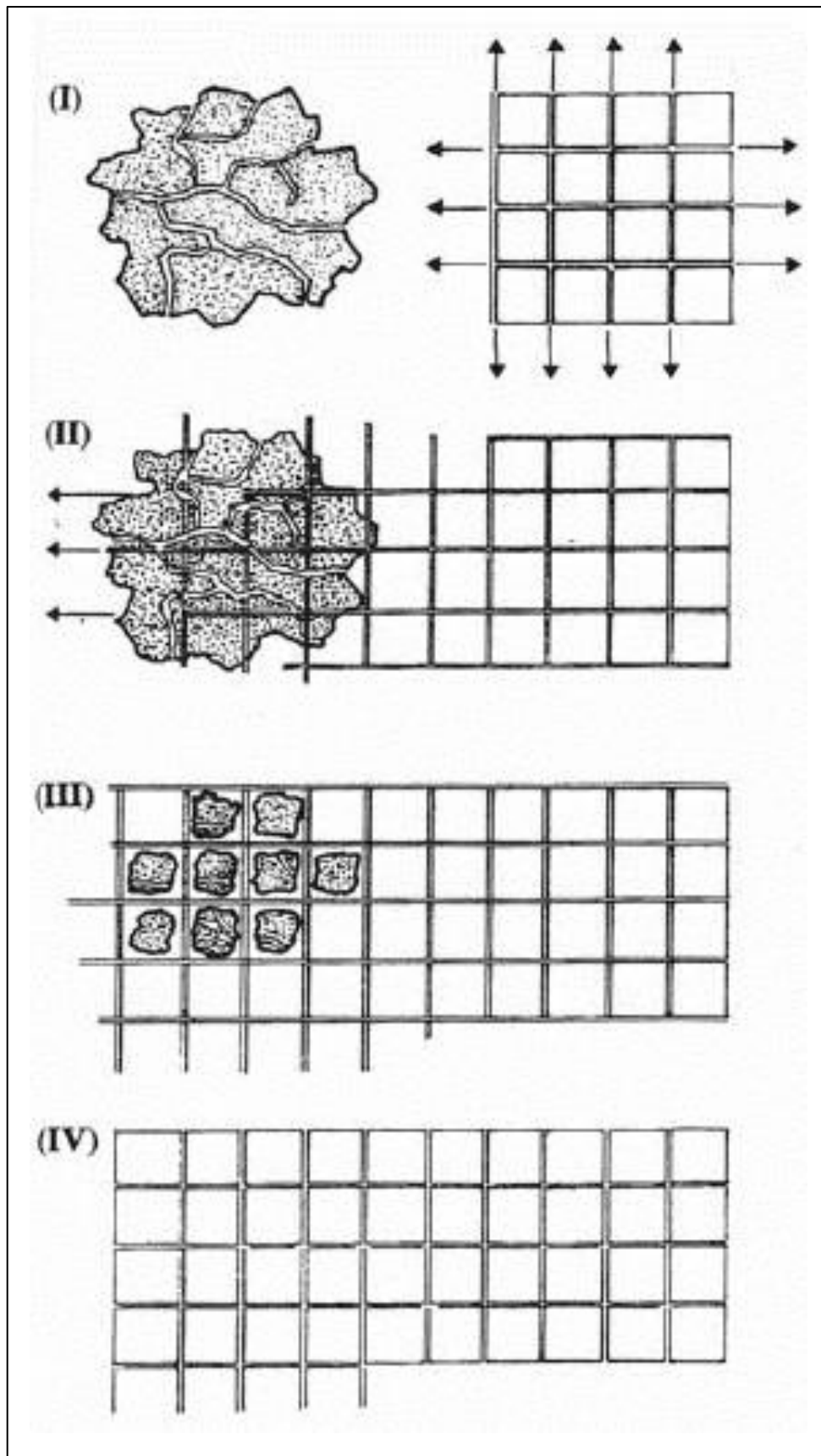
Until the middle of the 20th century, Xinjiang's dual cities consisted of a Uyghur city (left) and a Chinese city (right) existing relatively unconnected next to each other (*Phase I*). The strong influx of Han Chinese immigrants that began after 1949 led to the expansion of the Chinese new towns towards the old town. The regular street axes of the new towns extended into the old town (*phase II*). Gradually, they began to cross the old town. Straight avenues now ran through the middle of the Oriental-Islamic old town, initiating its urban 'Sinicization' (*phase III*). Loubes expects that the old towns will eventually be completely absorbed and 'Sinicized' by the straight streets and buildings of the new towns. The 'dual city' with two distinctly different cultures and ways of life will then be replaced by a modern Chinese metropolis with its wide thoroughfares, shopping centers and high-rise buildings, large parks and squares. The traditional cityscape is disappearing more and more. It is often being replaced by modern architecture with a folkloric exterior (*phase IV*).⁴

¹ Source: https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/d/de/Mannheim_1758.jpg (cutout).

² Loubes (2015, p. 96) characterizes the traditional Uyghur city as a "*ville irrégulière du type 'médina'*", or 'medina city'. For general information on the Islamic-Oriental city type, see Heineberg (2006, p. 288ff.). See also Kreckel, M. (2014, p. 65f.).

³ See Kreckel, M. (2008, p. 44ff.), Paul (2012, p. 443), Pawan / Niyazi (2016), Kobi (2016, p. 126ff.).

⁴ Loubes (1998, p. 394ff.), Sint (2007, p. 226).



Phases of the Sinicization process of Uyghur cities (according to Jean-Paul Loubes)¹

¹ Source: Loubes (1998, p. 407); graphic taken from Sint (207, p. 226).

However, one must be careful with the term '*Sinicization*'. The stages of development described by Loubes are not just about the old oasis cities in Xinjiang becoming increasingly 'Chinese' over time. It is also important to note that shortly after the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, socialist-style *urban modernization* began throughout the country, including in Xinjiang. Much was demolished, and wide boulevards, large parade grounds, prestigious buildings and parks were built throughout the cities. Later, industrial structures and new suburbs with uniform architecture were added. In many places, winding, confusing old town structures were removed; they were considered backward, unhealthy and hostile to progress. In the 1980s and 1990s, with China's explosive economic development under Deng Xiaoping, this process accelerated rapidly once again. In the 21st century, there are around 150 cities with populations of over a million in the People's Republic of China, all of them modern in design. Hardly anything remains of the old towns there, with the exception of tourist attractions, which are particularly well maintained and romanticized..

In Xinjiang, urban development proceeded in much the same way, only more slowly. The gradual '*Sinicization*' of urban structures in Loubes' sense was therefore always a deliberate process of socialist modernization and redevelopment of traditional cities in Xinjiang as well.

Urban modernization processes are taking place in a similar way all over the world today, not only in China. Nowadays, large cities with clear structures, tall buildings, wide transport axes, efficient public transport systems and a functioning supply of gas, water, electricity, etc. are generally considered to be particularly modern and progressive. Ecological considerations are also beginning to gain influence, albeit tentatively.

However, modernization and urban redevelopment everywhere involve the demolition of older buildings and the construction of imposing new buildings and efficient transport systems in the former surrounding areas. This inevitably leads to a clash of interests: modernization versus preservation, expansion and economization versus environmental protection.

This also applies to urban renewal in Xinjiang today. On the one hand, the ancient model of the rationally structured Chinese ideal city has left clear traces in this transformation process. On the other hand, however, urban planning during the socialist Mao era and today's Chinese-style capitalist socialism have also had a significant impact. In addition, international models and trends in urban development are unmistakable in today's Xinjiang.

So we should not only be interested in the Sinicization of Xinjiang. At the same time, the following questions always arise: To what extent do Xinjiang's modern and prosperous cities, which are increasingly influenced by Han Chinese culture, serve the development of the living conditions *of all* city dwellers, including the Uyghurs?¹ To what extent are they able to preserve the cultural heritage of Uyghur cities in the face of rapid change? And how does the expansion and modernization of cities fit in with the requirements of ecological sustainability?

The schematic development model presented by Loubes in the illustration refers to oasis cities with predominantly Muslim populations. They are all located in southern Xinjiang on the edge of the Tarim Basin and in the Turfan Depression, i.e. on the routes of the ancient Silk Road. However, Xinjiang also has large cities with a different history that are predominantly inhabited by Han Chinese.² We will discuss the two largest of these, namely the Bingtuan city of Shihezi and the provincial capital Urumqi, the only city with a population of over a million, later on. First, however, we would like to draw attention to the ancient Uyghur oasis city of Kashgar. Kashgar proves to be an interesting special case in terms of Loubes' development scheme.³

¹ See the essay by Steenberg/Rippa (2019) entitled 'Development for All?'.
² See chapter 9 above.

³ Loubes himself originally developed his urban development model based on the city of Turfan (Loubes 1998).

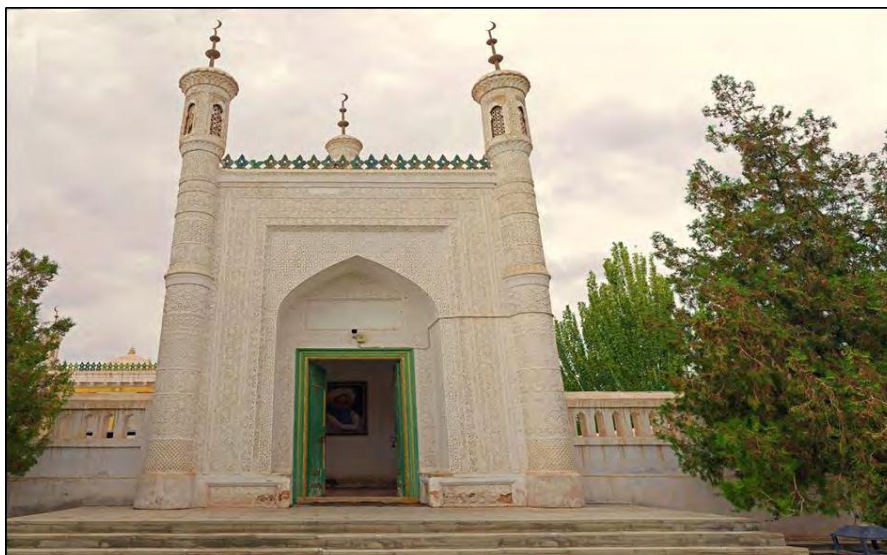
Kashgar, metropolis of the Uyghurs

According to official figures, around 651.000 inhabitants lived in Kashgar in 2018., approx. 86% of whom are Uyghurs. As can be seen from the various overview maps earlier in this book, the city lies on the western edge of the Taklamakan Desert, where the northern and southern routes of the historic Silk Road meet. Kashgar is protected from the dreaded north winds by the Tianshan Mountains. Although it rains very rarely here, the water-rich mountain rivers Kyzil Su and Tümen provide favorable living conditions. They converge east of Kashgar to form the Kashgar Darya. After about 300 km, this finally flows into the Tarim at the newly founded Bingtuan city of Aral.

Kashgar has existed since ancient times, even though there are hardly any traces of antiquity to be found today. More than two thousand years ago, the Greek polymath and geographer Ptolemy (c. 100-160 AD) mentioned the name 'Kasia'. In ancient Chinese sources, the city is called *Shule*. The early explorers of the Tarim Basin, Xuanzang and Marco Polo, also described Kashgar. At the turn of the 20th century, Kashgar was also an important destination for Sven Hedin and other European explorers.

The city has always played a key role in East-West trade along the ancient and medieval Silk Road. Caravans from all corners of the world converged here. Kashgar was a trading hub for goods from many countries and a meeting place for many cultures. However, little is known about the early history of Kashgar. Although it is known that Kashgar was an important centre of Buddhism in pre-Islamic times, there is a lack of architectural evidence from this early period in the city itself. The city's old mud walls and houses have repeatedly fallen into disrepair due to the harsh weather or been destroyed in wars. This means that almost nothing remains of early Kashgar today.

There is also no reliable history of the city to draw upon. There are only scattered historical references and reports.¹ And Mahmud al-Kashgari (c. 1008-1105), the widely travelled author of a dictionary of ancient Turkic languages, is said to have lived here for a long time and died there. It is believed that his grave is in Upal, a village near Kashgar. An impressive mausoleum has been erected for him in Upal.



Mausoleum of Mahmud al-Kashgari (with portrait of the scholar) in Upal near Kashgar²

¹ A compilation of descriptions of Kashgar in historical travelogues can be found in Gollings et al. (2008, pp. 153–157). For the history of Kashgar and the gaps in historiography, see in particular Vicziany/Castro (2019).

² Source: https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/a/a7/2015-09-11-102922_-_Upal%2C_Mausoleum_des_Uigu-rischen_Philologen_Muhamad_Al_Kashgari.jpg.

As mentioned above, medieval Kashgar has long since disappeared. The oldest surviving building in the city is probably the magnificent Id-Kah Mosque, built in 1442. It rests on older foundations and was later expanded and rebuilt several times.



Believers awaiting the breaking of the fast during the fasting month of Ramadan, 2010¹



Square in front of the Id-Kah Mosque – deserted, with few tourists, autumn 2018²

¹ Source: https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/2/2c/The_Thousands_Ruk%27u_on_Eid-ul_Fitr_at_Id_Kah_Mos-que.jpg. (Accessed: 12.6.2021).

² Photo: Marga Kreckel 2018, Map 3, P101452.

In 1514, the old town of Kashgar was almost completely destroyed by the troops of the Chagatai prince Said Khan (see above, chapter 4). Shortly afterwards, the 'new' old town of Kashgar (Uyghur: *kona shähär*) was built on the high banks of the Tümen River and surrounded by high city walls. It too has undergone many changes and modernizations over time. A small part of the former old town (called *aski shähär* or *kozqiyabexi*, Chinese *gaotai*) has continued to exist outside the city walls on the Tümen River to this day. This old part of the city has also recently been radically rebuilt or completely demolished.

After its conquest by Chinese troops under the Manchu Emperor Qianlong in 1759, Kashgar also underwent a development into a 'dual city' in the sense of Jean-Paul Loubes, albeit with a slightly different course. Shortly after 1759, a fortified Chinese garrison was established just outside the western wall of Kashgar's old town. The actual Chinese new town (Uyghur: *yengi shähär*, Chinese: *han sheng*), corresponding to Loubes' model, was not built until much later, around 1838, about 10 km south of Kashgar, near the present-day town of Shule. It was a rectangular, typically Chinese city, walled and oriented from north to south. This was the seat of the imperial governor (*Taotai*).¹

The distance was too great for the Uyghur old town to gradually merge with this new Chinese city. The transformation of Kashgar from an oriental city into a modern Chinese metropolis therefore took place somewhat differently. It only slowly got underway after the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949. In 1968, the huge 'People's Square' was created south of the old town with a larger-than-life statue of Mao, which still dominates the square today.²

¹ These few details on the history of Kashgar are taken from the article "Kashgar" in the 1911 edition of the Encyclopedia Britannica (Black/Eliot 1911), on which more recent accounts are based, mostly without citing the source. The authors of this article, C. E. D. Black and C. N. E. Eliot, were British colonial officials, not historians. They do not cite their sources.

² A detailed photographic documentation of this oldest part of Kashgar's old town *before* its restructuring or destruction can be found in Aydin's dissertation (2018), which is available on the Internet.

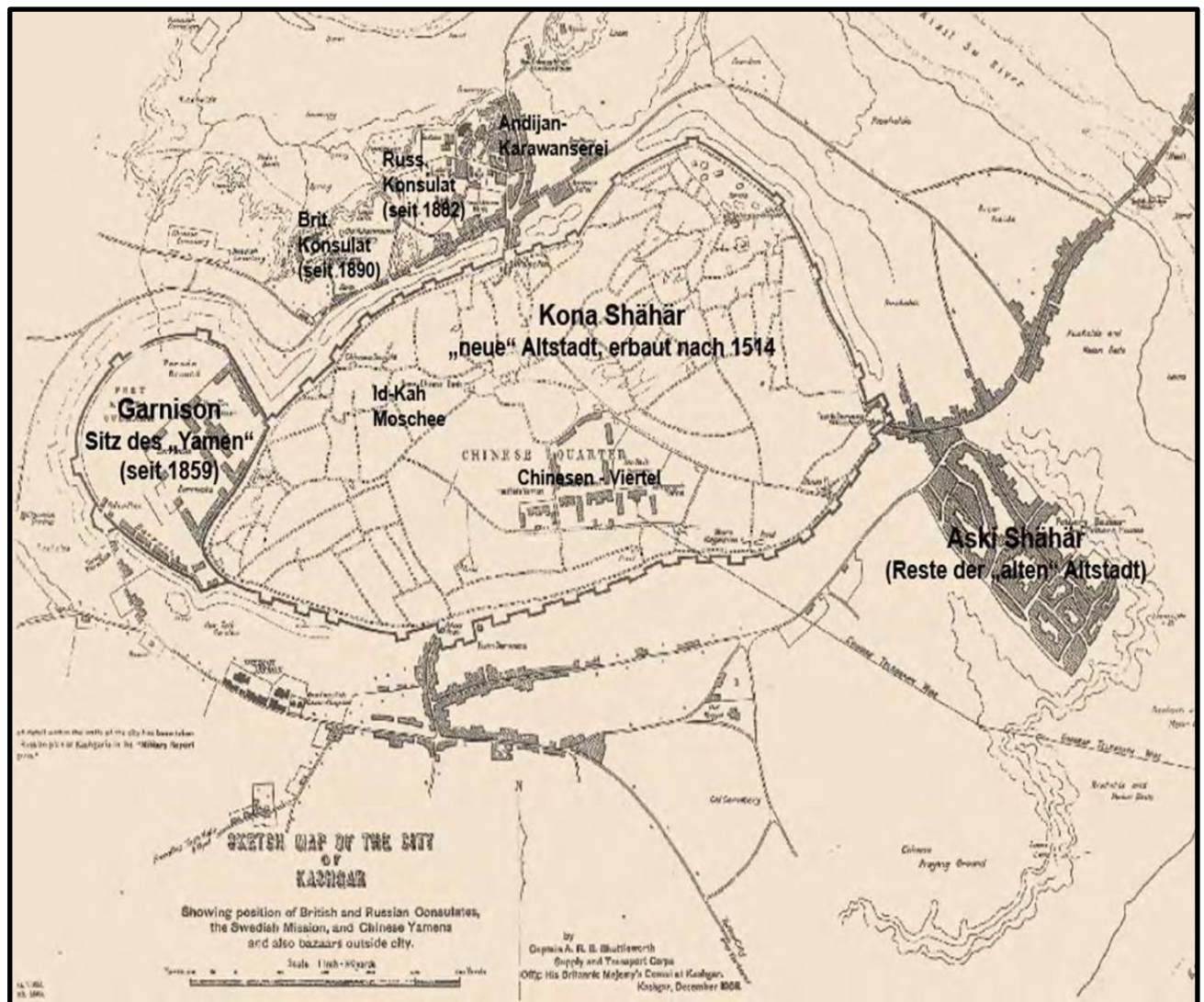


*Kashgar at dusk: Mao statue, Renmin Lu and People's Square, with the old town in the background on the left
the old town in the background¹*

Since the 1980s, with the beginning of the Deng Xiaoping era, the restructuring process has really picked up speed, and it has *not* followed Loubes' pattern. In the case of Kashgar, the distant Chinese new town with the governor's seat has not grown and not become the driving force behind the Sinicization and Modernization of the city. It has remained small and gradually fallen into insignificance. The Chinese city and district administration (*Yamen*), which was more important for everyday life, was not based in the new city, but had always been located in the Chinese garrison directly on the old city wall. It was also partly based in the Uyghur old town itself, where there was a small Chinese residential and commercial district.

The historical map sketch shown here depicts the layout of the 'new' old town (*kona shāhār*) of Kashgar in 1908, with its city walls still intact at that time. To the right, outside the wall (in grey) is the winding 'old' old town of *Aski Shāhār*, which dates back to the old Kashgar from before its destruction in 1514. On the far left of the sketch is the garrison with the seat of the Chinese civil administration (*Yamen*). At that time, it was still separated by its own wall, which disappeared shortly afterwards. The Chinese quarter with municipal offices in the centre of the old town is also clearly visible

¹ https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/1/1e/Kashgar_%2823756718610%29.jpg.



Kashgar in 1908¹

As mentioned above, the process of Sinicization and Modernisation in Kashgar did not originate in the new Chinese town, which lies far outside the old town. Rather, it took place through the gradual shift of the town centre away from the old town to new districts bordering it to the south and east. A thoroughfare running from north to south with the Chinese name *Jiefang Lu* (Liberation Road) was laid through the middle of the old town. Today, it cuts a wide swath through the former maze of alleys. Outside the former city walls, it meets a large east-west axis, the new main shopping street *Renmin Lu* (People's Road). There, south of the old town, a modern business district with high-rise residential buildings, parks and the huge parade ground dominated by the gigantic statue of Mao.

¹ Map sketch from a secret service report by the British colonial government in India; edited excerpt from a blog by Eric Enno Tamm (http://horsethatleaps.com/kashgarnap_oldnew/; accessed: September 2019).



Kashgar today¹

As can be seen from the modern tourist map reproduced here, the urban structure of Kashgar today is characterized by a central, typically "Chinese" north-south axis (*Jiefang Lu* and *Renmin Lu*) and a ring road that follows the line of the former city wall and also encompasses the modern southern part of the city.

In the following montage, we have projected the city wall, which was still in existence in the 1908 sketch, onto a current satellite photo and superimposed it onto today's city map. This reveals how Kashgar's old town has been increasingly taken over and marginalised by the newly emerging Chinese metropolis to the south and east in recent decades – a variation on Lou-bes' expansion scheme described above.

¹ Source: <https://www.chinadiscovery.com/assets/images/xinjiang/kashgar/kashgar-city-map.jpg>. Excerpt from a tourist map of Kashga



Kashgar today – with the former city wall superimposed¹

But first, let us return to the old, Uyghur-influenced Kashgar at the beginning of the 20th century: *Catherine Macartney*, who lived in Kashgar from 1898 to 1918 as the wife of the influential British representative and later Consul General Sir George Macartney, was a local observer of the conditions at that time². She hosted many famous explorers such as Sven Hedin, Aurel Stein and Albert von Le Coq at the British residence "Chinibagh". In her memoirs, Lady Macartney describes Kashgar at the turn of the century as a poor and frightening city on the one hand, but also as an idyllic, romanticized and charming oriental city on the other:

'Kashgar consists of two cities – the predominantly Muslim old town with approximately 40,000 inhabitants, where the Chinese civil administration is also located ... and the smaller, purely Chinese new town seven miles south of the old town, where the provincial governor resides

¹ Insert based on a template by Aydin (2018, p. 136), adapted by the author.

² Michael Dillon (2014, pp. 3f., 24ff.), one of the few Western experts on Xinjiang who had access to research findings by Chinese and Uyghur historians on Kashgar, emphasizes the particular significance of the reports by Western travelers, on which he himself mainly relies – despite his skepticism about their often somewhat one-sided and romanticized view of Kashgar in the past.

and most of the troops are stationed. (...) Both cities are surrounded by high, crenellated city walls with city gates that are locked at night. (...)

The streets of the Muslim city were very narrow, dirty and uneven. (...) Gloomy little shops lined the streets, often darkened by reed mats stretched across the street to provide shade. The shopkeepers squatted among their wares and did not seem particularly eager for customers. Beggars, often hideous in appearance and afflicted with terrible diseases, gathered at the city gate on the road to the bazaar. (...) The larger streets seemed to lead mostly to the wide Id-Kah market square, in the centre of which stood the main mosque. On Friday mornings, all the men came there in their best clothes to pray. (...) I wish I could adequately describe the picturesque beauty of the Id-Kah bazaar as it presented itself from the steps of the mosque. In the middle of the large square were the fruit stalls, in summer with mountains of fruit, purple peaches, apricots, mulberries, enormous bunches of blue and white grapes, yellow and blue figs, (...) melons of all varieties and colors.

Then there were the stalls selling Uyghur headdresses [Doppas], which provided a wonderful splash of colour. On their racks, they looked like colorful flowers. (...) The people themselves were also all dressed in the brightest colors. Compared to England, the people in Kashgar seemed very cheerful. The bright colors suited them and their surroundings perfectly.

In the side streets, there were bazaars for cotton fabrics, chintz, metalware and silverware, and there were market streets for flour, grain and much more. And there was also a dreadful flea market where second-hand clothes were sold. I am quite sure, it lived up to its name.’¹

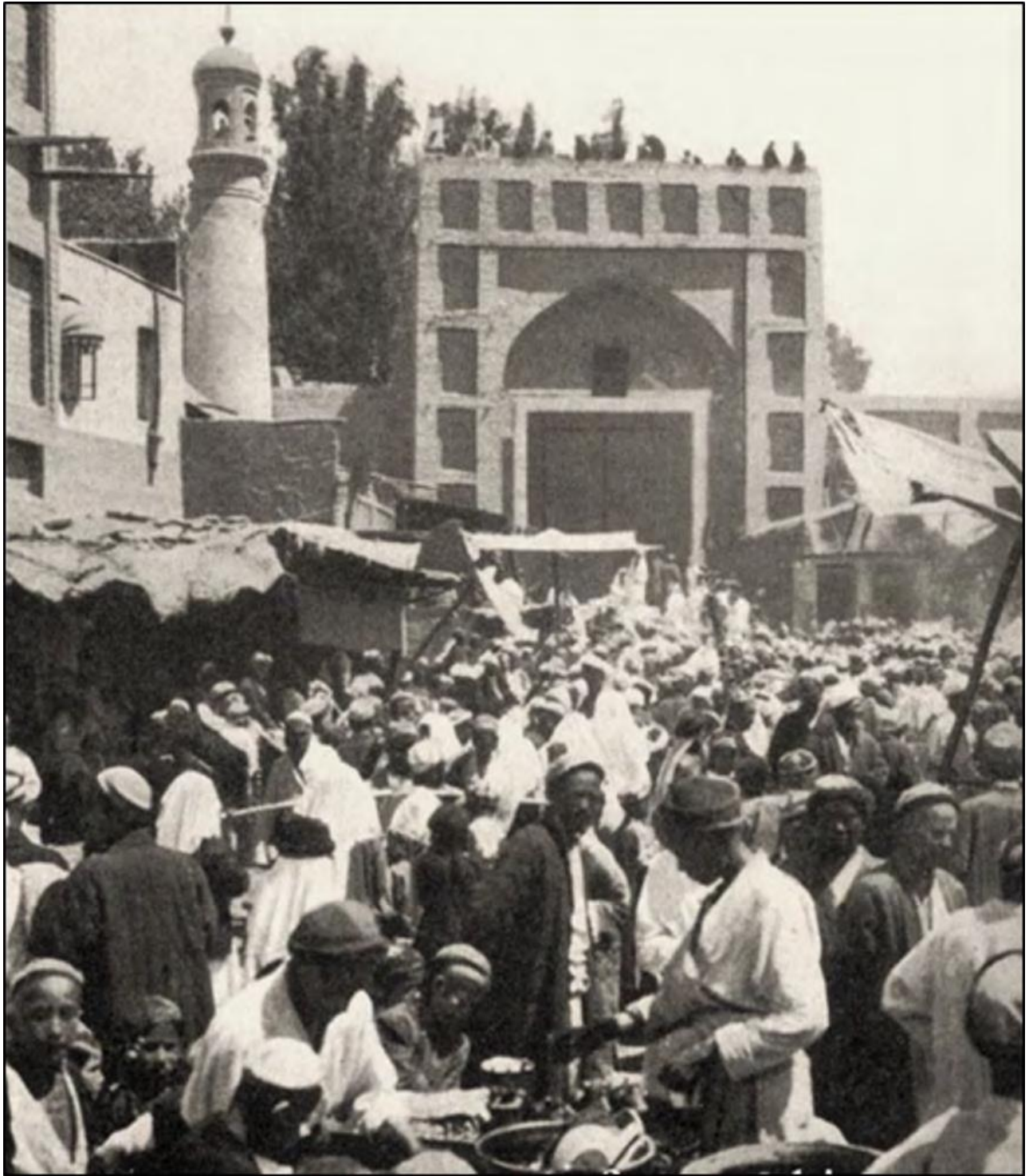
Another Western contemporary witness to old Kashgar and its recent changes was *Gunnar Jarring* (1907-2002), an internationally renowned Swedish diplomat and famous Turkologist.² In 1929, Jarring spent several months in Kashgar as a young doctoral student conducting linguistic research. Forty-nine years later, In 1978, he returned as a UN special envoy and highly respected guest of the Chinese government. In his memoir ‘Return to Kashgar’, published in 1986, Gunnar Jarring retrospectively characterizes the Kashgar of 1929 as follows:

‘Arriving in Kashgar in 1929 was like travelling from the present into the Middle Ages, into a scene from One Thousand and One Nights. There were no cars, no motorcycles, not even a bicycle. No electric light illuminated the narrow, dark alleys of the bazaar district. There were no newspapers, no printed books – scribes sat cross-legged copying manuscripts in neat Arabic letters. (...). People of all nationalities swarmed through the narrow alleys, Turks, Tajiks, Dungans, Chinese. The rich and the aristocrats rode through the crowd on stately horses with beautifully embroidered saddlecloths. The less well-off rode on mules, while the masses of poor people walked. (...)

At that time, the city was surrounded by a ten-meter-high wall with four city gates that were locked at night. (...) Inside the city walls were bazaars, large mosques and the homes of rich and poor alike. ... Outside the city there was green nature, sunshine and light; inside it was always semi-dark. Nowhere else in the world today can such a well-developed medieval Islamic society be found as there was in Kashgar at that time.’¹

¹ Macartney (1931, p. 62ff.).

² Gunnar Jarring (1907-2002) was a Swedish Turkologist who was particularly interested in the Uyghur language. During his long diplomatic career, he served as Swedish ambassador to India, the USA and the USSR, as well as to the UN. From 1967 to 1990, he was Special Envoy of the <https://badw.de/fileadmin/nachrufe/Jarring%20Gunnar.pdf> for the Middle East.



Market scene in front of the Id-Kah Mosque, 1920s¹

¹ Source: Skrine (1926, p. 80).

Jarring vividly describes the colorful diversity of the bazaar and the craftsmen's alleys in the old town of Kashgar. Hardly anything had changed there compared to the conditions observed by Lady Macartney shortly after the turn of the century.

Almost fifty years later, in 1978, Gunnar Jarring returned to Kashgar once more – after China's first socialist transformation, after Mao Zedong's death and after the end of the Cultural Revolution, but before the era of Deng Xiaoping, China's second great transformer. Jarring found the city greatly changed:

'Within the city, we drove through an area that still matched my earlier memories – craftsmen on both sides of the street: cobblers, tailors, the old specialists who repaired broken porcelain, bakers, a farrier who squeezed a horse into a special wooden frame to calm it down for the few minutes it took to change its horseshoes.

But this old-fashioned part of town was little more than an illusion. Most of the features of old Kashgar had disappeared. There were no more mullahs with their enormous white turbans. (...) Instead of the warning cries of mule and camel drivers, I heard the deafening honking of cars. (...) The most popular means of transport were small two-wheeled carts with bicycle tires, which were used to transport people or lighter goods. They were loaded to the limits of their capacity. Sometimes five or six people were crammed into these carts, which were designed for two. In addition to the chaos of carts, cars, trucks and motorcycles, there were countless bicycles (...). The noise was deafening. There were police and traffic lights at every intersection. (...)

But what made it particularly difficult for me to find my way around were not only the wide streets, the new houses, the monumental buildings and the gigantic statue of Mao. What irritated me most was that the old city wall that had surrounded the inner city had disappeared. The square in front of the Id-Kah, the large mosque, was unrecognizable. (...) In the past, street vendors' stalls lined the entire street up to the entrance of the mosque. Kashgar's covered bazaar was right next to it. All of that has now disappeared, replaced by a wide street (...)

"What I had seen in 1929-30 (...) can best be described as a return to the Middle Ages. Forty-nine years later (...) Kashgar was the opposite of the sleepy Islamic society of the 1930s. It was now a rather noisy and mechanized socialist city. The difference was enormous."¹

However, Jarring also reports on the Andijan district near the former Russian, later Soviet consulate north of the city wall. A large caravanserai had once stood there.² Now, in 1929, a small settlement of commercial buildings had sprung up here, already offering European imports, mostly from the Soviet Union or British India. Jarring writes:

'The Andijan district was Kashgar's modern area at the time. It pointed to a future that was already on the doorstep. But that door only opened after Mao's transformation of China.'³

¹ Jarring (1986, pp. 78-80).

² The Andijan caravanserai was the starting and ending point for journeys to and from the Ferghana Valley north of the Tian Shan Mountains, named after the city of Andijan in present-day Uzbekistan. In the past, all inhabitants of the Ferghana Valley were referred to as *Andijani*.

³ Jarring (1986, p. 85).



Pedestrian and bicycle street near the Id-Kah Mosque around 1983 – with the first tourists¹

Seven years later, in 1985, Gunnar Jarring wrote an afterword to his Kashgar book. In it, he talks about Xinjiang's opening up to the West, Kashgar's new transport links, the region's rich mineral resources, but also about the strong Han Chinese immigration. For him, Xinjiang is in every respect a 'province of modernization' for which there are sophisticated development plans. But he also asks the anxious question:

*'Where are the engineers and scientists who can implement these plans? There will be a strong demand for education, especially for the Uyghurs and the minorities living in this autonomous region, so that they can participate in the development of their country and not be pushed aside by the more technologically advanced Han Chinese.'*²

It is evident that Gunnar Jarring refused to simply want back the lost world of old Kashgar, which was romanticized in his memory. Jarring was convinced that there was no way around the modernization of

¹ Source: <https://www.farwestchina.com/blog/photos-of-kashgar-circa-1983/>.

² Jarring (1986, p. 237f.).

Kashgar and its Uyghur population. However, he also hoped that social upheaval could be avoided and that there would be no cultural devastation that would destroy the Uyghur language and way of life he loved so much.

More than forty years have passed since Jarring's second visit to Kashgar. Much has changed. during this period. Kashgar is no longer isolated at the end of the Taklamakan desert. As we saw in Chapter 8, the city is now connected to an efficient long-distance road network, has an airport and a high-speed rail link from the Chinese heartland to Kashgar and on to Khotan. In 2010, Kashgar was declared a 'special economic zone' in which industry, business and tourism are heavily subsidized by the state. The wealthy megacities of Guangzhou and Shenzhen are partner cities and sponsors of Kashgar. A new skyline has emerged in Kashgar, and the population has grown to over half a million.

Thus, some prosperity has arrived in Kashgar at last, in this remote city in the far-west of China. Bicycles are becoming a rare item which is increasingly replaced by electric motor-scooters as all-purpose transport-vehicles.



Electric scooters as all-purpose vehicles for the whole family ,,,



... easy to repair and often well occupied¹

¹ photos Marga Kreckel 2018, map (3 , P101 0589, P1010 261, map 4, P1010 460).

The traditional oriental bazaar has been moved away from the forecourt of the Id-Kah Mosque. It has been replaced by the large, stone-paved open space that Gunnar Jarring had already mentioned. The bazaar itself is now located in the spacious *market halls* and traffic-calmed bazaar streets on the opposite side of the Tümen River.



Modern bazaar of Kashgar¹

¹ Photos: Marga Kreckel 2018 (Map 4, P1010 394 and 395).

The famous Sunday *cattle market* of Kashgar has not been held in the old town for many years. As a tourist attraction, it has been relocated far outside the city. Nostalgics lament this, but modern city dwellers, who would have to endure the stench and noise, are less likely to do so.



A deal is struck in the morning mist between a Kyrgyz cattle dealer and a Uyghur sheep farmer¹



Sheep prepared for sale²

¹ Photo: Marga Kreckel 2018 (Map 3, P 1010 706).

² Photo: Marga Kreckel 2018 (Map 3, P 1010 720).

At the same time, the government's omnipresent anti-terrorism and disciplinary policies are by no means leaving the city of Kashgar unscathed. Everywhere you look, you see shops with bars on the windows and security measures of all kinds.



*Anti-terrorism measures in everyday Uyghur life:
Shopping street with barred shops, Kashgar, October 2018¹*



Omnipresence of barbed wire and surveillance cameras²

¹ Photo: Marga Kreckel 2018 (Map 4, P1010 377).

² Photo: Marga Kreckel 2018 (Map 4, P1010 291).

Today's Kashgar is a city full of contrasts and contradictions. On the one hand, visitors encounter people who seem carefree, especially children who live for the moment. On the other hand, routine surveillance and strict control measures are evident at every turn. In people's everyday lives, the two are inextricably intertwined. It is impossible to see into their hearts.



City of contrasts: City panorama of Kashgar, with the Tianshan Mountains in the background:¹

A second problem is closely linked to the increased control measures, namely the conflict and coexistence of urban planning tradition and modernity. Debates about the renovation or destruction of the historic old town of Kashgar have also reached the Western world. Even the European Parliament is calling for its preservation:

These warnings from afar are countered by the Chinese government's plans to modernize Kashgar and develop it into a national and international tourist centre. Preparations for this began as early as the 1990s. Since 2001, the systematic redevelopment of Kashgar's old town has been gradually underway, with considerable intervention in the existing old building fabric.

¹ Photo: Marga Kreckel 2018 (Map 3, P 1010 348).

² See, for example, the European Parliament resolution of 11 March 2011 calling on the Chinese government to preserve the architectural heritage of Kashgar (https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-7-2011-0100_DE.html).



Street scene in the old town of Kashgar, 2005¹

Until a few years ago, the old, albeit dilapidated Kashgar was largely preserved. This is documented in a freely accessible photo archive at Monash University Melbourne with approximately 2,000 photographs of Kashgar taken by John Gollings in 2005.² The best photos are included in Gollings' excellent 2008 photo book 'Kashgar', which we unfortunately cannot reproduce here. In this book, the old town of Kashgar is described as the *'best-preserved example of a traditional Islamic city in all of Central Asia'*.³ Today, much of what can still be seen in the photos from that time has already been demolished and disappeared or replaced by modern reconstructions.

From 2009 onwards, the 'Old Town Renewal' project was taken seriously. Entire areas with their winding alleys, one- to three-store clay and wooden buildings and enclosed courtyards have since been demolished. Others have been thoroughly renovated or completely rebuilt according to modern living and working principles. Industrial settlements have been relocated from the old town area.

¹ <https://ndownloader.figshare.com/files/6034038/preview/6034038/preview.jpg>.

² Available at https://figshare.com/articles/Kashgar_old_city/3851061#.

³ Gollings et al. (2008, p. 79). A detailed photo documentation (also freely accessible on the Internet) of the 'old' old town of Aski Shähär on the western bank of the Tümen River shortly before its radical renovation and demolition can be found in Aydin (2018): <http://researcharchive.vuw.ac.nz/handle/10063/70839>.

The entire project culminates in a 'model old town' on the northern edge of the historic city centre. There, most of the old buildings have either been extensively reconstructed or completely rebuilt. The alleys have been widened and repaved to invite locals and tourists to stroll and shop. A spacious car park has been set up for them at the foot of the rebuilt city wall.



Model Old Town of Kashgar, seen from the car park¹

Inside the renovated old town, traffic is calmed and everything is neat and tidy. The houses are decorated with flags and greenery everywhere. Instead of the former confusing maze of alleys and buildings in need of renovation, there are now clearly structured house fronts and wide pedestrian passages with modernized flats, small shops and craft businesses, many with 'new-Uyghur' façades. At the entrance to the model old town above the car park, cafés, restaurants, souvenir shops and similar attractions have been set up for tourists.

This means that the oriental-style living conditions with all their charms and hardships have now been replaced by a flagged, meticulously planned and thoroughly renovated idyll (see following page).

¹ Photo Marga Kreckel 2018, Map 3, P1010 590.



Festively decorated alley in the model old town of Kashgar¹



Everyday life in the model old town of Kashgar. Metal grating is being transported²

¹ Photo Marga Kreckel, Map 3, P1010 571.

² Photos Marga Kreckel, map 3, P1010 632.

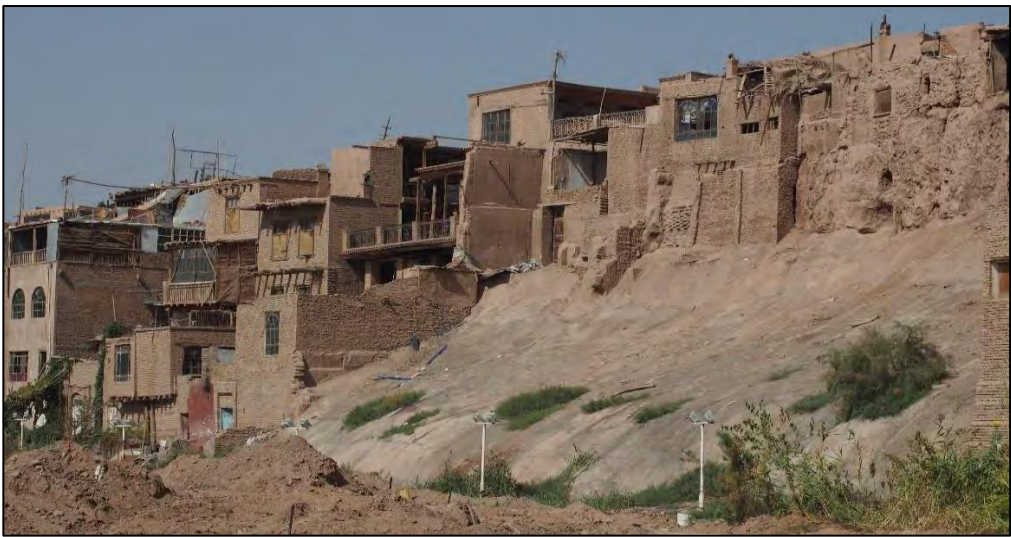


Sketch of the demolition and renovation process in the old town of Kashgar, as of 2011¹

In the sketch above, the first renovated quarter of Kashgar's old town is marked in light blue as the '*model old town*' in light blue. A second renovation project, also marked in light blue, was undertaken much further east, on the slope leading down to the Tumen River. The 'old old town' is located there, the *Aski Shähär* (Chinese: *Gaotai*) quarter. It dates back to medieval times, as mentioned above. For the purpose of its fundamental renovation, Aski Shähär has been completely vacated and partially demolished since 2011.

However, nothing of the redevelopment and reconstruction planned at that time can be seen yet. Instead, over the years, Aski Shähär has become a dilapidated, almost deserted place. Our photos document the condition in 2018.

¹ Source: Steenberg (2013, p. 69; excerpt, with additions of our own).



Above: Abandoned 'old' old town of Kashgar, on the slope to the Tümen River, 2018¹

¹ Photos Marga Kreckel 2018, map 3, P1010 800 and 785, and map 4, P1010 333.

A glance at *Google Earth* shows that nothing fundamental has changed in the structural condition of Aski Shähär between 2002 and 2021. Surely, surrounding demolition sites have now been cleared and landscaped. However, the redevelopment of the residential area itself is still pending. If a second ‘model old town’ is indeed to be built there, the likelihood that much of the old building fabric of Aski Shähär can be preserved will decrease more and more over the years.



Aski Shähär (Gaotai) and its surroundings, 2002-2021 (satellite images from Google Earth)¹

¹ Google Earth images from 2002 and 2017, taken from Aydin (2018, p. 140), for 2021: Own image from Google Earth on 22 November 2021.

Apart from the depressing sight of Aski Shähär and the numerous demolition sites, however, there are many examples of structural renewal and renovation throughout the Uyghur city centre of Kashgar, not only in the model old town. This involves a "*neo-Uyghur*" architectural style, which is significantly influenced by the internationally renowned Han Chinese architect *Wang Xiao Dong*.¹



Neo-Uyghur façade architecture: elegant department store and modern apartment building ²

¹ For more on "*neo-Uyghur*" architecture, see Loubes (2015, pp. 119–151) and Kobi (2018).

² Photo Marga Kreckel 2018, map 3, P1010 454 and P1010 269.



Neo-Uyghur architecture in Kashgar, street scene (2015)¹

Many of the former residents of Kashgar's old town no longer live there. They have been relocated to modern high-rise housing estates in suburbs far outside the city centre, prosaically named *Compound No. 1*, *No. 2* and *No. 5*². The living conditions there are completely different from those in old Kashgar. The traditional system of neighborhood assistance, which revolved around the local mosque and the mahalla, no longer exists here. The intricate oriental city structures have been replaced by rectangular streets and apartment blocks with a neo-Uyghur appearance.

Some of the old town residents were able to remain in their reconstructed and modernized homes in the old town or returned there later. It is mainly the better-off who can afford to do so. The old town has thus changed significantly, not only in terms of its architectural character, but also in terms of its social composition. Unfortunately, this is also typical of large European cities. The process of *gentrification* brings with it similar problems everywhere.

¹https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/8/83/Kashgar_everyday_life_Kashgar_old_city_IGP3839.jpg/1280px-Kashgar_everyday_life_Kashgar_old_city_IGP3839.jpg.

² According to Pawan / Niyazi (2016, p. 125), the flowery Chinese names for these new residential areas – ‘Garden of Happiness’, ‘Apricot Blossom Garden’ and ‘Peach Blossom Garden’ – are not accepted by the locals.

³ See Kobi (2016a, p. 154ff.; 2016b), Pawan/Niyazi (2016), Liu/Yuan (2019).

Since 2009/2010, there have been bitter public debates about these developments. The government presents the partial demolition and reconstruction of the old town of Kashgar as a long-overdue act of fundamental renovation of dilapidated buildings, earthquake protection and the preservation and renewal of traditional Uyghur architecture and urban culture. Improving the quality of life for residents and increasing the appeal for wealthy tourists are cited as important main arguments.

The opposing side argues, equally convincingly, that Kashgar is violating fundamental principles of monument preservation and that valuable historical heritage has been irretrievably destroyed. In addition, the Sinicization process associated with the renovation of the old town is viewed critically, as it is said to be changing the traditional living environment of Kashgar. It is claimed to be destroying the established structures of Uyghur coexistence and Uyghur urban culture and promoting harmful gentrification and commercial touristification of Kashgar's old town. It is not uncommon, especially from outside, for suspicions to be expressed that the renovation of Kashgar's old town is merely a pretext for cleaning up supposed Uyghur or Islamist pockets of resistance.

As a foreign visitor who sympathizes with the Uyghur population of Kashgar and their cultural heritage, one tends to take sides emotionally. However, we outsiders are advised to exercise restraint, even if we should not be blind and uncritical.

But we should also remain aware of our own contradictions. After all, one might recall the universally admired city of Paris, for example. Today, people are lamenting the destruction of large parts of the venerable *Notre Dame* Cathedral by fire. At the same time, however, they rave about the *Grands Boulevards* or *La Défense* as great architectural achievements. It is all too easy to overlook the fact that both are based on urban clear-cutting from the 19th and 20th centuries.

Or consider the demolition of the traditional market halls in the heart of Paris (*Les Halles*) and the construction of the modern *Centre Pompidou* and the popular *Forum des Halles* in their place.

¹ See Bellér-Hann (2014), Köckritz (2014), Kobi (2016a), Liu / Zhang (2019: pp. 37-40) for more on these controversies.



France or China?

View from the Arc de Triomphe to the Grande Arche in the La Défense skyscraper district, Paris¹

So we must not take the easy way out in the ongoing conflict between preserving cultural heritage and modern urban renewal. For example, one can certainly form a personal opinion on whether the bombastic skyscraper backdrops of Paris or Shanghai are a highlight of architectural design, and whether the neo-Uyghur architectural style found in Kashgar and other cities in Xinjiang is an architecturally remarkable innovation or kitschy folklore architecture, rather. Perhaps it is both? In any case, one should not presume to be a neutral referee in these matters.

Above all, one should not become too involved in the ethnic-political conflicts between Uyghurs and Han Chinese, which are influenced by many domestic and foreign interests and a wide variety of cultural beliefs. For as indisputable as it is that the Uyghurs in Xinjiang's 'dual society' are particularly affected by disadvantages, discrimination and the 're-education' measures (see Chapters 9 and 12), it cannot be overlooked that the main inhabitants of today's Xinjiang are Uyghurs *and* Han Chinese:

As has been emphasized several times, over 40% of Xinjiang's inhabitants are now Han Chinese, many of whom are already second or third generation. There are large cities in Xinjiang, such as the provincial capital Urumqi and the Bingtuan city of Shihezi, which have long been predominantly inhabited and shaped by Han Chinese citizens. They should not be forgotten here either. In the next two sections, we will therefore take a closer look at them.

¹ https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/1/1c/Blick_vom_Arc_de_Triomphe_de_l'Étoile_auf_La_Défense.JPG.

Shihezi, stronghold of the Bingtuan

As a particularly striking contrast to Kashgar, the ‘metropolis of the Uyghurs’, we introduce now the city of Shihezi, which is inhabited almost exclusively by Han Chinese. Both cities, Kashgar and Shihezi, are roughly the same size, with around 600,000 inhabitants. Shihezi is a very young city and, unlike Kashgar, is virtually unknown abroad. Like Kashgar, Shihezi is a river oasis, located on the Manas River in northern Xinjiang. The city lies on the northern side of the Tianshan Mountains in the Dzungarian Basin, on the edge of the steppe-like Gurbantunggut Desert. Similar to Kashgar, the surrounding area is largely flat and very fertile thanks to artificial irrigation. However, the climate is exposed to the north wind and therefore significantly harsher during the winter months.²

Shihezi was founded in 1951 by Han Chinese General Wang Zhen in no man's land. Wang Zhen was a close associate of Mao Zedong and commander of the troops that carried out the ‘peaceful liberation’³ of Xinjiang in 1949. He was also the founding father of the powerful Bingtuan organization mentioned above. It has its headquarters in Shihezi. Shihezi grew rapidly after 1951 and was elevated to city status in 1974.

¹ According to official figures, Shihezi had a population of 592,994 in 2018, with Han Chinese making up 94.1% of the population. Kashgar had 651,477 inhabitants, 85.8% of whom were Uyghurs (calculated according to: Xinjiang Statistical Yearbook 2020, Table 3-1). In both cases, some rural surrounding communities are also included.

² A comparison of Kashgar and Shihezi can be found in Cappelletti (2020, chap. 4).

³ ‘Peaceful liberation’ is the official euphemism for the – largely bloodless – process of Mao Zedong's troops taking power in Xinjiang in 1949 (State Council of the People's Republic of China, 2003, 2014).



General Wang Zhen (1908-1993), with the Bingtuan Museum in Shihezi in the background¹

¹ Source: Photo Marga Kreckel 2018, Map 2, 9180 132.

Today, Shihezi is a modern Chinese city. Its architectural style is partly characterized by the strict communist early phase and partly by modern Chinese architecture, but without neo-Uyghur influences. According to official figures, 94% of Shihezi's inhabitants are Han Chinese, with only 1% belonging to the Uyghur ethnic group¹.

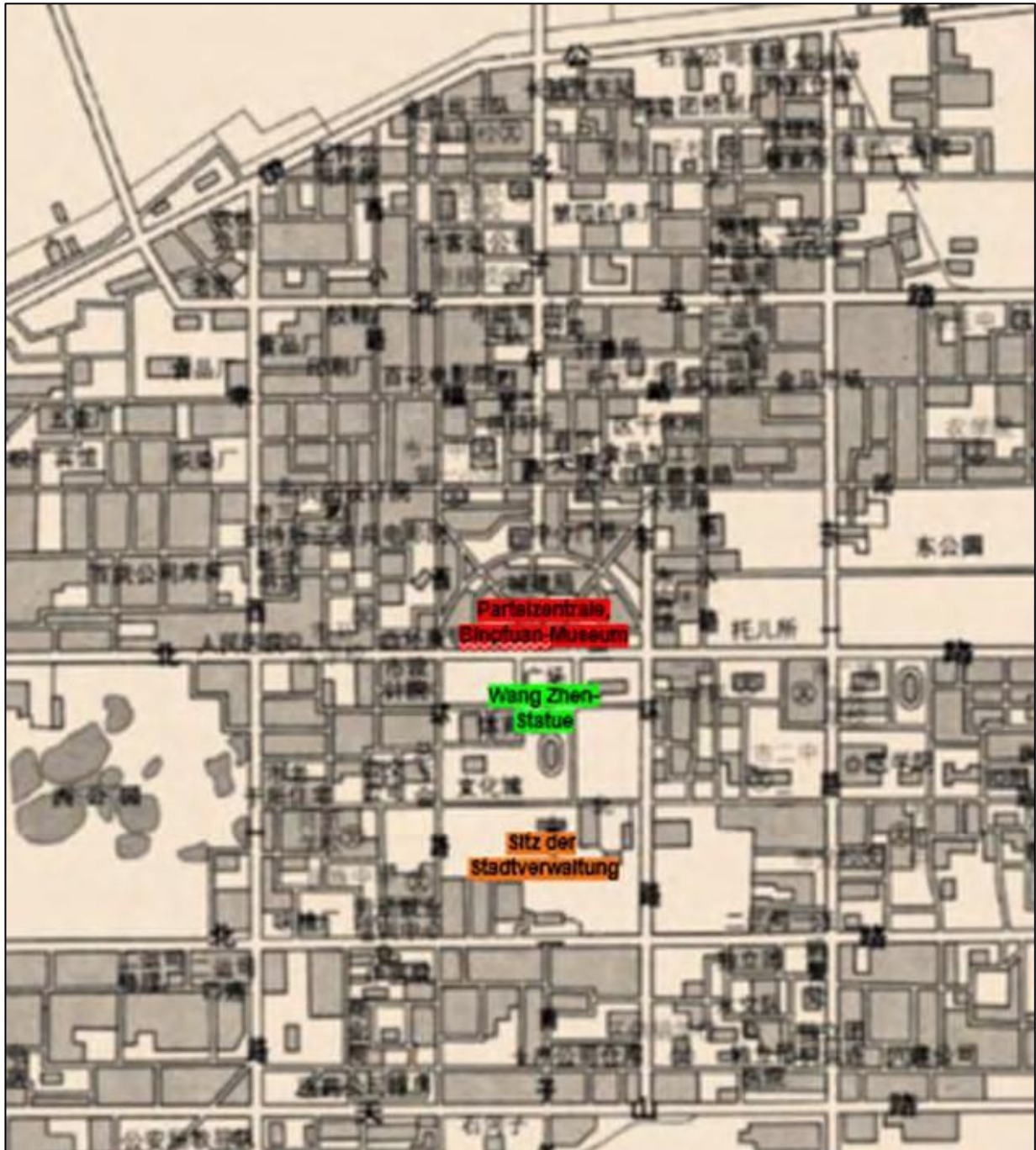


Main street in Shihezi, 1950s and today²

¹ Xinjiang Statistical Yearbook 2019, Table 3-7.

² Source: https://www.t-online.de/nachrichten/ausland/id_86547120/si_4/fotoshow-chinas-rasanter-wandel-in-vorher-nachher-bildern.html.

A large part of the population living in Shihezi is still employed in agriculture, particularly in livestock farming and the cultivation of sugar beet, tomatoes and, above all, cotton. However, over the years, Shihezi has increasingly become an industrial location, with a focus on textile production and food processing. In addition, Shihezi now has a modern, Chinese-language university with approximately 50,000 students. It is the second largest university in Xinjiang (after Urumqi).



Shihezi, city centre plan ¹

¹ Source: Cliff (2009, p. 97, edited).

The city plan of Shihezi clearly reflects the model of the ideal Chinese city shown above – with its chess-board pattern of straight and very wide streets, its distinct north-south orientation and the most important political institutions located on the central axis.

Ethnologist Tom Cliff emphasizes, too, that Shihezi corresponds exactly to the Chinese ideal of 'idealized urbanity' that has been transplanted from the Han Chinese heartland to the western periphery. It combines the traditional model of the rectangular, north-facing Chinese city with modern socialist ideas of Chinese urban planning.¹ In stark contrast to Kashgar, Islamic-Oriental urban culture has left no traces whatsoever in Shihezi.

Shihezi was shaped by the Bingtuan organization, which was already mentioned in chapters 8 and 9 above. Since the 1950s, this paramilitary organization has been and still is the most important driving force behind the economic development of the Xinjiang region and its integration into the People's Republic of China – a fact that is hardly known outside China:

After the 'peaceful liberation' of Xinjiang in October 1949 by Mao Zedong's Chinese People's Liberation Army led by General *Wang Zhen*, the latter established the Production and Construction Corps (*Xinjiang Shengchan Jianshe Bingtuan*) in Xinjiang. As mentioned before, the colloquial short name for this is Bingtuan (translated: 'troop', 'unit' or simply 'corps').² When the decades-long civil war in China came to an end, the militarily led production and construction corps initially served as reception centers for demobilized soldiers and their families, both for former members of the Communist People's Liberation Army and for former soldiers of the defeated Guomindang troops of General Chiang Kai-shek, who had fled to Taiwan. Almost all of them were Han Chinese.

In order to make a living, the Bingtuan units in Xinjiang had to provide for themselves as far as possible. Their task was to develop and cultivate new agricultural and grazing land under the most difficult conditions, to provide irrigation, to build transport routes and also to develop industry and mining. In doing so, they were to take on a pioneering and exemplary role in the development of Xinjiang and contribute to the creation of the "socialist new man" in communist China. In addition, as a tightly organized paramilitary organization and militia that was available at all times, Bingtuan was tasked with helping to secure China's external borders. Within Xinjiang, the corps members were responsible for maintaining public order and ensuring that the directives of the Chinese central government and the Communist Party were followed there.

¹ Cliff, op. cit., pp. 95ff.

² After 1949, semi-military, semi-civilian associations for the development of wasteland were initially formed under names such as "Xinjiang Land Reclamation Army" and "Xinjiang Construction Army". They were incorporated into the Bingtuan organization, which was formally established in 1954 (Neddermann 2010, p. 56ff.).

Since the founding of the Bingtuan in the 1950s, the Han Chinese production and construction corps have thus served as an important driving force behind the state-controlled process of social sinicization, economic modernisation, political control and ideological integration of Xinjiang into the Chinese state.

Until the 1970s, Bingtuan also became the main vehicle for state-sponsored immigration of Han Chinese settlers to Xinjiang. The ongoing immigration from the densely populated Chinese heartland to the sparsely populated west has led to a significant change in the demographic composition of Xinjiang over time. As has been emphasized several times, in 1949 around three quarters of the population living in Xinjiang were Turkic-speaking Uyghurs and only about 5% were Chinese-speaking Han,¹ whereas today, Uyghurs make up just under half of Xinjiang's population, while the proportion of Han Chinese has risen to over 40%.² Today they occupy the lion's share of well-paid and prestigious positions in Xinjiang.³

A large proportion of the 10.9 million Han Chinese officially counted in the last census in Xinjiang in 2020 – namely 3.1 million people (almost 30%) – live and work in one of the Bingtuan's facilities, i.e. in almost exclusively Han Chinese social environments within Xinjiang.⁴ The Bingtuan facilities have thus become an important power factor in today's Xinjiang. They are tightly organized and report directly to the powerful Ministry of Defense in Beijing, not to the provincial government in Urumqi.⁵

The city of Shihezi, with a population of just under 600,000, is the largest of these Chinese Bingtuan enclaves. However, most of the Han Chinese living there are no longer immigrants, but were born in Xinjiang as children and grandchildren of the first Bingtuan generation. They are therefore locals themselves, but have lived and grew up in a purely Chinese environment. They usually have no personal contact with the Uyghur majority population and do not speak Uyghur.⁶ Their language is Mandarin Chinese; the dialects of their original provinces are disappearing among the younger generation.

¹ Toops (2004, p. 246). For information on the immigration of Han Chinese to Xinjiang, see Joniak-Lüthi (2013).

² With Xinjiang's total population growing from 5 million to 25 million between 1953 and 2018 (Statistics Bureau of Xinjiang 2019, p. 73).

³ Zang (2011), Cappelletti (2016), Ma (2017), Hasmath (2019). See above, Chapter 9.

⁴ Census results: Statistics Bureau of Xinjiang, 16 June 2021 (<https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/ce/cgtrt/eng/news/t1884310.htm>); Bingtuan membership figures: Statistics Bureau of Xinjiang (2019, p. 97). Around 87% of Bingtuan members and almost all of their leadership personnel in Xinjiang belong to the Han Chinese ethnic group (Shinmen 2018, p. 110).

⁵ Information on the Bingtuan organization according to Seymour (2000), Cliff (2009, 2021), Neddermann (2010, 2012), State Council (2014), Zhu/Blachford (2015), UHRP (2018), Bao (2018).

⁶ Smith Finley (2013), Joniak-Lüthi (2013).

The comparatively favorable living conditions of today's Bingtuan members differ significantly from those that prevailed in the early decades. Life in the Bingtuan was strictly militarized unit combined accommodation, work assignments and military service. It was extremely austere in the early years.

German sinologist Hauke Neddermann, who has conducted extensive research into the history and structure of the Bingtuan organization, describes it as follows:

'At first, new arrivals were assigned accommodation by local leaders. However, this was usually poor and primitive; in some settlements, even years after their establishment, the dwellings consisted of simple, self-dug caves. (...) The dwellings, often used as communal dormitories with strict gender segregation, offered residents only limited space. (...) The cramped conditions, lack of adequate lighting and poor ventilation in the underground dormitories made living there an almost unbearable ordeal. Under these conditions, privacy was not an option, even in exceptional situations: neither newlyweds nor adolescents were granted a private space. (...) Students found no place to study in peace. (...)

*The settlers' supply situation was equally precarious. Drinking water was generally scarce in many areas of the arid border region. Especially in settlements far removed from transport routes ... food supplies were not delivered for weeks, even in phases when the goal of self-sufficiency had clearly been missed. (...) Qualified medical care could only be guaranteed in exceptional cases, such as severe, acute illnesses. (...) In many places, there was a lack of tools as well as draft animals or machines. The lack of adequate means of production was to be compensated for by creative use of limited resources and increased, ruthless use of human labour. Stories and illustrations of corps members harnessing themselves to the plough and pulling it through the stony earth with sheer muscle power became icons of party-state propaganda. They exemplified the spirit of selflessness and sacrifice associated with the socialist pioneer spirit.'*¹

These conditions have changed significantly over the years, as can be seen in today's large city of Shihezi. The living and working conditions there hardly differ from the standard in other modern Chinese provincial cities. Life in Shihezi is no longer barracks-like for the corps members. However, the vast majority of Shihezi's urban population still belongs to a Bingtuan brigade. They live in a Bingtuan house, participate in militia service together, and study or work in modern Bingtuan institutions to which they owe loyalty.

¹ Neddermann (2012, p. 7f.).



Bingtuan yesterday: Collective struggle against hostile nature¹



Bingtuan today – working conditions in a modern Bingtuan factory¹

¹ Source: <http://history.04007.cn/en.php/HisMain/7615.html> (accessed on 18 May 2020).

² Karrar (2018), Hann (2022).

During China's Proletarian Cultural Revolution, the Bingtuan organization was briefly dissolved in 1975. However, in the course of China's reorientation towards a market economy, it was re-established in 1981 with expanded economic objectives. While the early days of the Bingtuan had focused on the operation of state-owned agricultural estates, after 1981 a new task was added, to develop industry and trade in Xinjiang in line with more market-oriented principles. The Bingtuan organization thus became a driving force behind the new socialist market economy modernization of economically backward Xinjiang, initiated by Deng Xiaoping.² The paramilitary character of the Bingtuan institutions has gradually receded into the background. They have become modern agricultural, industrial or commercial state-owned enterprises, which today also operate as independent companies under the name *China Xinjiang Group*.

Bingtuan members and their families enjoy special privileges that are unusual for "normal" Chinese citizens, such as guaranteed housing rights, extensive protection against dismissal, health and social insurance, and secure retirement care. Their income situation is also significantly better than that of the rest of the population in Xinjiang (see above, Chapter 9). The Corps members are subject to their own police and judicial authority, have special Bingtuan hospitals and their own Bingtuan schools at their disposal. In addition, Bingtuan maintains two Chinese-language universities of its own, the large comprehensive university in Shihezi and a smaller agricultural university in Aral.¹

However, the Bingtuan system was not purely a new invention of the Maoist revolutionary government. Rather, it drew on centuries-old military and occupation traditions of the Chinese Empire.² More than two thousand years ago, during the Han Dynasty, China had already developed a strategy of establishing military-agricultural *Tuntian* or *Tunken* settlements or garrisons in the western border areas.³ In times of peace, the soldiers stationed there provided for their own livelihood as farmers, while in times of crisis and war they could be deployed immediately for military purposes. This method was still in use in the 18th and early 19th centuries, after the violent conquest of Xinjiang by troops of the Qing dynasty. Especially in northern Xinjiang, where population losses were particularly high, Chinese soldiers were settled in Tuntian garrisons; some of these also functioned as penal colonies.⁴

The establishment of the Bingtuan organization deliberately drew on these older models.⁵ However, as in previous centuries, the motives of the Han Chinese who ended up in one of the production and construction corps in distant Xinjiang after 1949 varied greatly: In addition to former soldiers, political prisoners were also sent to Bingtuan facilities for "re-education through labour" (*laojiao*) or "reform through labour" (*laogai*). Furthermore, well-qualified and ideologically motivated young people joined the Bingtuans as volunteer construction workers. There were also numerous refugees seeking to escape the great Chinese famines of the 1950s and 1960s. Finally, among the Han Chinese newcomers were also numerous wives, children and young women seeking marriage. Hauke Neddermann writes:

'At the time of their arrival in Xinjiang, few settlers would have considered themselves representatives of a socialist 'new man' (apart from those migrants who were politically or ideologically motivated). (...)

¹ Information according to Seymour (2000), Cliff (2009), Neddermann (2010), State Council (2014), Zhu/Blachford (2015), UHRP (2018), Bao (2018), Karrar (2018).

² See Neddermann (2010, pp. 70-74).

³ "*Túntián* and *túnkěn* are closely related, both as terms and as concepts. (...) The connecting element is the idea of stationing military troops (*tún*). However, the purpose of *túntián*, namely the self-sufficiency of the stationed soldiers through agricultural production, differs from the broader concept of *túnkěn*: here, the additional focus on the recultivation or reclamation of fallow land (*kěn*) becomes central to the strategy" (Neddermann 2010, p. 70, footnote).

⁴ Millward (2007, p. 104f.).

⁵ State Council (2003, p. 19), State Council (2014, p. 1).

*Under the pressure of circumstances, the settlers almost inevitably developed a shared identity. No matter how different their individual biographies may have been before joining the corps, as corps members (bīngtuánrén), the inhabitants of the settlements shared the same fate every day. The daily routine made it impossible to withdraw from the close-knit community. they were housed collectively in their living quarters and sleeping quarters, they ate collectively in canteens, and they worked collectively in the fields. ... Contacts outside the corps community developed only in isolated cases.'*¹

Their shared fate and the romanticized memory of their joint efforts and hardships eventually blurred the differences. The sense of belonging became predominant for many corps members and was established in their minds as a source of identity. This is particularly true of the large number of pensioners supported by Bingtuan, who see themselves as the true pioneers of the reconstruction period and look upon their city of Shihezi with particular pride. 'In conversation with the pioneers themselves, now elderly retired revolutionaries, it becomes clear that the 'new man' of socialism ... is still very much alive today.'²

The Bingtuan myth which is also propagated in museums and official writings, emphasizes unconditional obedience and work discipline, hard physical labour and a life of deprivation in the service of a common good cause. This still has an effect, but with one important difference among the younger Bingtuan generations:

The corps members of the first years, who are still alive today, and the second and third generations, who were born in Xinjiang and grew up in the Bingtuan, like to see themselves as the real pioneers and selfless champions of the Bingtuan's modernization- and border-security mission. On the other hand, they tend to view the Han Chinese who have only come to Xinjiang in recent years with skepticism, seeing them as fortune seekers or opportunists without idealism or ties to the land.⁵ However, there is one characteristic that both groups, the 'old' Bingtuan people and the Han Chinese newcomers, have in common – their great distance from the other inhabitants of the country, the 'minorities', who in the case of the Uyghurs actually form the majority in Xinjiang.

The well-known Chinese journalist *Xue Xinran*, who now lives in England, has studied the origins, development and current state of Shihezi in depth. In numerous interviews with veterans from the early days, she has gained her own insight into the enormous energy-sapping circumstances of the early days. As she writes, their original main goal was to cultivate, irrigate and densely populate the desert and high mountain region of Xinjiang as much as possible. However, Mao Zedong's Xinjiang policy was also part of a strategy to 'kill five birds with one stone', as the Chinese proverb says. The Bingtuan organization was also originally founded for this purpose:

¹ Neddermann (2012).

² Ibid.

³ For example, in the luxuriously appointed Bingtuan museums in the cities of Shihezi and Aral.

⁴ See, for example, State Council (2009); State Council (2014).

⁵ See Joniak-Lüthi (2013, p. 166ff.), Cliff (2016, p. 27), O'Brien (2017, p. 45f.).

Firstly, people who could have been dangerous to the Communist Party were resettled in Xinjiang, such as the approximately 200,000 prisoners of war from Chiang Kai-shek's defeated Guomindang army.

Secondly, there were a large number of Laogai prisoners in China at that time (Laogai means: reform through labour). Around 300,000 of these prisoners were gathered in Xinjiang at that time. They could be guarded there and used for land development.

Thirdly, Mao Zedong had already recognized that a break with the Soviet Union was inevitable and that the Silk Road, which ran through Xinjiang, was a strategically important link between East and Central Asia. The units stationed there, which developed the desert and guarded the border, were intended to form a barrier against the Soviet Union.

Fourthly, most ethnic groups in Xinjiang were Muslim. The stationing of Han Chinese troops could weaken or suppress Muslim independence movements.

Fifthly, the region's vast natural resources could be better exploited and would benefit the development of the People's Republic of China as a whole.¹

It was therefore decided *that 'the First Corps and the Twenty-Second Army Corps of the People's Liberation Army would be stationed in Xinjiang. Only one infantry division would be retained for defensive purposes. The vast majority of soldiers, namely 175,000, was to take on civil duties in Xinjiang. On the orders of Chairman Mao, they took up their rifles and hoes and began production on a large scale'*²

One of author Xinran's interviewees, Sun, a Han Chinese teacher who helped establish the first school in Shihezi, recounted the difficult beginnings: at that time, it took over a week to travel by bus and train from her hometown of Wendeng in the southern Chinese province of Shandong to Xinjiang. However, her family did not want to let her go. 'You're a twenty-year-old girl,' they said, 'where you want to go, they speak the Xinjiang language, and you don't understand it, and they write Muslim characters that you cannot read at all.'¹ However, she did not let that stop her. In her own words:

'But as everyone who has ever worked in the construction corps knows, everyone had to pass a probationary year first. You could only start doing specialist work (as a teacher) after you had done a year of physical labour.

*I worked in the large fields. Agricultural work is really incredibly strenuous. I had to work outside even in winter. And what did we have to eat when we came home in the evening? Wowotou, steamed grain buns, always just wowotou. ... I really did everything. I even picked cotton ... It was really hard work... I was always exhausted back then. Sometimes I cried from exhaustion. When we built our first school in 1963, there were very few children – only a handful of old comrades who had married after 1956 had school-age children; before that, everyone had been busy cultivating the desert. No houses, no places to sleep – who had the time and energy to get married and have children? ... When you've been sleeping on the floor for years and haven't had enough to eat, you don't think about marriage and children.'*²

¹ According to Xinran (2009, p. 73f.).

² Ibid., p. 77.

When asked about her current situation, Sun replied:

*'I am really very, very happy with my current situation. We have moved to the big city. We live in an apartment block. I never would have thought that. I am completely satisfied. My husband says that when I dream, I wake up smiling. My eldest son owns a car. When he has nothing to do on Sundays, he says, 'Dad, Mum, I'll drive you to the outskirts of town.' When my husband sits in the car, he is so happy, you can't imagine. He says he never could have imagined all this.'*¹

These few quotes show that today's members of the Bingtuan tend to see themselves as modern citizens of a prosperous China. They have left the hardships of the past far behind them. However, they are still a source of particular pride and a sense of belonging. As deserving members of the generation that built the country, they can now reap the full benefits of the new era. The two snapshots below, taken in 2018 on the forecourt of the Bingtuan Museum in Shihezi, seem to confirm this impression: the self-assured demeanor of these ladies reflects the perfect interplay of great personal joie de vivre and military discipline that has become second nature.



Modern Han Chinese Bingtuan women performing a group dance in Shihezi, 2018²

¹ Ibid., p. 86.

² Photos Marga Kreckel, Map 2, P9180 123 and P9180 127.

Urumqi, Xinjiang's divided capital

Urumqi (Chinese: *Wulumuqi*, Uyghur: *Ürümqi*) is the undisputed capital of Xinjiang. It is the only modern city with over a million inhabitants in western China. Urumqi has grown rapidly *'from a traditional Central Asian city with less than 100,000 inhabitants (...) to the most important economic growth centre in north-western China'*.¹



Main shopping street in Urumqi (then Dihua), around 1932²



Business district of Urumqi with China Civic Bank (229 m), 2018.

In the foreground, old apartment blocks from the Mao era; on the right, the new north-south motorway³

¹ [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Urumqi_\(3999819285\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Urumqi_(3999819285).jpg) (accessed: 22 September 2020). Statistics Bureau of Xinjiang (2019 p. 77, 84f.). The largest of the remaining population groups are the Muslim but Chinese-speaking Hui, who make up around 11% of the population. If the incorporated towns in the surrounding area are included, the population exceeds 4 million. ² Fricke et al. (2009, p. 62). Today, more than 4 million people live in the Urumqi metropolitan area (<https://de.sta-tista.com/statistik/studie/id/66436/dokument/urumqi/>).

³ Source: <https://inf.news/ne/travel/f30b80813406d5c1a1af3ecd68784ccd.html> (accessed: 22 September 2020).



Urumqi – Expansion of the Han Chinese suburbs to the north¹

Urumqi's unique geographical location is also the main reason why a city was deliberately founded here around 250 years ago: In 1759, as already mentioned several times, the northern and southern parts of what is now Xinjiang were conquered by the troops of the powerful Manchu Emperor Qianlong (reigned 1735-1796) after a long and bloody war. They were placed under joint Chinese administration. The Urumqi Valley was chosen as its headquarters. In the year 1763, a Chinese garrison was opened and The administrative city of *Dihua* was founded, which henceforth served as the capital of the 'New Frontier'² Xinjiang. It was not until 1954 that the city officially took the name *Ürümqi* or *Wulumuqi*. In fact, Urumqi had long been the colloquial Mongolian name for the valley. The English translation for Urumqi is 'lovely pasture'³ – an indication of why the shepherds who used to live there particularly appreciated this water-rich place located between steppe and desert landscapes.

When Xinjiang was formally elevated to the status of a Chinese province in 1884, a massive city wall was built around the city centre, which was mainly inhabited by Han Chinese and where the Chinese provincial government was based, in the provincial capital of Urumqi. The Muslim population (mainly Uyghurs and Chinese-speaking Hui) lived outside the walled city centre, to the south. In the 1950s, the city wall was demolished and replaced by wide boulevards.² However, the de facto division between the primarily Muslim Uyghur southern city and the Han Chinese centre and north of the city has remained to this day.

¹ Aerial photograph 2017, source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:2017-07-21_Aerial_view_of_Urumqi,_Xinjiang,_China_anago-ria_15.jpg (accessed: 22 September 2020).

² As we explained in the first chapter, *Xinjiang* is a distinctly Chinese word. In English, it roughly translates as 'new frontier'. The term first appeared between 1755 and 1759, precisely at the time when Chinese troops conquered the territory of present-day Xinjiang and introduced a comprehensive Chinese administration there.

³ See Gruschke (2012). On the history of the city of Urumqi: Shinmen (2018, pp. 80-89).

³ In addition, there used to be a Russian-influenced district in the south of the city, but this has since disappeared. Today, the southern districts of Urumqi and the new development areas and rural suburbs extending further south are predominantly Han Chinese (Shinmen 2018). Cf. Loubes (2015, pp. 122ff.).

As far as the architecture of modern Ürümqi is concerned, the business district in the city centre and the suburbs hardly differ in appearance from other modern Chinese cities with their high-rise buildings and wide boulevards. Nevertheless, there is one clear difference: the southern part of the city centre, which is more strongly influenced by Muslim residents and their culture, features many spectacular buildings in the neo-Uyghur style, similar to those found in Kashgar. This is not surprising at first glance, because urban renewal in both places was planned by the state-run *Xinjiang Architectural Design Institute* (XADI, director: Wang Xiao Dong), which also sought to emphasize folkloric stylistic elements.⁴ Nevertheless, it is remarkable that the predominantly Han Chinese metropolis of Urumqi draws so clearly on Uyghur traditions. On the one hand, this certainly has something to do with the intensive marketing of Urumqi as a tourist attraction, which aims to appeal to Han Chinese visitors in particular with a special exotic flair. The effort to give the capital of the 'Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region' an appearance that combines Chinese and Central Asian Uyghur traditions cannot be overlooked.

One example of a spectacular neo-Uyghur building is the magnificent *Jade Market* or *Minority Bazaar*, which opened in 2002 and was primarily intended for tourists. However, it has already been closed again because it was apparently no longer profitable. Today it is a hospital.



*Neo-Uyghur architecture in Urumqi:
Jade Bazaar (opened in 2002), now an accident and emergency hospital¹*

A more successful example is the *Grand International Bazaar*, which opened in 2003. An imposing minaret modelled on the famous late medieval Kalon Minaret in Bukhara, Uzbekistan, was built on the bazaar grounds as its landmark.

The approximately 80-metre-high minaret has no religious function whatsoever; it serves only as an eye-catcher and observation tower. The sprawling bazaar comprises six spacious, Oriental-style market halls, as well as a chic French 'Carrefour' department store. The 'Grand International Bazaar' is apparently very popular not only with tourists but also with local Han Chinese and Uyghurs.² The neo-Uyghur architectural style is therefore not merely a folkloric invention. It is also proudly accepted by many Uyghurs.

¹ Photo Marga Kreckel 2018, Map 1, P1010 126.



*Neo-Uyghur architecture in Urumqi:
Large International Bazaar with newly built minaret as its landmark (opened in 2003)¹*

This can be seen even more clearly in a slightly older building, the *Rebiya Kadeer Building* (Rebiya Dashia), which opened in 1992 and also features neo-Uyghur characteristics.



Neo-Uyghur architecture in Urumqi: Rebiya Kadeer Building (opened in 1992)²

¹ <http://www.cits.net/china-travel-guide/Urumqi/xinjiang-international-grand-bazaar.html> (accessed: 1 March 2020).

² https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/8/8f/Urumqi_s_bazaar.jpg/800px-Urumqi_s_bazaar.jpg.

Opened in 1992, the Kadeer Building, then the most modern shopping and commercial centre in Urumqi, was built by the successful Uyghur entrepreneur, Mrs. *Rebiya Kadeer*, with the explicit aim of providing Uyghur businesspeople with modern working and sales opportunities.¹ The impressive building enjoyed great popularity among the Uyghur population for a long time. When Rebiya Kadeer became a dissident and was finally able to emigrate to the United States in 2005 after a long prison term, the building began to decline. In September 2009, its demolition was officially announced, citing dilapidation as the reason.² However, the plan was not put into action. As a glance at the satellite photography on Google Earth shows, the now empty building was still standing at the intersection of Jiefang Nanlu and Lonquan Jie in July 2021, not far from the Grand International Bazaar.

The year 2009, when the Kadeer Building was to be demolished – or more precisely: the *5 July 2009* – is a traumatic date in the history of relations between Han Chinese and Uyghurs in Xinjiang: a few days earlier, two Uyghurs had been killed in violent clashes between Han Chinese and Uyghur workers at a factory in southern China. A mixture of rumors, accusations, facts and misinformation about these events had caused outrage in Urumqi. This led to large protest demonstrations by Uyghur citizens, clashes with the police and counter-demonstrations by Han Chinese, and ultimately to looting and random acts of violence against bystanders. The events, which began on 5 July 2009 in Urumqi and have never been fully clarified, claimed around 200 lives and left countless people injured, according to official figures. Accusations and counter-accusations have strained relations in the aftermath.³

Among others, Rebiya Kadeer, then president of the Munich-based China-critical 'World Uyghur Congress'⁴, was also blamed for the events in Urumqi. She herself always denied this. However, it explains the official announcement of the planned, but ultimately unrealized, demolition of the Rebiya Kadeer Building in autumn 2009.

Not only in Urumqi, but throughout Xinjiang, the events of July 2009 (known as '5/7')⁵ led to a hardening and coarsening of mutual perceptions between Uyghurs and Han Chinese. Since then, members of both ethnic groups have once again been characterized more by sweeping judgements and suspicions than by differentiated assessments.

¹ Kadeer / Cavelius (2009, p. 236ff.).

² Source: People's Daily, 8 September 2009 (<http://en.people.cn/90001/90776/90882/6750817.html>).
[y.280.19426476h.0t.0r/data=CiqiJgokCQ7HTTr3hHTdAEfgh6A55HDdAGfsnMls-UVxAlblcSnV1UFxA](http://en.people.cn/90001/90776/90882/6750817.html)

³ The events in Urumqi in July 2009 are described in detail and commented on from different perspectives in Millward (2009), State Council (2009), Smith Finley (2011) and Mackerras (2012). A summary assessment of the events at that time is provided by Alpermann (2021, p. 154ff.).

⁴ The "World Uyghur Congress" is an international association of Uyghurs living in exile who are campaigning for an independent

"East Turkestan". It is regarded as a separatist organization by the Chinese authorities.

⁵ Colloquially, the events in Urumqi around 5 July 2009 are referred to as "5/7", in reference to "9/11", the date of the Al-Qaeda attack on the World Trade Centre in New York on 11 September 2001.

Looking back, it can be said that during the phase of China's opening up under Deng Xiaoping between 1978 and 1990/91, the Chinese government pursued a policy of integration and reconciliation towards the Uyghur ethnic group.¹ When, after 1991, sovereign nation states with Turkic-speaking, Muslim-dominated populations emerged in the former Soviet part of Central Asia, demands for an independent Uyghur state 'East Turkestan', which would secede from the People's Republic of China, also became vocal in Xinjiang. This led to separatist or Islamist-motivated attacks. This was met with the strictest rejection on the Chinese side. As emphasized before, from then on, the Chinese government intensified its fight against the 'three evils' of terrorism, separatism and (religious) extremism in Xinjiang.

According to expert Western observers, relations between Han Chinese and Uyghurs in Xinjiang had gradually eased in the years prior to 2008/9. However, since the events of July 2009, there has been a renewed general distancing between the two ethnic groups, with significant discrimination against the Uyghur population. After 2014, when bloody attacks, some with separatist motives and many human casualties, occurred again in Urumqi and other cities in Xinjiang, the Chinese government's security and re-education measures, which mainly targeted Uyghurs, were significantly tightened again. The media in Germany and throughout the Western world regularly report on this and voice increasingly criticism, even calling for boycotts.³

The Chinese authorities have responded with sharp counterarguments (see above, Chapter 8). During our stay in Urumqi in autumn 2018, this meant that the southern part of the city centre, which is mainly inhabited by Uyghurs, was subject to much stricter police surveillance than the rest of the city. Temporary police stations were set up at all major road intersections. Passers-by were subject to regular routine checks, as was also the case on all major highways in Xinjiang. If recent media reports are to be believed, nothing fundamental has changed in this regard.

Today, although outward appearances suggest that peace has been restored in Urumqi and throughout Xinjiang, there is a climate of surveillance and intimidation that affects the Uyghur population in particular. This is particularly pronounced in the capital itself and in the cities in the Uyghur southern part of the country, as we have seen in the example of Kashgar. In the largely Han Chinese city of Shihezi in northern Xinjiang, on the other hand, there is hardly any sign of the whole problem.

¹ Rodriguez-Merino (2018, pp. 2-4).

² Millward (2007), Millward (2009).

³ See, for example, Millward (2018), Smith Finley (2019), Zenz (2019), Ramzy / Buckley (2019), Shi-Kupfer (2020). See also the so-called *China Cables* from November 2019 (<https://projekte.sueddeutsche.de/artikel/politik/das-sind-die-china-cables-e185468/>) or the dossier by the *Newlines Institute* from March 2021 (<https://newlinesinstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/Chinas-Breaches-of-the-GC.pdf>) as well as the balanced study by Björn Alpermann (2021).



Police checkpoint for pedestrians, Urumqi 2018¹

¹ Photo Marga Kreckel 2018, Map 2, P9160 1.

Chapter Twelve

Uighurs and Han Chinese in Xinjiang: What distinguishes them, what connects them, what separates them?

The three short portraits of Kashgar, Shihezi and Urumqi are examples of how great the differences are between the three most populous cities in Xinjiang. One must therefore be more than cautious about making hasty generalizations about 'urban life in Xinjiang'.

This also applies to the difficult relationship between Han Chinese and Uyghurs, which was just mentioned in connection with the events in Urumqi in July 2009. Even if one considers the two largest population groups living in Xinjiang as a whole, one must be wary of sweeping generalizations when thinking about what should happen now. It is true that mutual stereotyping, clichés and disparagements between Han Chinese and Uyghurs exist throughout Xinjiang, not only in the capital Urumqi. But in many places, Han Chinese and Uyghurs also coexist peacefully side by side. It is therefore important to avoid categorizing 'the' Han and 'the' Uyghurs as two hostile ethnic groups. The social circumstances, local conditions, personal characteristics and fates of individuals and their families within the two ethnic groups are too diverse and varied. On the other hand, the similarities between the members of all ethnic groups living in Xinjiang under the same geographical, political and economic conditions are too great. Nevertheless, there are characteristics and traits that clearly distinguish the inhabitants of Xinjiang as Han Chinese or Uyghurs.

'Objective' differences and real similarities

Before we take a closer look at the current conflict between Xinjiang's two largest population groups, let us first examine, as impartially as possible, what actually distinguishes them from one another. After all, it is conceivable that the tensions between Han Chinese and Uyghurs in Xinjiang are based precisely on these differences.

- As we have already seen, the great *diversity of language and writing* between the Han Chinese and the Uyghurs is a particularly obvious difference between them. For many nationalistic people, this alone is enough to speak of an unbridgeable divide between them. Such things also occur in Europe, for example in the conflict between Catalans and Spaniards in Spain, the opposition between Greeks and Turks in Cyprus, between Flemings and Walloons in Belgium, or between Russian- and Ukrainian-speaking citizens in Ukraine. On the other hand, there are also plenty of countries where several languages are spoken and written side by side without this leading to insurmountable conflicts. Just think of Switzerland with its four language groups or the German-speaking South Tiroleans in present-day Italy.

In short, linguistic differences are important when it comes to distinguishing between ethnic groups. However, this does not necessarily lead to conflicts between them – just as linguistic similarity does not automatically lead to commonality. For example, hardly anyone would seriously describe English-speaking Britons and Americans, Jamaicans and Canadians, Australians, New Zealanders and South Africans as 'one' people. Of course there are differences between them. These can be referred to as 'differences of mentality' or as 'national characteristics'. But they are not associated with major political differences.

- The same applies to *differences in religion or denomination*. Today, Protestants and Catholics in Germany have a relaxed relationship with each other. In the past, the differences between them were considered irreconcilable. Bitter religious wars were fought in their name. As far as China is concerned, it is often assumed that the Confucian tradition and socialist secular culture of today's Han Chinese is incompatible with the religious culture of Islam. But this is also incorrect. In addition

to the Turkic-speaking, predominantly Muslim Uyghurs, China is also home to the recognised Chinese-speaking minority (minzu) of *Muslim Hui*, who are usually referred to as "Dungans" by Turkic-speaking inhabitants. The Hui are quite well integrated in today's People's Republic of China – including in Xinjiang. There they make up about 4% of the population (approx. 1 million). In total, there are around 11 million Hui in China. They see themselves as descendants of Muslims who immigrated in the Middle Ages and can be found in almost all provinces of the country.

In the past (between 1862-1871 and again around 1933-1935), there were bloody "Dungan uprisings" in the western parts of China, including Xinjiang. Dungan warlords and Dungan rebels were active repeatedly at that time, but were unable to establish themselves permanently.



Hui mosque with Chinese stylistic elements: Great Shaanxi Mosque in Urumqi ¹

Today, the old conflicts have become irrelevant. The Hui now see themselves as Muslim citizens of China. They do not claim their own territory. Their mother tongue is Chinese, but they profess Islam and follow their own customs without the Han Chinese taking serious offence.² The Hui's own mosques are clearly influenced by Chinese stylistic elements, while Uyghur mosques are more closely related to Iranian or Middle Eastern models.³

The Hui people living in Xinjiang have always kept their distance from the Uyghurs, who are also Muslim but speak a Turkic language. Marriages between the two groups are rare. In Xinjiang, male Hui people distinguish themselves from traditional Uyghurs by wearing a typical head covering, a white cap, while Uyghurs tend to wear a multicolored, mostly square Doppa on their heads.

¹ <https://www.chinadragontours.com/shaanxi-grand-mosque-in-urumqi.html>.

² The restrictive measures against Muslims introduced in China in recent years are primarily aimed at Uyghurs, but also affect the religious life of the Hui (Garcia 2016, Adams 2018).

³ For more on the history of the Muslim Hui in China and their relationship with the Uyghurs, see, for example, Dillon (1999), Gladney (1991, 2004), Garcia (2016), Adams (2018), Wang (2018).



Muslim Hui in a typical noodle restaurant in Kashgar¹



Uighur men wearing Doppa in Kashgar²

The contrast between the situation of the Hui, who are relatively well integrated today, and the much more precarious situation of the Uyghur Muslims makes it clear that religious incompatibilities alone can hardly be the decisive reason for the tensions between Han Chinese and Uyghurs in Xinjiang. After all, there are plenty of examples of good relations in everyday life.

¹ Photo Marga Kreckel 2018: Map 1, P1010037.

² Photo Marga Kreckel 2018: Map 3, P1010497.

coexistence, or at least peaceful coexistence, between Confucian or completely atheistic Han Chinese on the one hand, and Muslim Hui-Chinese (or Dungans) on the other.

So we can see that different languages, religions and customs within a state can lead to conflict – as can differences in origin, skin colour, gender, political beliefs or sexual orientation. However, this is by no means inevitable. When the coexistence of different groups with different characteristics turns into conflict, questions of power always come into play – but more on that later.

First, let's return to the differences between Han Chinese and Uyghurs. It would be too simplistic to try to draw a blanket distinction between a Han Chinese and a Uyghur mentality or way of life. When it comes to "the" Chinese, there are many highly generalized and simplistic portrayals, but there are also some books worth reading that are well researched and offer more than just clichés. For example, the classic work by Chinese writer and philosopher *Lin Yutang*, 'My Country and My People', first published in 1935, is still recommended.¹ More recently, the book 'Die Chinesen. Psychogramm einer Weltmacht' (The Chinese: Psychogram of a World Power) by the German-Chinese writer couple *Baron / Yin-Baron* is also worth reading², as is the small volume by Munich sinology professor *Hans van Ess*, 'China: The 101 Most Important Questions'.³

These books contain a wealth of serious background information and distinctions, but hardly anything about the particularities of the Han Chinese living in Xinjiang and their relationship with the Uyghurs. As we have said before, generalizations about 'the' Chinese and 'the' Uyghurs are not really helpful. The living conditions and history of the members of both population groups are too diverse for that. The transitions between them are often fluid.

Above all, there are also many real similarities between them, which simply arise from the coexistence of Uyghurs and Han Chinese under the special circumstances of Xinjiang province. The living conditions of the inhabitants of the densely populated and prosperous provinces and megacities of the Chinese heartland differ drastically from those in sparsely populated and economically less developed Xinjiang. For those who live here, whether Han Chinese or Uyghurs, the living conditions are often not that great.

Nevertheless, there are some clear *objective distinguishing features* between them:

- Particularly clear is the legally prescribed *Minzu classification* described in the first chapter. It legally defines who is Uyghur and who is Han Chinese for all Chinese citizens in their identity cards. Even if this is not visible to the outside world, it is an immutable, legally established fact with real consequences that no one can ignore.
- Then there is the *Chinese naming* system. According to a recently published statistical survey, around 85% of the population of the People's Republic of China today has a surname that clearly identifies them as Han Chinese, because their name is already listed in the centuries-old 'Book of Family Names' (*Baijaxing*), which dates back to the medieval Song dynasty. Twenty-three of these ancient Han Chinese surnames account for one third of China's population, led by the names Wang and Li, which are now borne by over 100 million people each. Anyone with a Baijaxing name (and who also looks reasonably 'Chinese') is clearly identified as Han Chinese. Uyghurs, Tibetans and Mongols generally have special ethnic surnames, as do the Hui and members of other ethnic groups.⁴

¹ Lin (2015).

² Baron / Yin-Baron (2018).

³ Ess (2012).

⁴ (http://german.china.org.cn/txt/2019-02/01/content_74432035.htm; accessed: 8 March 2020). According to Chinese custom, the family name – also known as the 'surname' in the United Kingdom – always comes first, followed by the personal name, which corresponds to the British 'first name'.

- But there are not only such quasi-objective distinguishing features, but also *subjective certainties*. In modern cities such as Urumqi or Kashgar, for example, one can observe that all locals immediately recognize with unerring certainty whether the person they are talking to is Han Chinese or Uyghur, even before he or she opens their mouth, gives their name or shows their identity card. Of course, there are people with ‘typically Uyghur’ and ‘typically Chinese’ faces – and those who are immediately recognizable as Han Chinese or Uyghurs by their clothing, hairstyle or demonstrative behavior. But for many, especially younger people, this is not the case at all. They dress modernly, behave in an urban manner and often have facial features that could just as easily be Han Chinese as Uyghur. Nevertheless, they naturally assign themselves to one ethnic group or the other and behave accordingly.

Certainly, such mutual ethnic ‘first impressions’ can lead to misconceptions that must be corrected later. However, it is important *that* they are corrected – because it is crucial for everyone involved to know who they are dealing with, a ‘real’ Chinese person or a Uyghur. Anyone who wants to be both at the same time will encounter difficulties: If you live in Xinjiang (and do not belong to one of the other small minzu), you have to present yourself as either a Han Chinese or a Uyghur in order to get by in everyday life.



Street scene in Urumqi¹

- Another quasi-objective peculiarity is particularly striking, namely the fact that *two different times* apply in Xinjiang, one for Han Chinese and one for Uyghurs: As is well known, there are no different time zones in the vast country of China, as there are, for example, in Russia or the USA. Officially, therefore, only one time applies to the entire People's Republic of China, based on sunrise in the capital Beijing, commonly known as *Beijing time*. For Xinjiang, located far to the west, this means that the ‘real’ time of day, based on the position of the sun, always lags two to three hours behind the official time. When the sun rises in Beijing, it is still pitch dark in Urumqi for two hours, and even longer in Kashgar near the distant western border.²

¹ Photo Marga Kreckel 2018, Map 5, P1010 104.

² As Agnieszka Joniak-Lüthi (2016) shows in an ethnological study, there are also some ‘Uighurized Han’ in southern Xinjiang, i.e. Chinese-speaking Han Chinese who have adopted certain Uyghur customs and who can also speak or at least understand Uyghur. Nevertheless, the official Minzu classification remains decisive or them as well.

For Han Chinese living in Xinjiang, official Beijing time is the natural measure of time. The Uyghurs, on the other hand, almost without exception adhere to *Xinjiang time*, which is two hours behind and also applies in the neighboring Central Asian countries of Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. If you want to arrange to meet someone in Xinjiang at a specific time, you need to be clear whether you mean Xinjiang time or Beijing time. This often boils down to whether you are dealing with a Han Chinese or a Uyghur counterpart.¹

- If you are arranging to *eat* together, you should also know exactly which ethnic group the participants belong to in order to avoid embarrassment. Uyghurs almost universally reject Chinese dishes containing pork and only eat meat that has been slaughtered according to Islamic halal methods – even if they are not practicing Muslims themselves. The drinking habits and table manners of the two ethnic groups also differ significantly. For this reason, shared meals and social gatherings between Han Chinese and Uyghurs are the exception rather than the rule, except on official occasions. Emotional ties and marriages between Han Chinese and Uyghurs are correspondingly rare. In both ethnic groups, they tend to encounter resistance from their family and social environment.²

All these examples² make it clear that the inhabitants of Xinjiang make clear distinctions between Uyghurs and Han Chinese in their everyday lives. With regard to the Uyghur population, Swiss ethnologist Madlen Kobi summarises the situation as follows:

*'Ethnicity, or the constant emphasis on belonging to an ethnic group, has become an important ritual for many Uyghurs in a rapidly transforming society.'*³

Similar situations exist elsewhere: Many Germans consider it significant whether someone is Bavarian or 'Prussian', East or West German, with or without a migrant background, Muslim or Christian, male or female, homosexual or heterosexual. Sometimes these everyday distinctions are associated not only with different behaviors, values, preferences or customs, but also with tangible discrimination. In most cases, however, such everyday differences between people do not have any serious consequences. People may avoid each other, but they do not despise or fight each other, except in certain milieus. In Xinjiang, on the other hand, the distinction between Han Chinese and Uyghurs has become a constantly present and conflict-laden issue. One reason for this is obvious:

- If you live in Xinjiang as a Han Chinese, you also belong to the majority population of the vast People's Republic of China. It is easier to identify with it and recognize the benefits and protection it offers. Likewise, you also share the disadvantages, political problems and hardships of life in China with 1.3 billion other Han Chinese throughout the country. Against this backdrop, one is also happy to accept the special advantages that Han Chinese in Xinjiang enjoy. The situation is exactly the opposite for the approximately 12 million Uyghurs, who, from a pan-Chinese perspective, are a tiny minority of 0.8% of the population of China as a whole. In Xinjiang, they still form the majority. However, in view of the obvious political and economic dominance of the Han Chinese many of them increasingly feel like *'strangers in their own land'*.⁴

¹ See Smith Finley (2013, chap. 6).

² For examples, see in particular the ethnographic studies by Smith Finley (2013) and Bellér-Hann (2015) as well as the historical works by Millward (2007) and Bellér-Hann (2008).

³ Kobi (2016b, p. 102).

⁴ 'The Uyghurs: Strangers in Their Own Land' is the title of a widely cited social science study by Gardner Bovingdon (2010).

In our first chapter we referred to the influential Chinese sociologist Fei Xiaotong, who described the spread of the Han Chinese language and culture as a historical 'snowball process'. According to the Chinese view, this process of gradual inclusion means that all the territories newly acquired during the long history of the Chinese Empire are eventually absorbed into the superior Han Chinese society, and their inhabitants becoming socially and culturally integrated. This was the case, for example, with the Manchus, the conquerors and dynasty founders of earlier centuries. Today, they speak Chinese and are largely assimilated.

In Xinjiang, however, this has not worked so far. As we have described above, the introduction of the Chinese education system in Xinjiang has not yet led to the gradual integration of the Uyghurs. Although intensive economic development in recent decades has raised the general standard of living of the population in Xinjiang, the competitive situation of the Uyghurs in working life has not really improved. Only a few of them have equal access to the high-end labour market in Xinjiang which is dominated by Han Chinese.

Using the examples of Kashgar, Shihezi and Urumqi, we have seen that even in the modern cities of Xinjiang, which should actually be playing a pioneering role in the integration of ethnic groups, separate worlds still exist for Han Chinese and Uyghurs, especially in Kashgar and Urumqi. This is not just a matter of the two ethnic groups coexisting in relative peace and harmony. Instead, there is now considerable potential for conflict between them, which has been escalating since the 1990s, culminating in the Chinese government's current disciplinary measures. Why is this? A look at Xinjiang's recent history helps to put this into perspective.

The Xinjiang conflict – some historical facts

Historians know that over the centuries and millennia, present-day Xinjiang has been ruled by many local and foreign powers, not just the Chinese Empire.⁽¹⁾ After a long and eventful history, the entire region was finally conquered by troops of the Qing dynasty for the Chinese empire in 1759. Only since then has it borne the purely Chinese name Xinjiang ('New Frontier'), as we have repeatedly emphasized.

The question of which ethnic group the troops who conquered Xinjiang between 1755 and 1759 belonged to was hardly an issue for those affected at the time. It was known that they were soldiers of different origins fighting on behalf of the Emperor of China, and that was enough. At that time, if you were a subject of a ruler, you were less interested in which ethnic group he came from and which dynasty he belonged to. If he had the power, he was the master. No one at that time dreamed of a 'right of self-determination', especially not in Xinjiang. It was much more important for the people living at that time whether they were subject to a reasonably mild and 'just' ruler or whether violence, arbitrariness, hunger and harsh exploitation determined their lives. There was no talk of popular sovereignty and democracy, let alone human rights.¹

For the period from 1759 to the present day, the following course of events can be broadly reconstructed:

- After the Qing dynasty completely conquered Xinjiang in 1759, the Turkic-speaking Muslims initially continued to live their traditional lives relatively undisturbed. In the southern part of the country, where most of them lived, the new Chinese-Manchu administration had little impact. It was primarily concerned with general military and tax matters. Local affairs were left to the local rulers, Muslim *begs*, *kadis* and *mullahs*.

¹ In all official historical accounts of the People's Republic of China, the following formula is repeated almost word for word: "*Xinjiang has been an inseparable part of Chinese territory since ancient times; it has never been the so-called East Turkestan. ... It is part of the Chinese nation.*" (State Council 2019b, p. 2). This statement does not correspond with the historical facts. Before 1759, there was only a relatively permanent presence of imperial troops and administrative structures in the area of present-day Xinjiang during the Han Dynasty (206 BC - 220 AD), the Tang Dynasty (618 - 907 AD) and the Mongol Yuan Dynasty (1279 - 1368 AD). Cf. e.g. Vogelsang (2021).

- From the mid-18th to the mid-19th century, there were very few Han Chinese in Xinjiang itself, and they often only stayed for a short time. In rural areas, especially in the Tarim Basin in the south, there were virtually no Chinese to be found. The few Han Chinese who did live here were concentrated in the oasis towns as administrative and military personnel and as business-people. They usually lived at a physical and social distance from the long-established Muslim population, as we have already seen in Chapter 11. The Turkic-speaking Muslims were well aware that they were not Chinese, just as they are today. However, they certainly did not have their own national consciousness at that time. It was not until the 1920s that they began to see themselves as a cohesive ethnic group, as Uyghurs¹ Since the mid-19th century, during a period of increasing weakness of the central government in Beijing, political unrest has been on the rise in Xinjiang. Between 1867 and 1877, this ultimately led to the establishment of the short-lived Islamic Emirate of *Jakub Bek* in Kashgar. Jakub Bek brought large parts of Xinjiang under his control and broke away from Beijing. However, he was eventually defeated by imperial troops. He died soon afterwards under unclear circumstances. This brief episode was certainly not a Uyghur struggle for freedom, but rather the rebellion of a warlord who presented himself as a defender of Islam.
- From 1884 onwards, Xinjiang was incorporated into the Chinese Empire as a regular province, but with a very small Chinese presence.² There was no question of a 'Sinicization' of Xinjiang at that time. The decline and fall of the empire in 1911 and the ensuing civil war turmoil with changing rulers were also not exactly conducive to the emergence of a strong Chinese national consciousness among the Turkic-speaking population of Xinjiang.
- The two ultimately unsuccessful attempts in 1933-1934 and 1944-1949 to establish a 'Republic of East Turkestan' in Xinjiang independent of China also argue against the idea that a strong bond between the local population of Xinjiang and China had developed at that time. Above all, however, the Turkic-speaking and Islam-influenced population still constituted the overwhelming majority of Xinjiang's inhabitants until the middle of the 20th century. Only around 5% were Han Chinese at that time, the Uyghur majority made up ca. 75-80% of the population of Xinjiang, especially in the southern part of the country, where they lived largely among themselves.³
- A heterogeneous group of Han Chinese from all parts of China was resettled in Xinjiang at that time as part of the paramilitary Bingtuan organisation. They lived in their separate Bingtuan facilities and developed their own socialist way of life here, away from the Muslim settlements. In just a few decades, sustained *immigration from mainland China* brought about a lasting change in the demographic composition of Xinjiang.¹ Today, there are almost as many Han Chinese living here as there are Uyghurs. In Chapter 9, we saw that after 1949, key positions in politics and administration were predominantly held by Han Chinese – a practice that continues to this day. Even in Xinjiang's gradually growing modern industrial and service sector, the lion's share of prestigious and well-paid jobs has been and continues to be filled by Han Chinese.³ Many Uyghurs experience this as discrimination and neglect, as they do the gradual advance of the Chinese language and script in public life, education, administration and the media.

See above, Chapter 1.

² Millward (2007, p. 118ff.).

³ Toops (2004, p. 245f.). Alpermann (2021, p. 17ff.) distinguishes between a phase of relatively loose *affiliation* of Xinjiang after 1759 and its *integration* into the Chinese state beginning in 1884.

⁴ See the summary by Joniak-Lüthi (2013), which particularly emphasizes the by no means homogeneous composition of Han Chinese immigrants. See also the richly documented historical-ethnological account by Bellér-Hann (2008).

- In the first difficult years after the 'peaceful liberation' of 1949, fundamental reforms were implemented in Xinjiang by the now ruling Chinese Communist Party. Peasant-based agriculture was replaced by 'People's communes'. New, state-controlled educational institutions were created and compulsory education was introduced. As everywhere else in China, Xinjiang also saw a profound politicization of everyday life in line with the ideology of the now ruling Communist Party. But the state policy of protecting minorities still had a certain effect.
- The harshest and most painful changes in the lives of the Turkic-speaking inhabitants of Xinjiang occurred during the decade of the '*Cultural Revolution*' (Wenhua dageming, 1966-1976), in the final years of Mao Zedong's rule. The events of that time had a particularly traumatic impact on large sections of the Uyghur population. In the name of class struggle, the 'Red Guards' fought and denounced everything that had to do with 'old' customs, traditions and ideas. The Red Guards targeted primarily the Uyghurs, who were considered particularly backward or counter-revolutionary. They fought against Islam, which was widespread in Xinjiang, as a feudal relic, closing Koranic schools, desecrating or destroying mosques, and burning scriptures. People were persecuted and humiliated, and many died violent deaths. During this period, the Uyghur population's reservations about 'the' Han Chinese grew. They were blamed for the excesses of the Red Guards. A kind of culture war had swept across Xinjiang at that time, claiming heavy casualties and leaving behind a deep mistrust between Uyghurs and Han Chinese.¹
- In the subsequent phase of '*Reform and Opening Up*' (*Gaig kaifang*) pursued by the Chinese government under Deng Xiaoping from 1978 to the early 1990s, some wounds were healed in Xinjiang. There was a brief 'haw', mosques were rebuilt, the Uyghur language and culture were promoted, prisoners were released and those who had been persecuted were rehabilitated.² At the same time, the market-oriented reorientation of the Chinese economy, with its extremely high growth rates, also began to take effect in Xinjiang. New businesses settled there, transport links improved, and the purchasing power of the population increased. The first modern department stores with a wide range of goods appeared in the now modernized cities. This gave rise to hopes that the growing prosperity, which also benefited the Uyghur population, would lead to a general easing of tensions.
- But as early as 1989, the tide began to turn again. Influenced by the policies of Perestroika and Glasnost in the Soviet Union during the Gorbachev era, protests critical of the government also broke out in the People's Republic of China. The violent suppression of the large student demonstration in *Tiananmen* Square in Beijing on 4 June 1989 was a turning point. Since then, the reins have been tightened significantly throughout China, including in Xinjiang. With the surprising self-dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1990 and 1991, the Chinese party leadership and government became increasingly fearful for their existence. There was concern that the multi-ethnic state of China could also be infected by the Soviet 'bacillus' of disintegration. This was particularly true with regard to Xinjiang. In Beijing, there were fears that Xinjiang could follow the example of the former Soviet republics in neighboring Muslim Central Asia, which had just gained independence, and break away from the Chinese state. This concern was not unfounded. At that time, there had been repeated protests involving Uyghurs. Xinjiang had seen a series of spectacular attacks resulting in fatalities, and there had been public calls for the independence of East Turkestan.

¹ Zang (2011), Wu / Song (2014), Cappelletti (2016), Ma (2017), Hasmath (2019).

² Millward (2007, pp. 265-276). Cf. Clarke (2007), Bovingdon (2010, pp. 51ff.), Rodriguez-Merino (2018, pp. 2-4).

- There were also repeated Islamist acts of violence in various parts of the country.¹ The Chinese ruling party and government responded with increasingly harsh measures in Xinjiang. It began to place the Uyghur population, their language and their culture under a kind of general suspicion. Strict coercive and control measures were introduced against them.
- When, following the attacks by the Islamist Al-Qaeda on 11 September 2001 in New York and Washington, the USA took the initiative to declare a global 'war on terror', Beijing joined in. Although the Chinese government had common sense enough, not to refer to it as a 'war', it has since defined its harsh Xinjiang policy as China's contribution to *combating and preventing terrorism*.²

From Beijing's point of view, key Chinese national objectives are at risk in Xinjiang. The Chinese ruling party and government believe that the security of citizens, the unity of the Chinese state and the success of the Eurasian Silk Road policy are at stake. They therefore consider harsh measures to be necessary, which primarily affect the Uyghur population.

Conclusion

It is evident that the ethnic or religious differences between Han Chinese and Uyghurs in Xinjiang are not the root cause of the current conflict in Xinjiang. These differences have existed for a long time without giving rise to intolerable hostility. It is only the developments of recent decades, the strong immigration since the 1950s and the accompanying improvement in the professional status of Han Chinese, the traumatic events of the Cultural Revolution, the appalling acts of violence in the recent past and the resulting harsh anti-terrorism and 're-education' measures of recent years that have brought about the current polarization..

For centuries, the Turkic-speaking Muslims of Xinjiang and the few Han Chinese living there did not have much to do with each other. Their respective languages, religions and cultures differed greatly. As a result, the people lived more alongside each other than with each other. They did not feel that they belonged together. Personal ties or even marriages between them were rare. This did not really change even after Xinjiang's gradual integration into the Chinese Empire in the 18th and 19th centuries. The two worlds remained separate. People made the best of it between the two quite foreign cultures that characterized Chinese Xinjiang at the time.

After 1949, however, conditions changed dramatically. The Han Chinese population in Xinjiang grew steadily as a result of constant immigration. In the form of the paramilitary Bingtuan organization, it gained its own crystallization point. The balance of power and majority in the entire province shifted increasingly to the detriment of the Uyghur population, even though their material living conditions had improved significantly in recent years. It became apparent that the traditional Chinese 'snowball strategy' of gentle cultural assimilation of minorities had not succeeded in the case of Xinjiang. Instead, both sides became more entrenched, emphasizing the differences rather than the similarities between Han Chinese and Uyghurs.

¹ There is a fair degree of agreement between Chinese and Western sources on the existence of these incidents, if not necessarily on their assessment. See the summary of the incidents in Alpermann (2021, p. 148ff.).

² Rodriguez-Merino (2019).

The Chinese government is currently attempting to win over the Uyghur population with a kind of *"carrot and stick" strategy*: on the one hand, it is relying on strict re-education and surveillance measures, bans and harassment. On the other hand, it is trying to ensure modern living conditions and raise living standards through targeted economic development in Xinjiang. The aim is to integrate the Uyghur population in particular by providing them with numerous new employment opportunities (as auxiliary police officers, security and service personnel, etc.) in the rapidly growing state security and control services. ⁽¹⁾ One can imagine the conflicts of loyalty that this creates.

On the plus side, this policy has ensured "calm" in Xinjiang for several years, and since 2015 there have been no reports of major anti-Chinese violence or public unrest. Since then, the state security forces have had a clear and unambiguous monopoly on the use of force. Another positive aspect is the continuous economic growth in Xinjiang, which is supported by substantial state subsidies from the wealthy east of China. One result of this Chinese economic policy has been the expansion of Xinjiang's infrastructure and the modernization of its cities.

The negative side effects of the modernization process have already been discussed above, using the example of the renovation of Kashgar's old town. The downside of China's Xinjiang policy also includes interference in the religious and cultural life of the Uyghurs, constant surveillance of the population and the establishment of 're-education camps'.

In Chapter 9, we discussed the increasingly heated public controversy over the situation in Xinjiang between Western media and governments on the one hand, and the Chinese state and party leadership with their official publications on the other. As we have already noted, the tone of these debates hardly differs from the time of the Cold War.²

We will not go into this in depth here. As we already announced in our foreword, our aim with this book is to help escape the narrow-mindedness and hostility caused by ideology and day-to-day politics by highlighting broader historical contexts. In the opening chapters, when looking at the long history of the Eurasian Silk Road and the Tarim Basin, we pointed out that different rulers, peoples, languages and religions have repeatedly encountered each other there. They have fought each other time and again, they have come to terms with each other, they have also learned from each other and enriched each other. Ultimately, they replaced one another without this resulting in lasting enmities. It may well be that this will be the case again in the future.

In the fourth and final part of this book, we will take a closer look at some of the overarching international and geopolitical contexts that one should be aware of in order to better understand the situation in Xinjiang and its inhabitants. As in the first, historically oriented part of our book, we will again look at Xinjiang from a long-term perspective. This will reveal the extent to which the current situation in Xinjiang is influenced by external, historically determined power relations, in particular its key geographical position as a continental 'bottleneck' between China and the Eurasian landmass.

¹ Zenz / Leibold (2017, 2019).

² Frank Pieke, a Dutch national and former director of the Mercator Institute for China Studies in Berlin, wrote in 2020: "Views on China have rapidly polarised. It is no longer possible ... to present information and analysis on China and its global role without getting sucked into debates about challenges and threats that China poses to democratic (or even more plainly Western) societies and values" (Pieke 2020, p. 4).

Part Four:

Global political contexts and backgrounds

Chapter Thirteen

Xinjiang in the 'Great Game' of the imperial powers

With the end of the "Pax Mongolica" and the beginning of the colonial era dominated by European powers, control of the seas and sea routes became a key geopolitical issue. We already emphasised this in Chapter 1. As the central land connection between Europe and East Asia, the Silk Road had therefore lost its previous strategic importance since the 16th century.

Xinjiang, the eastern hub of the historic Silk Road, lies far from the sea. For a long time, the region was therefore merely a sideshow in world politics. As we have seen, the territory of present-day Xinjiang was dominated for centuries by changing regional and local power relations. This situation only began to change when the Chinese Empire conquered the whole of Xinjiang in 1759 and gradually incorporated it into its empire. In 1884, Xinjiang was finally declared a regular Chinese province and thus fully integrated into the Chinese state.

It was precisely at this time, in the late 19th century, that two other global political players besides China entered the scene and also began to take an interest in Xinjiang: Great Britain and Russia. A legendary rivalry developed between them in Central Asia, which became known as *The Great Game*.

The Great Game marked the beginning of major changes in the geopolitical environment of the Chinese province of Xinjiang. These changes are first presented in a comparative overview on the following four map sketches and then explained in more detail.



(a) Xinjiang and Eurasia before the Great Game (around 1850)



(b) Xinjiang and Eurasia after the Great Game (around 1914)

¹ Copyright: Stepmap 27 March 2020, own adaptation.

² Copyright: Stepmap 19 March 2020, own adaptation.



(c) Xinjiang and Eurasia during the Cold War (1949–1990)



(d) Xinjiang and Eurasia around 2020 ¹

¹ Tables a -d: © Stepmap 16 January 2020, own adaptation.

19th century: The classic Great Game

Anyone who was fascinated by *Rudyard Kipling's* best-selling novel 'Kim' from 1901 in their youth is already familiar with the main themes of the 'Great Game'.¹ Nobel Prize winner Kipling (1865-1936) was an ardent advocate of British imperialism. He was convinced of the superiority of the white man, but also harbored romantic feelings towards the exotic 'natives' of the British colonial empire.

The real background to Kipling's exciting story was the historical rivalry for colonial supremacy in Central Asia and the Indian subcontinent. This conflict was ideal material for an adventure novel. It was fought out with diplomatic maneuvering, secret missions and national pathos between two 'white' imperial superpowers – on the one hand, the *British Empire*, which ruled as a colonial power in Southeast Asia, in what is now India and Pakistan, and on the other, the *Russian Tsarist Empire*, which had appropriated the entire north of Asia from the Urals to the Pacific coast. Between these two imperial powers, the Great Game for world power was played out in Central Asia at that time, as a kind of anticipated Cold War' without direct military confrontation between them.²

The third great empire with interests in Central Asia, the *Chinese Empire*, had been so weakened politically and economically since the mid-19th century by the lost Opium Wars (1839-1842 and 1856-1860) against Great Britain and France and by internal unrest that it could only intervene marginally in this Russian-British north-south conflict. Nevertheless, the country managed to '*remain independent and defend its territory even in times when it was very weak and under strong external pressure*'.³ This allowed China to largely stay out of the Russian-British Great Game and to assume the role of an observer.⁴

- The *opening move* in the Great Game between the two rival superpowers came from the *Tsarist Empire*. Since the 17th century, Russia had been pushing ever further east into Asian Siberia and had finally reached the Pacific Ocean. It thus became the only northern neighbor of the Chinese Empire.

In the mid-19th century, when China suffered defeats against the Western colonial powers of England and France in the Opium Wars, Russia conquered *Outer Manchuria*, which until then had belonged to China. Under the 1860 Convention of Peking, in which the so-called *unequal treaties* with France, Britain and Russia, China was forced to recognize this annexation by Russia – a wound that remains open from the Chinese perspective to this day. In the same year, a new Russian trading and naval port called *Vladivostok* (meaning 'Rule the East', the first 'Western' city in the Far-East) was opened on the Pacific coast. In Vladivostok, the construction of the Russian Trans-Siberian Railway to Moscow began in 1891 and was completed in 1916.

Also in the 1860s, Russia continued to advance southwards. This set the Great Game in motion. The troops of the Tsarist Empire conquered vast territories in Central Asia that had previously been ruled by Muslim princes. In 1868, the Russian *General Government of Turkestan* was established there. In the impassable Pamir and Karakorum mountains, Russia thus advanced to the northern border of the British colonial empire on the Indian subcontinent (see overview maps a and b, above).

¹ See Kipling (1901) and Hopkirk (1997).

² Colorful and detailed accounts of the events of that time can be found in Hopkirk (1990) and Meyer / Brysac (2001).

³ Mühlhahn (2021, p. 30).

⁴ The following concise overview is based in particular on Lattimore (1975), Hopkirk (1990), Meyer / Brysac (2001), Millward (2007), Osterhammel (2008), Paul (2012), Sergeev (2013) and Jacobs (2016).

- From the British perspective, the advance of the Tsarist Empire to India's northern border was perceived as a threat. However, the *British response* to this was initially only administrative and rather symbolic in nature: in 1857, India was declared a Crown Colony. From then on, it was directly dependent on the British government in London, rather than the semi-official British East India Company.¹ In 1876, Queen Victoria was formally proclaimed Empress of India. This established protocol equality in the looming conflict with the Tsar of Russia. Two empires now stood face to face as equals. At a time when questions of status and protocol were taken so seriously, this was a very important consideration.

But a military response was not long in coming. The mountainous country of Afghanistan, an independent emirate, lay like a foreign body between the British and Russian spheres of influence. This situation changed during the Anglo-Afghan War of 1878-1880, which ended in defeat for Afghanistan. An emir acceptable to the British was installed. From then on, the Central Asian country of Afghanistan became a de facto dependent satellite state of British India. Afghan foreign policy was determined by the British. However, they hardly interfered in internal affairs. Afghanistan ultimately proved uncontrollable for the British and always remained formally independent. It never became a colony of the British Crown.

The main problem in the conflict of interests between Britain and Russia now became the demarcation of the border in Central Asia between Afghanistan, which belonged to the sphere of influence of British India, and the General Government of Turkestan annexed by Russia. As direct armed conflict was to be avoided, serious efforts were now made to resolve this dispute. This ultimately led to a gradual *de-escalation of the Great Game*:

For decades, there had been the so-called *Pamir Gap*, a long strip of impassable high mountain terrain stretching from the eastern border of Afghanistan to the western border of China (see map b, above). The Silk Road had run through this area since ancient times, through the so-called Wakhan Corridor. Xuanzang, Marco Polo and Benedikt Goës also once travelled along this route. However, the political ownership of the Pamir Gap was unclear in the 19th century. In the eyes of the British, it clearly belonged to Kashmir and thus to British India. The Tsarist Empire, on the other hand, claimed the Pamir Gap as an integral part of its own General Government of Turkestan. This disputed and unsecured border gap in the high mountains would have given Russian troops direct access to Kashmir in British India. This implied the danger of a direct military clash between the two great powers. To avoid this, a British-Russian border commission was set up, which, after lengthy negotiations, finally succeeded in resolving the problem amicably in 1893.

The Pamir Gap was not awarded to either of the two adversaries, but to the Emirate of Afghanistan, which thus became a formally independent buffer state between British India and Russia. The *Wakhan Corridor*, an approximately 300 km long, only a few kilometers wide strip in the Pamir highlands, generated a common border between Afghanistan and China, or rather Chinese Xinjiang. This Chinese-Afghan border still exists today. Russia's (and later the Soviet Union's) direct access route to the Indian subcontinent was finally blocked by the Afghan Wakhan Corridor. Since then, Chinese territory in the east forms a barrier between Russia and India. Further west, it would have been necessary to violate the border of Afghanistan, which at that time belonged to the British sphere of interest (see overview map b above).

¹ Until then, the *British East India Company* had ruled India for more than 200 years.

- The Great Game continued for some time after the Anglo-Russian Agreement of 1893, in the form of mutual surveillance, tactical maneuvering and espionage, even after the Treaty of St. Petersburg in 1907 had established a formal alliance between the two old adversaries, Russia and Great Britain. In this *late phase of the Great Game*, the city of Kashgar, located in the far west of Xinjiang, played a central role. As mentioned above, there had been a Russian consulate general there since 1882 and a British consulate since 1890 (which became a consulate general in 1908). The diplomatic skirmishes between the long-standing representatives of the Tsar and the British Crown in Kashgar, Nicolai Feodorovich *Petrovsky* and George *Macartney* have since become literary legends.¹ They always viewed each other with suspicion. The Chinese authorities also closely monitored whether the activities of the two diplomatic missions endangered the balance of power that had been achieved between China, British India and Russia. In addition, Petrowski and Macartney made a name for themselves as helpful hosts to European explorers on the Silk Road. For example, they assisted Sven Hedin, Aurel Stein and the members of the German Turfan expeditions, which were mentioned in the second part above.

The intensity of the conflict between the British and Russians gradually began to subside. British attempts to expand into the Russian sphere of influence had now ceased. In addition, both Russia and the neutral third party in the alliance, China, had been increasingly weakened by lost wars and internal upheavals. It can therefore be said that the old Great Game effectively came to an end with the First World War.

- As far as *China* was concerned, the war against Japan from 1894 to 1895 had led to a heavy defeat. Shortly afterwards, the so-called Chinese Boxer Rebellion of 1900 broke out, which was crushed by troops from foreign powers. After many crises, the Chinese monarchy finally collapsed completely in 1911. The young Emperor Puyi was deposed. At the beginning of 1912, the 'Republic of China' was born, but it suffered from decades of internal unrest and civil wars. Added to this was the Japanese invasion, which lasted from 1931 to 1945. It was not until 1949 that the Chinese Communists under Mao Zedong succeeded in bringing the entire country under their control (with the exception of Mongolia, which had become independent as a Soviet satellite state in 1924, as well as of Taiwan, Hong Kong and Macao) and founded the People's Republic of China. The Chinese province of *Xinjiang* had only a very marginal significance for Chinese politics during these years
- But *Russia's* drive for expansion was also broken for a long time. In the war against Japan from 1904 to 1905, Russia was severely defeated. This led to the first, ultimately unsuccessful Russian revolution in 1905. In 1907, the aforementioned compromise between Russia and Great Britain was sealed in the Treaty of St. Petersburg. In 1914, the already weakened Tsarist Empire entered the First World War on the side of Great Britain and France. The war was very unfortunate for Russia. In the October Revolution of 1917, the Tsar was finally overthrown and the monarchy abolished.

20th century: The era of world wars and the Cold War

After years of fierce conflict, the Russian Revolution of 1917 culminated in 1922 with the victory of the Communist-led Soviet Union (USSR) under V. I. Lenin and his successor J. V. Stalin. It assumed the imperial legacy of the Tsarist Empire, including the recently conquered countries of Central Asia. Five Socialist Soviet Republics (SSR) were created there as dependent sub-regions of the USSR: Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. Their external borders became an integral part of the Soviet-controlled *Iron Curtain*, which largely isolated the Soviet Union from the rest of the world. The

¹ See, for example, Macartney (1931), Skrine/Nightingale (1973), Hopkirk (1990). See also above, chapters 5 and 6.

old Eurasian east-west connections along the overland routes of the historic Silk Road and the Trans-Siberian Railway with its branch lines were now under the control of the Soviet Union. They thus lost their former importance for long-distance transport and international trade beyond the borders of the Soviet sphere of influence.

After the fall of the Chinese monarchy in 1912, a widespread power vacuum had developed in Xinjiang. The Chinese governors ruling in the provincial capital of Urumqi acted more or less as they saw fit. There were still no functioning road and rail connections between the Chinese heartland and Xinjiang.

The situation was quite different in the Soviet Union. The Trans-Siberian Railway, with its branch lines leading to present-day Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan, extended to the western border of Xinjiang. During the 1920s, the Soviet Union's influence in Xinjiang began to grow steadily. An attempt by local Uyghurs to establish an independent '*Islamic Republic of East Turkestan*' with its capital in Kashgar in 1933-1934 was brutally suppressed with Soviet support.

From then on, developments in Xinjiang were increasingly influenced by the Soviet Union under its Chinese military governor *Sheng Shicai*, who ruled from 1933 to 1944.¹ In the north of Xinjiang, a socialist-oriented second *Republic of East Turkestan* was established between 1944 and 1949, with its capital in Gulja (Chinese: Yining) in the Yili Valley. However, its influence remained limited to three northern districts of Xinjiang.² The establishment of a 'People's Republic of East Turkestan' encompassing the whole of Xinjiang as a satellite state of the USSR, as had happened in 1924 in 'Outer' Mongolia, which until then had belonged to China, never came to pass. The invasion of the Chinese People's Liberation Army in October 1949 prevented this once and for all, and Xinjiang remained Chinese. In the course of the so-called "peaceful liberation", Chinese troops occupied the whole of Xinjiang and made the province an integral part of the newly founded People's Republic of China – with the grudging consent of the Soviet Union. Until the early 1960s, when open discord arose between the two communist-ruled 'brother countries' of China and the Soviet Union, Xinjiang was still strongly under the economic and political influence of its powerful Soviet neighbor. Thanks to the railway lines that had existed since the Tsarist era, Xinjiang was easier to reach from Russia than from eastern China, where transport links remained completely underdeveloped even during the Mao era.

At the international level, meanwhile, a new geopolitical conflict soon emerged after 1945, known as the Cold War. Its main players were, as is well known, the first two nuclear powers and new world powers, the United States and the USSR:

- After the end of the Second World War, the *United States of America* had assumed supremacy over Japan, Taiwan, South Korea and South Vietnam. Added to this was the strong US presence in the Philippines, which remained an American colony until 1946. The USA, which had possessed the atomic bomb since 1945, had thus become a major Asian power with a significant military presence. However, the Americans reached their limits with the unsuccessful Korean War (1950-1953) and the lost Vietnam War (1965-1975). After the Islamic Revolution in Iran in 1979 the US also lost all influence there.

¹ See Jacobs (2016, chap. 3).

² For more on the balance of power in Xinjiang at that time, see Millward (2007, pp. 179–235) and Jacobs (2016).

- The main winner of the Second World War was the *Soviet Union*, which had been a nuclear power since 1949. In 1940, as part of the Hitler-Stalin Pact, the USSR had annexed the Baltic states (Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania) and, after 1945, significantly expanded its sphere of influence westwards once again by subjugating six dependent 'Eastern Bloc' states in Europe (Bulgaria, East Germany, Poland, Romania, Czechoslovakia and Hungary). However, the USSR's attempt to bring Afghanistan under Soviet control and thus finally succeed in the old Great Game failed in the costly First Afghan War (1979-1989).
- The crisis-ridden *People's Republic of China* did not play a major role on the international stage for a long time, even though it had been the leading power of the non-aligned and anti-colonial 'Third World' countries since 1955 and had become a nuclear power in 1964. Until 1976, the year of Mao Zedong's death, China was mainly preoccupied with its own problems, such as the failed Great Leap Forward and the Proletarian Cultural Revolution'. It was only since the economic reforms led by Deng Xiaoping (1978-1990), China increasingly established itself as a serious power factor.
- The once powerful British *Indian Empire* was dissolved and fragmented in 1947. The British left behind two huge, hostile states, India and Pakistan (from which East Pakistan seceded in 1971 under the new name Bangladesh). In addition, the British colonial legacy gave rise to the independent states of Myanmar (formerly Burma), Malaysia, Singapore and Sri Lanka (formerly Ceylon), as well as Nepal and Bhutan, both former satellite states of British India. All these countries were now 'Third World' countries, just like China, but with significantly less international influence. With the loss of British India, Great Britain itself lost its former position of power.

For *Xinjiang*, a Chinese border region that was still quite inaccessible at the time and virtually closed to foreigners, these developments meant that it once again found itself on the margins of world affairs during the world wars and the Cold War. Its northern and western borders were adjacent to territories that had been under Soviet rule since the 1920s. At that time, international attention was focused not so much on Xinjiang as on neighboring Tibet.

¹ In the First Gulf War (1980-1988) between Iran under Ayatollah Khomeini and Iraq under Saddam Hussein, who was supported by the USA at the time, Iran was able to hold its own after heavy losses on both sides

Chapter Fourteen

The New Silk Road and the 'New Great Game' for supremacy in Central Asia

With the collapse of the USSR and the Soviet-dominated Eastern Bloc between 1989 and 1991, the geopolitical constellation in Central Asia changed fundamentally. The Iron Curtain fell and the land bridge between Western Europe and the Far East, which had been blocked for decades, reopened. Quite unexpectedly, five sovereign Central Asian states emerged from the break-up of the Soviet Union: Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. There had been no significant independence movements there during the Soviet era. They had come to terms with the Soviet Union and, after its dissolution, elected former Soviet politicians or officials as presidents. The same thing happened in the Caucasus, in Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia, as well as in Ukraine, Belarus and Moldova.¹ All these former republics of the Soviet Union became independent states that were no longer formally tied to any great power. However, their economic and transport systems were completely geared towards the Soviet Union which no longer existed. The same was true of Mongolia, formerly a satellite state of the USSR (see overview map d, above).

After the end of the Soviet Union, the old Silk Road route suddenly reopened *as a land corridor* between Asia in the east and Europe in the west. Once again, the question arose as to who should or could exercise control over this strategically important region. Under President Yeltsin, Russia was initially too weak to assert its traditional claim to Russian supremacy there. The Russian-led *Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS)*, comprising all the former Soviet republics located on the Eurasian east-west corridor – was unable to fill the newly created power vacuum.

Against this backdrop, since the 1990s there has been a revival of the Eurasian land routes as the '*New Silk Road*'. This was a kind of re-run of the 'Great Game' of the 19th century. At that time, Russia had been the main winner. China had at least been able to assert its rule over Xinjiang in Central Asia. The British, on the other hand, had been denied access to Central Asia. But they had blocked further Russian expansion to the south and retained limited sovereignty over the buffer state of Afghanistan, which they only had to relinquish with the loss of British India after 1947.

¹ Only *Estonia*, *Latvia* and *Lithuania*, the three Baltic republics annexed by the USSR in 1940 in the context of the Hitler-Stalin Pact, introduced parliamentary-democratic forms of government based on the Western model and later joined the NATO.

Afghanistan has also remained a bone of contention in the *New Great Game*¹, which can be conquered by no-one, but which also cannot find peace. Other world powers are involved in today's new Great Game for Central Asia, namely:

- The *United States of America*. At the end of the Second World War, the USA replaced Britain as the leading world power. In many regions of the world the United States took over former British spheres of influence.
In 1947, after withdrawing from their Indian colonial empire, the British left the world with a parting gift in the form of the conflict-ridden division of British India into India, Pakistan and Bangladesh. After *Brexit* in 2020, they have been seeking their own path.
- Since President Putin came to power in 2000, the *Russian Republic* has tried to regain the position of the former Tsarist Empire as a major power in northern Eurasia. However, it has suffered enormous territorial losses in the west (Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Belarus, Ukraine, Moldova) and south (Central Asia and the Caucasus), which it has not really been able to cope with. Russia has increasingly pursued revisionist goals. In 2008 with its military occupation of the regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia in Georgia, in 2014 with its attacks on the Donbass region of Ukraine and the annexation of Crimea, and in 2022 with its armed attack on Ukraine (see overview maps c and d, above).
- The *People's Republic of China*. The formerly impoverished and politically isolated country has undergone a second, this time successful, transformation since the 1980s under Deng Xiaoping. China has indeed, if somewhat belated, made a 'great leap forward'. In just a few years, China has regained its former strength. This has been unmistakable since the turn of the millennium at the latest, but remained virtually unnoticed in the West for a long time, not least because China initially took a very cautious approach to foreign policy. It was not until Xi Jinping came to power in 2012 that this began to change. Since then, the People's Republic of China has become a self-confident new world power pursuing its own goals. It is increasingly drawing Russia into its orbit and could tip the balance in the war in Ukraine.
- The *European Union*. With its enormous economic potential, the EU comes into play as the fourth, albeit multifaceted power. The EU's close ties to NATO and thus its military and strategic dependence on the US are obvious.

Other powers, such as Japan, India, Pakistan, Iran and Turkey, are also trying to exert their influence.

The four most important international powers currently competing for influence in Central Asia are strung like a string of pearls around the northern hemisphere of the globe: China, Russia and the European Union are direct Eurasian neighbours of the old Silk Road, with the United States of America completing the circle across the Pacific and Atlantic oceans.

This means that the New Great Game is no longer purely a Central Asian north-south conflict. Rather, the entire Eurasian east-west axis is now affected. The primary aim is to fill the power vacuum that arose there with the collapse of the Soviet Union.

¹ For more on the 'New Great Game', see, for example, Scholvin (2009), Cooley (2013), Chen / Fazilov (2018).

² Münkler (2019, p. 14).

In this new East-West constellation, the Chinese province of Xinjiang, which had long been on the sidelines of world politics, is once again playing a strategically important role. From now on, Xinjiang will serve as China's western gateway to the Chinese-inspired "New Silk Road" to Eurasia, which we will discuss later.¹

As already mentioned above, the historic Silk Road, as a land connection between East Asia and Western Europe, had already lost its global political significance around 500 years ago. The half-millennium of *colonial world domination by European powers* took place primarily by sea. The colonial powers that violently established themselves in South and East Asia at that time and controlled long-distance trade – England, Spain, Portugal, the Netherlands and later France – were *maritime powers* that relied on the military superiority of their fleets. They no longer had much interest in the overland routes of the old Silk Road. Their aim was to dominate the seas, overseas trade and their colonies. The shortening of the sea route from Europe to East Asia. The opening of the Suez Canal in 1869 ultimately consolidated the imperial supremacy of the Western maritime powers for almost another century. The symbolic end came with the Suez Crisis of 1956, when the old colonial powers of Great Britain and France finally lost their supremacy over the Suez Canal under pressure from the new world powers, the USA and the USSR.

Meanwhile, since the second half of the 19th century, Russia and later the Soviet Union had taken control of the Eurasian land routes of the former Silk Road and eventually sealed them off almost completely from the outside world with the 'Iron Curtain'. It was not until the early 1990s, after the end of the Soviet Union and under completely changed global political conditions, that an opportunity arose to breathe new life into the old Silk Road myth. However, each of the parties involved attempted to shape it in their own way.

Western Silk Road policy since the 1990s

The first attempts to reactivate the Silk Road ran *from West to East*. On the one hand, this can be understood purely in geographical terms, as the expansion of Europe and the EU towards the east, into the former Soviet sphere of influence. On the other hand, 'the West' is also a political direction, referring to the USA and NATO as a Western military alliance that has advanced in the Baltic states to Russia's western border.¹

As regards the *United States of America* itself, shortly after the end of the Soviet Union in the 1990s, the USA made some efforts to provide financial support to the Central Asian countries of the Silk Road corridor that had become independent of the USSR in order to win them over to its side and promote Western values such as free trade, democracy and the rule of law. The success was fairly modest. Throughout post-Soviet Central Asia, autocratic governments had established themselves with former Soviet politicians or party officials as presidents,² who were rather cautious about the US's advances.² I

In 1999, a *Silk Road Strategy Act* was finally introduced as a bill in the US House of Representatives, which contained Western democracy and free trade goals. However, the Act was never finally passed by Congress. When the US launched the War on Terror in Afghanistan immediately after the Al Qaeda attacks of 11 September 2001, it stepped up its involvement in Central Asia. For several years, there were US military bases in Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan. In 2011, US Secretary of State Hilary Clinton also

¹ See Griffiths (2019), who emphasizes that although China provided the label for the 'New Silk Road', in fact many political actors had contributed to the revival of the Eurasian overland routes.

² This applies only to a limited extent to the small Republic of Kyrgyzstan, where a kind of multi-party democracy emerged (cf. M. Kreckel 2017).

announced her own '*New Silk Road Initiative*', which was primarily aimed at connecting Afghanistan to the Central Asian economic area.¹ However, since the first partial withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan in 2014 under President Obama, American interest in Central Asia has noticeably waned.² This trend has intensified during the Trump era from 2017 to 2021. The hasty withdrawal of US troops in 2021 under President Biden was the final chapter in this development. As a result, the US is now barely present in the Eurasian Silk Road debate.

The *European Union*, as a confederation of (currently 27) sovereign states, also became active in the Caucasus and Central Asia after the dissolution of the USSR. The EU's aim was to use the newly accessible routes of the ancient Silk Road to open up opportunities for European values and economic interests to exert influence. The immediate goal was to revive and expand the direct overland connection from Europe to Central Asia and China, bypassing Russia.²

However, a glance at the map reveals that bypassing Russia is proving difficult to achieve. Overland transport between Europe and the Far East would then either have to pass through Iran – a very difficult cooperation partner for the EU – or take the cumbersome route through the Black Sea, the Caspian Sea and the independent countries of Georgia and Azerbaijan lying between them. The EU opted for the latter route.

To put this into practice, the EU launched the TRACECA (*Transport Corridor Europe – Caucasus – Asia*) support program in 1993.³ At a conference of 12 heads of state and government on the "Re-establishment of the Ancient Silk Road" in 1998 in Baku, the capital of Azerbaijan, a founding document was signed.⁴ Soon afterwards, a permanent TRACECA General Secretariat was established in Baku. Since then, considerable EU funds have been invested in the expansion of the rail and road networks in the participating partner countries. Not only are most of the new states of Central Asia and the Caucasus permanent members of TRACECA, but so are Ukraine, Turkey and (since 2009) Iran, three partner countries that are not without their problems for the EU.

¹ However, in 2011, President Obama declared the *Pacific region* to be the focus of US foreign policy in Asia ("*Pivot to Asia*"), not Central Asia and Afghanistan.

² See Laruelle (2015) on this topic. Under President Obama, the Asian region was declared the main focus (*pivot*) of US foreign policy. However, this primarily concerned the Pacific Rim countries (cf. Hansel et al., 2018). See Kolmaš / Kolmašová (2019), who argue that the new US Silk Road policy announced by President Obama in 2011 never really got off the ground and was not pursued under President Trump either. Markey (2020, chap. 6) argues similarly.

³ The TRACECA initiative was strongly influenced by the vision of a "New Silk Road" propagated in the 1990s by *Eduard Shevardnadze*, former Soviet foreign minister and later president of independent Georgia. See Shevardnadze (1999).

⁴ The original TRACECA partner countries are Armenia, Azerbaijan, Bulgaria, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Moldova, Romania, Tajikistan, Turkey, Ukraine and Uzbekistan, with Iran joining in 2009. China and Russia are not members of TRACECA, while Turkmenistan has guest status.



Eurasian transport routes promoted or planned by the EU (TRACECA)¹

From the outset, one peculiarity of TRACECA was that the 'Europe-Caucasus-Asia transport corridor' did *not* include China, which lies at the other end of the historic Silk Road. Instead, the main aim was to open up the former Soviet-controlled corridor from the Caucasus to the Central Asian republics for the EU itself. However, the People's Republic of China and the Russian Federation were also pursuing their own interests there.

Given this complicated starting point, the European TRACECA initiative has not yet resulted in a truly coherent strategy. Tangible progress has been made in financing a network of rail and road connections and pipelines in and between the countries of the Caucasus and Central Asia. In addition, official TRACECA announcements make much of joint working groups and commissions of the participating countries and high-profile summit meetings of heads of state.²

New Silk Road policy from the East

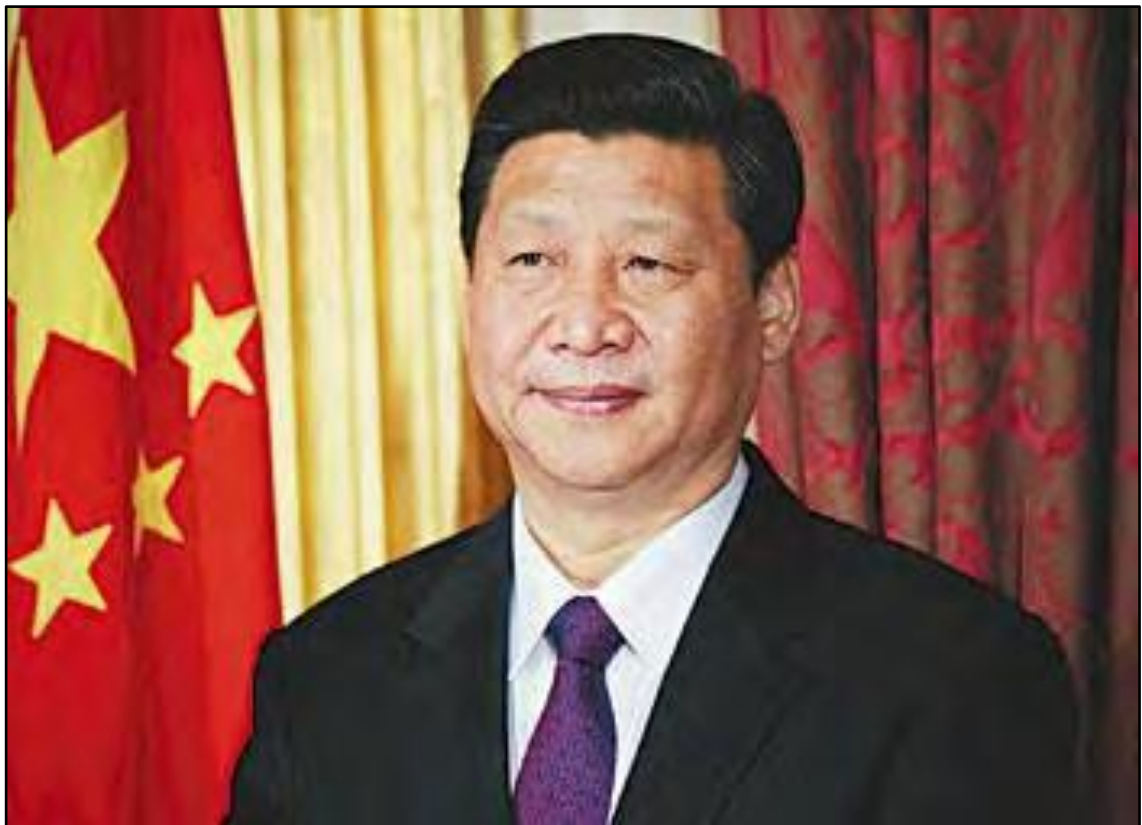
The Western Silk Road policy, supported by the United States and the European Union, has thus not been particularly successful to date. This is primarily due to the fact that momentum in the opposite direction, i.e. *from East to West*, is growing stronger. Since 2001, the *Shanghai Cooperation Organization* (SCO) has existed there, in which China and Russia have joined forces with the Central Asian republics of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan to assert their 'Asian' interests in shaping post-Soviet Central Asia. The *People's Republic of China* is the driving force behind the SCO and the strengthening of Eastern influence on the revival of the Silk Road.

¹ http://www.traceca-org.org/fileadmin/fm-dam/TAREP/65ta/Master_Plan/MP.pdf, p. 199 (edited, accessed: 20 May 2020).

² Hartmann et al. (2017, p. 27). See the TRACECA website (<http://www.traceca-org.org/en/home/>).

China had already begun expanding its transport routes and trade relations with Europe in the 1980s as part of its new economic liberalization policy under Deng Xiaoping. The first freight train connections between China and Western Europe were established. They mainly ran via the Russian-operated '*Eurasian Continental Bridge*'. This was essentially the modernized route of the dilapidated Trans-Siberian Railway and its southern branches. This transport route was clearly under Russian control. China established efficient connections to the Russian '*Eurasian Continental Bridge*' on its own territory, such as the modern railway line from Beijing via Urumqi to the Kazakh border, which was already mentioned in Chapter 8.

Since the early 2000s, articles about the re-establishment of the ancient Silk Road began to appear in the Chinese state press.¹ These articles indicated that the Chinese leadership was preparing to take greater control of its opening up to the West. In September 2013, Chinese state and party leader Xi Jinping finally announced the opening of a China-inspired *New Silk Road* (*yidai yilu*)² in the Kazakh capital Astana.³ It was initially given the official English name '*One Belt, One Road*' (abbreviated OBOR), but this soon proved to be misleading and was replaced by the name '*Belt and Road Initiative*' (abbreviated BRI).



Xi Jinping during his "One Belt, One Road" speech in Astana, September 2013⁴

¹ E.g. Fu Ying, Rebuilding the Ancient Silk Road, China Daily, 1 September 2004, source: _ (http://www.china-daily.com.cn/eng-lish/doc/2004-09/01/content_370519.htm); accessed: 1 March 2020).

² The Chinese expression *yidai yilu* was initially officially translated into English as "*One Belt, One Road*" (abbreviated OBOR). "Belt" stands for the Eurasian land connections, "Road" for the sea routes. As this led to misunderstandings, since 2016 the official English translation for *yidai yilu* has been "*Belt and Road Initiative*" (abbreviated BRI).

³ Between 2019 and 2022, the Kazakh capital Astana was temporarily given the official name "Nursultan" in honoring long-time president Nursultan Nazarbayev.

⁴ Source: <https://astanatimes.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/1378867981.jpg> (accessed: 20 June 2021).

According to Xi Jinping, the task of the New Silk Road was to promote global trade and foster international understanding for the benefit of all parties involved (a win-win situation).¹ The Silk Road initiative was intended to establish reliable land connections (*Silk Road Economic Belt*) and efficient sea routes and ports (*Maritime Silk Road*) between China and the Western world, primarily to Europe and Africa.²

This was clearly not just an empty declaration of intent, as enormous financial resources were made available by the Chinese side, mostly in the form of loans and subsidies, which soon began to flow. The figures on their extent vary. Depending on the calculation method, estimates for the years 2013-2018 range from a total of approximately 500 billion to 1 trillion US dollars in Chinese investments and construction contracts in the BRI countries.³ In any case, these are enormous sums that inevitably entail economic and political dependencies and can lead to repayment difficulties.⁴

The original aim of the Silk Road Economic Belt was probably to establish a southern transport corridor running from China via Central Asia, Iran, Turkey and the Balkan countries to Central Europe, thereby creating an alternative to the Eurasian Continental Bridge running through Russian territory. This was roughly in line with the ideas of the European TRACECA initiative, which also sought to bypass Russia over a large area.

¹ See Frankopan (2019, p. 99ff.).

² China's plans for a Maritime Silk Road were first publicly announced by Xi Jinping in early October 2013 during an official visit to the Indonesian capital Jakarta.

³ Bickenbach et al. (2019, p. 11f.), Breinbauer (2019, p.7), Ifo Institute / Institute for the World Economy (2019, p. 11).

⁴ See Heilmann (2020).



Xinhua: Original representation of the New Silk Road from 2013¹



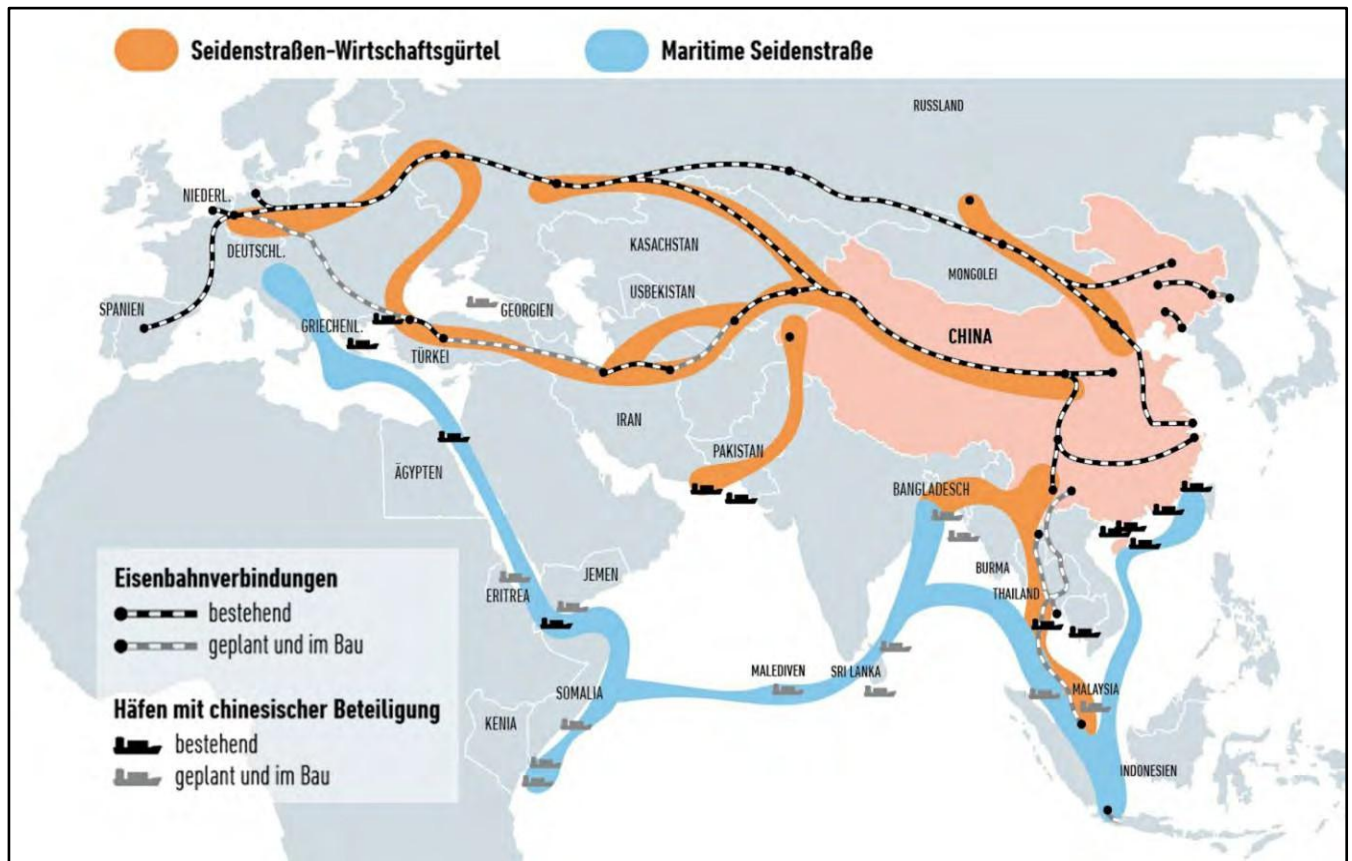
Xinhua: Official representation of the New Silk Road, used since 2015²

¹ The original representation of the planned route of the Chinese Silk Road, published in 2013. Source: <http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/special/silkroad/> (no longer available today).

² The revised version of the Silk Road route published in 2015. Source: <http://i2.chinamil.com.cn/i2/attachment/jpg/site2/20160516/8cdcd430086f18a361c004.jpg> (accessed 1 May 2020).

A schematic map sketch published in 2013 by the Chinese state news agency Xinhua clearly shows the originally planned southern route of the Chinese New Silk Road. Incidentally, it corresponds almost exactly to Sven Hedin's vision of the future from 1936, described above (at the end of Chapter 5), of the route of a future 'New Silk Road'.

But China's priorities had already shifted significantly by 2015. This can be seen from the amended map sketch that the state news agency Xinhua has been distributing since then. From 2015 onwards, it has been presented as official fact by the Chinese side that the Eurasian overland route of the New Silk Road runs through Russia. On the corrected sketch from 2015, the Economic Belt of the New Silk Road (orange) makes a northern 'detour' via Moscow.



Existing and planned rail connections of the New Silk Road (as of the end of 2015)¹

This change of direction has nothing to do with the actual route, as can be seen from the sketch above. It reflects the planning status of the Chinese Ministry of Transport at the end of 2015. A fictional 'detour' via Moscow is indicated there, while the existing railway lines of the Chinese 'Silk Road Economic Belt' run *through Russia*, either via Mongolia (northern route) or via Kazakhstan (central route). The southern detour route via Iran and Turkey is still only a vague plan with no visible rail connection.

¹ FAZ, 5 March 2019 (<https://www.faz.net/ppmedia/1.6060121/default-retina>). The graphic is based on a presentation by the Berlin-based Merics Institute, which takes into account official data from the Chinese Ministry of Transport.

The main trigger for this change was Russia's annexation of the Crimean peninsula, which belongs to Ukraine under international law, in spring 2014. The Ukraine crisis at that time led to sanctions by the US and the EU against Russia and to major tensions between the Western NATO powers and Russia, which have intensified significantly since Russia's attack on Ukraine in early 2022. The People's Republic of China, on the other hand, did not condemn Russia's policy on Ukraine.¹ Since then the Russian Federation has entered into closer political and economic ties with China, which have intensified in subsequent years.

This means that since the events in Ukraine in 2014, Russia has no longer behaved primarily as a rival, but above all as an active partner and ally of the Chinese Silk Road initiative. The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) served as an institutional platform for the intensifying Chinese-Russian cooperation.

From then on, the entire Russian transport infrastructure running between East and West, including the Trans-Siberian Railway, was considered Russia's contribution to China's New Silk Road. The 'Eurasian Continental Bridge', which had previously been operated independently by Russia, thus merged with China's Silk Road initiative.² Since then, the Russian rail network has been used by the Trans-Eurasia Express, which is heavily subsidized by Chinese state funds and operated by the Chinese state railway. As can be seen in the planning sketch above, Russia has thus become a transit area for Chinese transit freight trains travelling back and forth between China and Western Europe:

- The *northern route* of the Chinese Trans-Eurasia Express connects northern China and Mongolia with Western Europe via the old Trans-Siberian Railway line.
- The *middle route* runs through Xinjiang and Kazakhstan towards Moscow and from there further west. It is by far the most important Eurasian long-distance connection. To date around three quarters of rail transport between Europe and China has been handled on this route.³
- The originally planned *southern route*, which bypasses Russia, has so far existed largely on paper only. It also crosses Xinjiang and follows the route of the historic Silk Road across the Black Sea, or via Iran and on through Turkey. From there, it is to continue via the Balkans towards Central Europe.⁴
- Finally, a fourth route leading to the south-west can be seen on the planning sketch. This is the *China–Pakistan Economic Corridor* mentioned in Chapter 8. In the distant future, a rail and road link suitable for freight transport is to be built between Kashgar and the Pakistani seaport of Gwadar on the Persian Gulf. This would further enhance Xinjiang's status as a border region.

China's original ambition to bypass Russian territory with a southern route has therefore lost its former priority since 2014/15. The central route, on the other hand, experienced a real boom between 2014 and 2021. After the start of the coronavirus crisis, transport volumes there increased even further.

The outbreak of war in Ukraine in spring 2022 and the subsequent tightening of sanctions against Russia by the West have led to a completely changed situation. The outcome is uncertain. For freight transit traffic between China and Europe, this could mean that transit routes through Russian territory could even be completely shut down in the future.

¹ See Rimmer (2018, pp. 8–11). See also Fels (2018), Hsiung (2019), Zuenko (2019), Rolland (2019).

² In May 2015, Presidents Putin and Xi Jinping signed a joint declaration on cooperation between Russia and China, in which they agreed to link the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) initiated by Russia with China's Silk Road initiative (Zuenko 2019, p. 2).

³ UIC Freight Department (2020, p. 2).

⁴ See Rimmer (2018), Ifo Institute / Institute for the World Economy (2019, p. 68f.).

The original Chinese plan to upgrade the southern corridor of the historic Silk Road and thereby create a transport link to the West that is independent of Russia may therefore regain importance. It could even lead to a link between China's Belt and Road Initiative and the European TRACECA plans, which have always favored the southern route.

Regardless of this, China has been pushing ahead with the expansion of the southern freight train connection to Iran via Central Asia for some time now. Following the renewed tightening of American sanctions against Iran in 2018, the Islamic Republic of Iran is almost inevitably dependent on closer economic and political ties with China, which is not particularly interested in the country's religious and political peculiarities.¹ Notably, with China's support, Iran's admission as a full member of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) was initiated in September 2021.²

A global Silk Road network under Chinese hegemony

However, Chinese plans for the New Silk Road now extend far beyond the catchment area of the traditional Silk Road and are constantly expanding.³ In addition to the Silk Road Economic Belt running through Russia and the Maritime Silk Road, there are now Chinese plans for a *Polar Silk Road*, which would run from northern China through the Arctic Ocean to Europe.² Furthermore, the whole of Africa and parts of Latin America are being included in the BRI network.

There is also a tendency towards inflationary use of the Silk Road metaphor. There is now talk of a "*Digital Silk Road*" and a "*Health Silk Road*".³ The term "Silk Road" has increasingly become a label for Chinese-inspired international networks of all kinds. For example, there is a "*Network of Silk Road Arts Festivals*", a "*Silk Road International Library Alliance*" and a "*Silk Road International Alliance of Art Museums and Galleries*" – usually coordinated by Chinese Confucius Institutes.

According to official Chinese figures⁴, by early 2022 the number of BRI partner countries with cooperation agreements had already risen from 64 to 143, including all of Africa, all Arab states, Turkey and Iran. The United States and Germany are not included.⁵ Unlike the US, however, Germany (along with other major European countries, including France and the UK) is a member of *the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank* (AIIB), which was founded and is led by China. Since 2016, a large part of the funding for Silk Road projects around the world has been handled by the AIIB, increasingly in Chinese yuan rather than US dollars.

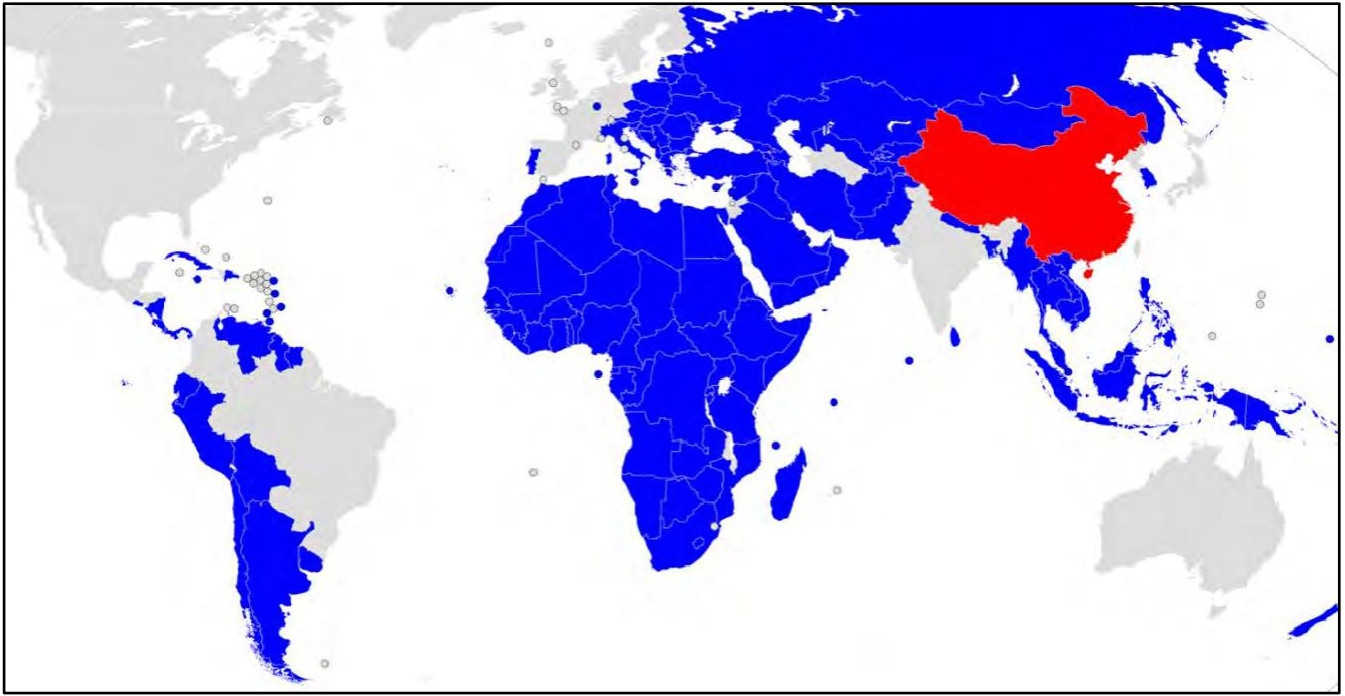
¹ See, for example: DER SPIEGEL, 18 May 2018 (<https://www.spiegel.de/wirtschaft/soziales/iran-china-startet-neue-handels-route-nach-us-ausstieg-aus-atomabkommen-a-1207197.html>) from 12 September 2018. (<https://owc.de/2018/09/12/neue-eisenbahn-zwischen-iran-und-china/>) (both accessed on 1 March 2020).

² Sources: <https://deutsche-wirtschafts-nachrichten.de/514713/iran-wird-Vollmitglied-der-Shanghai-Cooperation-Organization>; <https://www.giga-hamburg.de/de/publikationen/28756216-außenpolitik-raisis-pragmatischer-revolutionismus-und-iranische-neuausrichtung-asien/>.

³ See the data from the Berlin-based Merics Institute, which is continuously updated: <https://www.merics.org/de/bri-tracker/mapping-the-belt-and-road-initiative>.

⁴ Source https://eng.yidaiyilu.gov.cn/info/iList.jsp?cat_id=10076&cur (as of 9 April 2022).

⁵ Some of the traditional European NATO members and allies of the US, such as Greece, Italy, Austria and Portugal have also joined, but not the USA and Germany.



Partner countries of the Chinese Silk Road Initiative, colored blue (as of February 2022)¹

The newer global activities of the Chinese Silk Road initiative have little in common (except for the name) with the historic Silk Road. Above all, it cannot be overlooked that the Eurasian overland routes that once made up the classic Silk Road now have only limited economic and strategic significance in the new global context. This is because international trade in goods today is predominantly carried out not by land or air, but – apart from pipeline connections – by the far more cost-effective sea route, primarily with the help of huge tankers and container ships.

This means that the global dominance of maritime trade, which has been in place since the 16th century, continues to this day. That is why China, as an exporting nation, is investing in the port facilities and terminals required for this purpose all over the world, such as in Piraeus in Greece, in the Italian port cities of Trieste and Genoa, and even in Hamburg.²

The Eurasian overland connection between China and Europe

Despite its ever-expanding maritime goals, China has by no means lost sight of the Eurasian land corridor of the New Silk Road (Silk Road Economic Belt). On the contrary, the Chinese leadership attaches particular importance to China's influence as an emerging world power. Since 2013, the overland connection between the Far East and Europe has become a state-subsidized prestige project for China, with which major economic interests are associated.

In 2021, the People's Republic of China was the largest foreign trade partner for the 27 EU countries, accounting for 16% (€696 billion) of total European trade (imports and exports) with non-EU countries. The United States ranked second with 15%, while Russia ranked fourth in EU foreign trade with 6%, behind the United Kingdom.³

¹ https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/archive/e/e5/20220212065722%21Belt_and_Road_Initiative_participant_map.svg, 6 February 2022, with a total of 148 member countries.

² According to UNCTAD, "based on weight, approximately 90 per cent of cross-border trade in goods is transported by sea" (<http://www.bpb.de/nachschlagen/zahlen-und-fakten/globalisierung/52531/see-fracht>; accessed 1 May 2019). See Frankopan (2019, p. 109f.). This does not include the international oil and gas business conducted via pipelines.

³ Source: <https://www.destatis.de/Europa/DE/Thema/Aussenhandel/EU-Handelspartner.html>.

China's keen interest in trade relations with Europe via the New Silk Road becomes even clearer when Germany, the EU's strongest economy, is singled out. In 2020, China was by far Germany's largest foreign trade partner, with annual turnover of around €212 billion. The US followed at a considerable distance with €172 billion, while Russia is only 14th (behind a number of EU countries, the UK and Switzerland), with an annual turnover of just €45 billion.¹

These figures show that the EU, and in particular its strongest exporting country, Germany, also has a keen interest in maintaining good economic relations with the major nuclear powers, the US *and* China. The EU and Germany's trade relations with Russia, the third major nuclear power, have been significantly less extensive to date. However, Russia has been Germany's most important energy supplier to date. Russia is also the main transit country for the Eurasian transport corridor of the New Silk Road. It remains to be seen whether this will still be the case after the global political "turning point" of 2022, which was triggered by Russia's attack on Ukraine.

However, as mentioned above, the vast majority of foreign trade between Europe and China does not take place by land, but by sea. Huge container ships, loaded with up to 20,000 large containers, travel between Chinese and European overseas ports such as Piraeus, Trieste, Genoa, Marseille, Antwerp, Rotterdam and Hamburg. Sea transport is by far the most cost-effective option, but also the slowest.³ Measured in tons, 92-95% of goods traded between Europe and China are transported by ship, which takes around 35-40 days. Freight trains only take around 14-20 days, but they account for only 2-3% of the trade volume, although this has been increasing in recent years.⁴

Rail freight transport between Europe and China has therefore always been a niche business, albeit an extremely attractive and strategically important one, primarily involving high-value commercial goods.⁵ If we consider not only the weight but also the market value of goods transported by rail, they account for around 5% of annual turnover. Between Germany and China, this amounted to approximately 10 billion euros per year in 2019, before the outbreak of the coronavirus crisis. This is a very interesting figure for German companies and business locations.⁶

This brings Xinjiang, which seems so far away, back into the picture. As has been emphasised many times, Xinjiang is China's most important bridgehead for overland transport to the west.

Two cities 11,000 kilometers apart, which could hardly be more different, have taken the lead in establishing and rapidly expanding rail transport between China and Europe: the central Chinese city of *Chongqing*, with a population of 34 million, on the Yangtze River, and the old coal and steel city of *Duisburg*, with a population of 500,000, located at the confluence of the Rhine and Ruhr rivers. The connection between these two cities will therefore serve as an illustrative example here.

¹ Source: (https://www.destatis.de/DE/Themen/Wirtschaft/Aussenhandel/Publikationen/Downloads-Aussenhandel/zusammen-fassende-uebersichten-jahr-vorlaeufig-pdf-2070100.pdf?__blob=publicationFile) (Federal Statistical Office, Special Series 7.1, Table 1.6).

³ For example, in 2017, the average freight costs between Shanghai and Hamburg by rail were almost three times higher than by ship (6,350 vs. 2,410 US dollars per ton), but the average transport time was about half as long. For much faster air freight, the costs (at \$32,490 per ton) were about five times higher than rail costs (Ifo Institute / Institute for the World Economy 2019, p. 69).

⁴ Ifo Institute / Institute for the World Economy (2019, p. 41ff.), Berger (2017, p. 9).

⁵ Source: <https://www.faz.net/asv/die-neue-seidenstrasse-1/der-chinahandel-vor-dem-wandel-ausbau-der-schienerwege-15640012.html> (accessed: 1 July 2020).

⁶ The value of goods imported and exported by air freight between China and Germany accounts for almost 30% of total trade between the two countries. Source: Ifo Institute / Institute for the World Economy (2019, p. 41ff., 67f.).

Excursus: The Trans-Eurasia Express ‘Yuxinou’ between China and Germany

Duisburg was the first city in Germany to engage in overland trade with China, attracting media attention and investing considerable effort in the process. A functioning freight train connection between Duisburg and Chongqing had been in place since 2011. Shortly after the current President Xi Jinping officially launched the Chinese Silk Road initiative in 2013, the railway line between Chongqing and Duisburg was declared *the main axis of the intercontinental transport link of the New Silk Road* (Trans-Eurasia Express). In 2014, it was baptised with great pomp and circumstance with the promotional and, to German ears, mysteriously sounding name *Yuxinou*.



Ceremonial baptism of the ‘Yuxinou’ in Duisburg, 2014¹

‘Yuxinou’ is a Chinese artificial word composed of the syllables *Yu* (渝), a popular abbreviation for Chongqing, *Xin* (新), meaning ‘new’ and also the short form for the transit region ‘Xinjiang’, and *Ou* (欧). ‘Ou’ stands for Europe on the one hand, but also for iron, road and railway on the other.²

Within the framework of the Yuxinou concept, Chongqing and Duisburg serve as the two central shipment hubs for China and Europe. In Chongqing, European goods arriving from Duisburg are forwarded within China and Chinese goods destined for Duisburg are brought together here. Duisburg is to take on the same tasks for Europe and become the central European hub for overland trade with China.

Both cities have excellent rail and road connections as well as an efficient inland port for the transport of goods. In the case of Duisburg, the Yuxinou terminates at the Duisburg-Ruhrort port station, a gigantic transshipment station for goods arriving and departing by land and water. Duisburg-Ruhrort is directly connected to Rotterdam, the largest seaport in Europe, via the Rhine, which can also accommodate large container ships.

¹ <https://der-farang.com/de/pages/zugverbindung-von-mannheim-ins-chinesische-chongqing>.

² According to: <https://www.ksta.de/politik/-mit-wertvoller-fracht-von-china-nach-duisburg-3291698>, accessed on 1 July 2020).



Trans-Eurasia Express "Yuxinou" near the border town of Alashankou in Xinjiang¹

The rail journey covering the approximately 11,000 km between Chongqing and Duisburg now takes 12-14 days.² Around 35 container block trains³ up to 650 meters long can now travel between Chongqing and Duisburg each week. The frequency has even increased during the coronavirus pandemic.⁴ The freight trains operate in transit traffic without stopover between China and Germany on the central route of

¹ "An iron dragon on the Belt and Road near Alashankou", author: You Tian (CRI, China Radio International). Source: http://img0.zhytuku.meldingcloud.com/images/zhycms_chinaplus/20190412/e29130c1-e4d1-4048-993c-bbf13189814c.jpg?x-oss-process=image/resize,w_650 (Ausschnitt, Zugriff: 1.7.2020).

² Due to the greater width of the railway tracks throughout the former Soviet Union, the *gauge of the wagons* has to be *changed* twice. This involves transferring the entire container load of a freight train to other running gear in a gauge changeover facility, which takes some time and incurs costs. On the middle route of the Trans-Eurasia Express, on which the Yuxinou operates, this happens for the first time at the border between China and Kazakhstan, and for the second time at the border between Belarus and Poland.

³ *Block trains* are sealed freight trains that travel from their point of departure to their destination with a single customs declaration for their entire load, without any stops for loading or unloading and without time-consuming and costly customs checks en route (Griffiths 2019, p. 85). Such block clearance arrangements require diplomatic negotiations in which all countries of origin, transit and destination must be involved and their respective interests taken into account.

⁴ As the Duisport Group emphasizes in its April 2022 report: "Trade with China also continued to develop positively. In 2021, over 2,800 trips were made via the New Silk Road, representing an increase of twelve per cent. The TEU volume, which rose sharply in 2020, not only remained very stable in 2021, but even increased by 26 per cent. This was due in no small part to better utilization of trains in both directions. On average, there were around 60 arrivals and departures per week in Duisburg, with over 70 at peak times (<https://logistik-heute.de/news/ha-fenlogistik-stuermischen-zeiten-kurs-gehalten-36720.html>).

the Eurasian land bridge, which runs through Xinjiang, Kazakhstan, Russia, Belarus and Poland. Since the outbreak of the war in Ukraine in February 2022, nothing seems to have changed in this regard.¹ As recently as July 2022, the arrival of the ten thousandth Yuxinou from Chongqing in Duisburg was proudly announced.²

The Yuxinou transports 'textiles, electrical appliances, industrial supplies and toys from China to Europe – in short, everything that can be manufactured cheaply there and sells well here.'³ In the opposite direction, it mainly transports European luxury products such as wines, spirits, branded clothing and car spare parts. The return journey is usually less full than the outward journey.⁴ However, there are hopes for a further increase in capacity in the long term, and efforts are being made to reduce the journey time to 10 days in order to better compete with air freight, which is significantly faster but also much more expensive.



Xinjiang and the Trans-Eurasia Express routes, 2021 (with planned southern bypasses)⁵

The Chongqing-Duisburg route runs from its starting point in Chongqing through Xinjiang via Urumqi to the well-developed Chinese border station of *Alashankou* at the Dzungarian Gate and its counterpart *Dostyk* on the Kazakh side. At the Chinese-Kazakh border, the containers are transferred to bogies with the

¹ <https://www.waz.de/staedte/duisburg/ukraine-hafen-duisburg-meldet-erste-folgen-auf-seidenstrasse-id234714013.html;https://table.me-dia/china/analyse/stoerungen-auf-der-schienen-seidenstrasse/> (accessed: 18 March 2022).

² Source: <https://german.cri.cn/2022/07/12/ARTIM59S8XZht9lnVZ0GH2t220712.shtml> (report on the German-language website of the state broadcaster "Radio China International" dated 12 July 2023).

³ Source: <https://www.zdf.de/nachrichten/heute/wie-duisburg-von-der-neuen-seidenstrasse-profitiert-100.html#:~:text=35%20Z%C3%BCge%20aus%20China%20%2D%20jede%20Woche%20Wie.von%20der%20neuen%20Seidenstra%C3%9Fe%20profitiert&text=For%20five%20years%20now,%20the, trains%20arrive%20every%20week> (ZDF, 26 April 2019, accessed on 1 July 2020)

⁴ UIC Freight Department (2020, p. 2).

⁵ Source: <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Trans-Eurasia-Express.png>; with own additions, taking into account the planning map of the Chinese Ministry of Transport from 2019 and the information contained therein on the train frequency of the Trans-Europe Express between 2011 and 2018 <https://img2.chinadaily.com.cn/images/201904/28/5cc504f5a3104842e4aafc5e.jpeg> (accessed: 1.7.2020).

wider Russian gauge. It then continues through Kazakhstan, Russia and Belarus to the European Union. At the EU border between Belarus and Poland, it switches back to the narrower European gauge. Xinjiang has thus become a strategically important transit country for the People's Republic of China for the 'Eurasian Land Bridge' of the New Silk Road.

The second major Chinese border crossing to the west is also located in northern Xinjiang, but slightly further south, in *Korgas* in the Yili Valley. Korgas (and its Kazakh counterpart Khorgos) has been developed into an efficient 'dry port' with its own free trade zone for road and rail freight transport. From Korgas, Chinese border traffic runs to Almaty in southern Kazakhstan and from there on to the Central Asian countries of Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, as well as to Iran.

As the above chart shows, the volume of traffic on the Trans-Eurasia Express has risen steadily since 2011. This is particularly true of the central route through Xinjiang, which accounts for the vast majority of transport via the 'Eurasian land bridge' (approx. 75%). By contrast, the southern route, which is only partially developed, has so far accounted for less than 3% of total overland long-distance freight traffic between China and Europe.² Once the southern route is completed and the problem of the many national and customs borders has been overcome, it – and thus also Korgas – will probably gain in importance. Until now, Korgas has mainly served regional freight transport between China and the neighboring Central Asian countries (including Iran).

In addition to the Yuxinou between Chongqing and Duisburg, there are numerous other direct freight train connections between European and Chinese cities.³ All of these connections are heavily subsidized by the Chinese government⁴ and operated by *China Railway Express (CRE)*, a subsidiary of the Chinese state railway. Its German partner is DB Cargo Eurasia, a subsidiary of German Railways (Deutsche Bundesbahn). Some of these connections run from eastern China via the northern route of the Silk Road and the Trans-Siberian Railway.⁵ However, as mentioned above, the most heavily used route is the central route of the 'Eurasian Land Bridge'.⁶ Its core remains the Chongqing-Duisburg connection. The desired unique position for rail transport between China and Europe has not been achieved. Nevertheless, according to an estimate by THE GUARDIAN, around 80% of container trains commuting between China and Europe pass through Duisburg. Thus, the city has become a central hub for European trade with China by rail.⁷

Recently, Hamburg has also been promoting the idea that *'it is not Duisburg, as is often claimed, but Hamburg that should be seen as the end of the 'New Silk Road'*.² This is supported by the fact that Hamburg now has 25 direct China Railway Express connections with Chinese cities, with a total freight volume of 160,000 standard containers (TEU) in 2021. However, as mentioned above, trade with China is predominantly conducted by sea.

¹ On the Kazakh side, in the border town of Khorgos, there is also a modern facility for converting entire freight trains to the wider Russian gauge and vice versa. From there, there is also a freight train connection to the central route of the Eurasian Land Bridge through Russia. However, it has hardly been used so far; the Yuxinou runs via Alashankou (Griffiths 2019, p. 90f.).

² Berger (2017, p. 10f.).

³ There is now even a direct connection between Xiwu in China and London, which uses the Channel Tunnel, and another that runs to Madrid. Further examples include direct transport connections between Chinese cities and German destination stations such as Berlin, Hamburg, Leipzig, Nuremberg and Munich. An overview is provided by Chen, Xiangming (2020).

⁴ For information on Chinese subsidies for rail freight transport between China and Europe, see: <https://market-in-sights.upply.com/en/what-is-the-situation-for-china-europe-rail-freight-subsidies-in-2022>, 22 January 2022.

⁵ Griffiths (2019, p. 86f.).

⁶ UIC Freight Department (2020, p. 2).

⁷ <https://www.theguardian.com/cities/2018/aug/01/germanys-china-city-duisburg-became-xi-jinping-gateway-europe> (The Guardian, 1.8.2018, accessed 1 July.2020).



Chinese container ship on the Elbe heading for the Port of Hamburg, 2021¹

Hamburg's overseas trade with China, with an annual freight volume of around 2.6 million TEU standard containers², exceeds rail trade many times over. Hamburg, which is also part of the "maritime Silk Road" with its seaport on the Elbe, is therefore *the* main hub for German trade with China. The globally operating state-owned Chinese shipping company Cosco is based in the Port of Hamburg Cosco (headquartered in Shanghai) has therefore become a very important player with its own shareholding in the Port of Hamburg.³

It is a moot point as to who deserves top ranking in Germany, the city of Duisburg as a pioneer and key player in rail freight transport with China, or the city of Hamburg as the undisputed largest German hub for trade with China by land and sea. Local patriots and marketing strategists may rack their brains over this. If the Ukraine conflict and Western sanctions against Russia lead to the complete abandonment of the China Railway Express connections between China and Western Europe that run through Russian territory, then the question would be moot anyway.

¹ <https://www.hafen-hamburg.de/en/vessels/cosco-shipping-azalea-48340/> (accessed 25 December 2021).

² <https://www.hafen-hamburg.de/de/special/chinaspecial/> (accessed 18 February 2022).

³ <https://www.faz.net/aktuell/wirtschaft/unternehmen/chinas-staatsreederei-kauft-sich-in-hamburg-ein-17548052.html> (accessed 25 September 2021).

Conclusion

When comparing the Eurasian overland connections of the Old and New Silk Roads, fundamental changes have taken place over the course of history. As we saw in the first chapter, goods and people travelled very slowly along the caravan routes of the historic Silk Road, usually only over short distances, from oasis to oasis, from market to market. Marco Polo's two long journeys from Venice to Beijing and back, which took several years, were rare exceptions, but they provide fertile grounds for the creation of myths.

Local and regional transport and trade relations over shorter distances are, of course, still important. With the intensified infrastructure development in the wake of the New Silk Road Initiative, their volume has even grown. But there is a crucial difference in that goods and people now normally cover the entire distance between Europe and the Far East *in one* go. People usually travel the huge distance between Europe and China by plane. Export and import trade with China is also direct, almost exclusively by sea. This is likely to remain the case in the future. Rail freight transport between Europe and China could increase. But even under the most favorable circumstances, it will probably always remain a side issue. The same applies to expensive air freight. The main emphasis will continue to be on overseas trade relations between Europe and China, which are strongly influenced by political framework conditions, i.e. subsidies on the one hand and boycott measures on the other.

Given their huge trade volume with China, it would have been logical for the European Union and the Federal Republic of Germany to officially join China's Belt and Road Initiative. This did not happen. Mainly out of loyalty to their ally, the United States, and out of concern about unilateral co-operation with China. Neither the EU nor Germany have signed a formal cooperation agreement,¹ despite frequent calls to do so.² Both are torn between economic considerations on the one hand, foreign policy considerations towards their powerful American ally on the other, and growing concerns about China's economic and foreign policy stance. The recent conflict in Ukraine and ongoing discussions about the human rights situation in Xinjiang have further complicated the situation. The growing mistrust among Europeans towards global supply chains and trade dependencies is also likely to dampen acceptance of the New Silk Road with its Chinese-inspired win-win philosophy.

We cannot explore this further here. Our main interest in this book is the eventful fate of Xinjiang throughout its long history. Against this backdrop, if we try to look into the future, it is very likely that Xinjiang will continue to be China's gateway to the West, as it was in the days of Xuanzang and Marco Polo.

However, if the Eurasian overland connections fall victim to a new political ice age between East and West, the Xinjiang issue is likely to recede into the distance for Europe once again. With the Yuxinou, Xinjiang and its problems would then probably disappear completely from the screens of Western media attention. However, it could also be that this development will lead to a renewed appreciation of the long-neglected southern route of the traditional Silk Road. In this case, Xinjiang is likely to remain in the game as China's 'window to the West'.

¹ The Federal Republic of Germany has been a member of *the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank* (AIIB) since 2015, which was founded and is led by China. It handles a large part of the financing for Silk Road projects around the world.

² See Handelsblatt, 3 May 2019 (<https://www.handelsblatt.com/politik/konjunktur/research-institute/handelspolitik-mit-china-neue-seidenstrasse-deutschland-sollte-offiziell-partner-werden/24280410.html?ticket=ST-9754928-ZP1XaZxeK6f0FHT2t9is-ap1>; accessed 8 July 2020).

Chapter Fifteen

China, Xinjiang and the Eurasian Silk Road.

A co-existence bound by fate

In just a few decades, since the 1980s and 1990s, the People's Republic of China, ruled by a communist single party and with a population of 1.4 billion today, has experienced a kind of 'economic miracle'. During this period, China has transformed itself from an impoverished developing country into an efficient market economy and a self-confident world power. China is also a military and nuclear power with four times as many inhabitants as the United States.

With regard to China's Silk Road initiative, major changes have also taken place at breathtaking speed. After lengthy preparations, the implementation began in 2013. Since then, China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has developed rapidly and been continuously expanded to new areas. This means that China's Silk Road rhetoric and policy has less and less to do with the actual history of the historic Silk Road, whose last heyday was more than half a millennium ago. Instead, China's New Silk Road has become a symbol and trademark of the People's Republic of China's global economic and power politics.

This is precisely why its development is also of utmost importance for the fate of the Chinese province of Xinjiang and its Uyghur majority population. The traditional meaning of the term Silk Road is the Eurasian transport and trade corridor that runs through Xinjiang, leading from China via Central Asia to the West. From Beijing's perspective, Xinjiang is, in a sense, *China's backyard*, which must not be abandoned under any circumstances. There are various reasons for this:

- The People's Republic of China will not voluntarily relinquish control over Xinjiang, if only because it has strong *economic interests* there. Xinjiang has valuable mineral resources, especially vast natural gas and oil reserves. More than a fifth of China's coal, gas and oil reserves are located in this sparsely populated region. Exploiting these resources is of paramount importance to the energy-hungry Chinese giant with its 1.4 billion inhabitants. This places clear limits on the autonomy of the 'Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region'. Not least for this reason, Xinjiang remains attractive to the Chinese economy and Han Chinese immigration despite its adverse climate and geographical remoteness.

¹ Duan et al. (2016).

- However, the powerful China's immediate economic interests are not the main reason why Xinjiang's separation from China is highly unlikely: the integrity of the entire Chinese territory is now understood as a non-negotiable *core interest* of the People's Republic of China's *policy*. From the official Chinese point of view, not only Taiwan, Hong Kong and Macao have belonged to China for thousands of years, but also Tibet and Xinjiang. Any thought of possible independence or even secession of these territories is unacceptable in the eyes of the Chinese state and party leadership. Throughout China: school lessons and the mass media portray the 'unity in diversity' of the Chinese motherland as an irrefutable historical fact: The myth of the inviolability of the multi-ethnic 'Middle Kingdom', which dates back thousands of years, is today a cornerstone of the ruling Communist Party's policy and part of the *raison d'état* of the People's Republic of China, to which Xinjiang is also subject.
- Due to its special location in north-western China, Xinjiang also plays an indispensable *geostrategic key role* in the realization of China's New Silk Road. Xinjiang is the transport bottleneck for access to the central route of the Eurasian land corridor via the Central Asian countries to the west, as well as to the planned southern route via Iran, Turkey and the Balkan countries to Central Europe. In addition, the strategically important connection to Pakistan runs through Xinjiang.

All this means that the People's Republic of China has big plans for its north-western province of Xinjiang and will not voluntarily relinquish control over it. Western pressure is unlikely to change this. Whether one takes the Chinese government's official view of history at face value, namely that Xinjiang is an immutable part of millennia-old China, or whether one regards Xinjiang more as a 'new frontier' that was conquered by the Qing dynasty in the mid-18th century and gradually incorporated into the Chinese state, it does not matter: Political unrest in Xinjiang is something the Chinese ruling party and government cannot afford, and it will certainly not tolerate any separatist tendencies.

Territorial integrity as a supreme national goal of the People's Republic of China is being brought to the fore particularly strongly under Xi Jinping's increasingly self-confident foreign policy and domestic nationalism. Xi Jinping's predecessors, Mao Zedong and Deng Xiaoping, also adhered to this line. And the break-up of the Soviet Union is an experience no-one in China today wants to share.

As we have seen, the Chinese party and state leadership has identified 'the' Uyghurs as potential separatists and troublemakers, as an obstacle to the modernization of Xinjiang and as a threat to China's Silk Road policy. This has been increasingly evident since the violent events of July 2009 in Urumqi. For several years now, there has been a crackdown on the Uyghur population. The Uyghurs are to be educated or re-educated to become loyal Chinese citizens, by force if necessary. On the other hand, the Chinese side is also working intensively to promote Xinjiang's infrastructure, economic development and educational standards in order to improve the material living conditions of its inhabitants and thus win their approval.

This problem has been discussed frequently in this book. It remains to be seen whether future developments in Xinjiang will continue to move towards terror prevention, intimidation and exclusion, or whether they will shift back towards integration, minority protection and joint development.

Should it not be possible one day for Uyghurs and Han Chinese, the '*temperamental neighbours*', as Ildikó Bellér-Hann¹ called them, to come together again in Xinjiang in a spirit of prosperous coexistence?

After all, there are a few Han Chinese who were born in Xinjiang or have lived there for decades who can be considered '*Uyghurised Han*'.² They see themselves as Han, but in addition to Chinese, they also speak Uyghur more or less fluently and have adopted certain Uyghur customs and eating habits. They generally get along well with their Uyghur neighbours. Conversely, there are more and more educated young Uyghurs who are proficient in Chinese and can navigate both cultures competently. At the same time, however, they have remained Uyghurs.

¹ Bellér-Hann (2002).

² Joniak-Lüthi (2016).



A glimmer of hope? Chinese lion with Uyghur ikat scarf (Urumqi 2018)¹

When one recalls the eventful history of Xinjiang, it becomes clear that many languages, cultures and religions have come and gone in the oasis cities of the Silk Road over the centuries. A wide variety of powers have ruled here, and time and again the people have come to terms with this. Today, it is the Chinese lion, certainly not a harmless animal, that catches the eye in the center of Urumqi. Why should this lion not one day be able to accept wearing Uyghur scarf in Xinjiang, thereby fully recognizing and respecting the Central Asian characteristics of its 'Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region'? We would be very pleased if it did.

It is clear that the national and international circumstances surrounding the live and coexistence of the people in today's Xinjiang are extremely complex. From the government's point of view, China's policy of 'Opening Up the West' depends on Xinjiang remaining an integral part of China and developing well and peacefully in the future. The Chinese state, the Chinese- and Turkic-speaking inhabitants of Xinjiang and the mega-project of the Chinese New Silk Road now form a *community of shared destiny*.³

¹ Photo: Marga Kreckel 2018, Map 1, P1010 047.

² The *scarf* shown in the photo is made of a patterned colorful fabric dyed using the *ikat method*. This dyeing technique, which is used especially for silk fabrics, is widespread in all Central Asian countries. Ikat dresses are worn not only in Xinjiang, but also in Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, especially on festive occasions. Ikat fabrics are something of a special symbol of the Uyghurs. They are not part of the Han Chinese traditional dress, but are often bought by Chinese tourists in Xinjiang.

Stone lions are a symbol of special strength throughout China. They can be found everywhere as guardian figures, especially in front of public buildings and restaurants.

³ See Hayes (2020), who refers to "*interwoven destinies*" in this context.

For the Uyghurs and Han Chinese living in Xinjiang, therefore, there is literally a lot at stake in view of their voluntary-involuntary participation in the rapid modernization and rapid rise of the People's Republic of China to become a political and economic world power. This should not be overlooked if one wishes to approach today's Xinjiang as a foreign visitor and observer with a sympathetic attitude, but with open eyes and an unbiased view.

One can only hope for better times. The well-understood self-interest of all parties involved suggests that these better times will one day come for Xinjiang. Unfortunately, the current global political climate, with its increasing polarization between China, Russia and the US-dominated West, makes it unlikely that this will happen very soon.

It may even be that Russia's attack on Ukraine will create a new Iron Curtain between East and West. In that case, the revival of the Eurasian Silk Road would have been nothing more than a brief dream. For us Europeans, Xinjiang would then once again be far away, on the other side of the world.

For Xinjiang itself, however, the looming cold spell in global politics could perhaps even lead to tempers cooling down to such an extent that, over time, a reasonably tolerable coexistence or even cooperation between the two largest ethnic groups living here becomes possible again.

Let us not give up hope.

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About the authors

Marga Kreckel, psychological psychotherapist, studied in Strasbourg, Aix-en-Provence, Munich and Aberdeen and obtained her doctorate at the University of Oxford. For over nine years, her main occupation was as head of the psychiatric day clinic at the municipal hospital in Nuremberg. Since 1995, she has been a practicing psychotherapist in Halle an der Saale.



Reinhard Kreckel studied sociology, history and philosophy in West Berlin, Paris, Aix-en-Provence and Munich. He was a university research associate in Munich, a lecturer and senior lecturer in Aberdeen University and a professor of sociology at the Universities of Erlangen-Nuremberg and Halle-Wittenberg. From 1996 to 2000, he was Rector of the University of Halle, and from 2001 to 2010, he was director of the Institute for Higher Education Research in Wittenberg.



After studying together in Aix-en-Provence, Marga and Reinhard Kreckel taught in post-colonial Algeria in 1964. This experience contributed significantly to their lifelong interest in Islamic societies and cultures.

For *Marga Kreckel*, this was the impetus for her seven personal travel guidebooks on Islamic countries, all of which sought to dispel common prejudices and transform them into active enthusiasm. She has published the richly illustrated volumes *My Uzbekistan* (2008), *Iran with My Own Eyes* (2009), *Fascination Taj Mahal. On the Trail of History in Delhi, Agra, Jaipur and Lahore* (2011), *Constantinople – Istanbul. Ottoman Metropolis – Turkish Cosmopolitan City* (2012), *Royal Morocco* (2013), *Albania – Multireligious Country in the Heart of Europe* (2015) and *Adventure Kyrgyzstan* (2017).

Her two most significant academic publications are: *Communicative Acts and Shared Knowledge in Natural Discourse* (1981) and *Macht der Väter – Krankheit der Söhne* (Power of Fathers – Illness of Sons, 1997).

Reinhard Kreckel has published numerous academic books, among others: *Soziologische Erkenntnis und Geschichte* (Sociological Knowledge and History, 1972), *Soziologisches Denken* (Sociological Thinking) (1975), *Soziale Ungleichheiten* (Social Inequalities, 1983), *Politische Soziologie der sozialen Ungleichheit* (Political Sociology of Social Inequality, 1992), *Soziale Ungleichheit im globalen Zusammenhang* (Sociology of Social Inequality in a Global Context, 2006).

With this book, the two have joined forces. Marga Kreckel's keen sense of clarity and aesthetics and Reinhard Kreckel's penchant for academic thoroughness have come together in what was hopefully a successful collaboration.