

Xinjiang Itinerary

(Author's note: For the sake of time I've relied on Wikipedia for historical information on cities and sites visited. All references can be sourced there. Wikipedia extracts have been italicized. I cannot attest to the accuracy of Wikipedia or its contributors. I have also converted all dates to the BCE and CE standardized format and used the metric system throughout.)

Day 1:

We arrived in Urumqi on the night flight from Beijing. It takes four hours. We departed from the magnificent Terminal 3. Wheels up at least one hour late putting us into Urumqi very late. The terminal was closed to save electricity when we arrived. We were allowed to exit through the jet way but had to take the service stairs down to waiting buses and onto baggage claim. One guy had to carry his wheelchair-bound mother on his back like a sack of potatoes to get down the unlit stairwell. Luckily my father was able to walk down. Welcome to Xinjiang.

Four years ago we visited Xinjiang and drove over 3000 km covering a northern route around the province that took me up to the northern forests and mountain lakes and through the xxx desert. This time the itinerary I planned would take us on the Silk Road routes counter clockwise in a southerly route around and through the Taklimakan desert. My parents were traveling with us adding to the adventure.

Urumqi has changed a lot. The small oasis town that my father had imagined has given way to rapid industrialization and commercial development. Urumqi now boasts several Kentucky Fried Chickens, nonexistent 4 years ago, and over 5 million people. The influx of people from around the province to work in Xinjiang's largest city, as well as immigrants from all over China, has cases the city to swell and put massive pressures on Urumqi's transportation infrastructure. The traffic is now worse, in my opinion, than Beijing.

In Urumqi we stayed at Home Inns (Nasdaq:HMIN), China's first real economy hotel chain. The company was founded by a venture capitalist I know from Shanghai named Neil Shen. Neil also started Ctrip.com, a popular travel website. The beds are relatively soft for China, the service standardized, includes free internet, and clean sheets.

Day 2:

We visited some sights in Urumqi on our first full day after picking up our rental car. My preferred vehicle for highway travel in China is a Hyundai Elantra. The Beijing produced vehicle is ubiquitous throughout China and easily serviceable. Urumqi's heavy police and military presence gives the main tourist attractions an unfriendly feel. Sure we've all heard of the so-called terrorist activity of the Xinjiang Uighur separatists but seemed far from it in the traffic choked city. In the evening we had dinner with some of our Xinjiang friends. One a Uighur we befriended in Altai named Hasan. The other is a Han Chinese friend. The Han are the predominant ethnic group in China. After catching up on things over dinner and discussing our travel plans, we made plans to meet in ten or so days after completing our journey.

Day 3: Drive from Urumqi to Yining- North Side of Tianshan mountain range, lakes and mountains, China's far west frontier (20 miles from Kazakhstan), via G 312 (696 km)

We got an early start for our first day on the road and missed the horrid traffic of Urumqi. Blasting north out of town and pitching west, the scent of the Silk Road was in the air as the previous night's heavy rainfall made for bluebird skies and an unforgettable sunrise in the rearview mirror. Just as my mom asked me when we will see camels, we pass three in the early dawn on the side of highway G312. Our destinations for the day include Sailimu Lake, the Kazakhstan frontier, and Yining.

The drive west to Kazakhstan is stunning. The rugged semiarid landscape with the Gurbantungut desert to our left and the snowcapped Tianshan mountains to the right with a fresh snow from the night before on our left, the views are breathtaking and we spot a couple of golden eagles perched spotting for prey.

The highway climbs in elevation transitioning from the semiarid desert in to a forested alpine ecosystem as the highway snakes through a mountain pass. The pass opens up to us and revealed a gorgeous azure blue lake protected on all sides by high mountains partially shielded by clouds skirting across the sky. The air was cold and the wind was whipping off the lake making our stop brief but memorable. At this point we had climbed so high that the snowline almost met the lake.

Sailimu lake is located in the in the Bortala Mongolian Autonomous Prefecture in Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region. It encompasses an area of about 460 square kilometers and is a fault basin at an elevation of 2,073 meters, the highest among the Xinjiang's high mountain lakes having a maximum depth of 91 meters. There's even an annual road bike race around the lake and the nearby regions, now in its 5th year.

Leaving the lake stop we made our way along the shore as the gas in the tank was hitting empty. We stopped at a tiny settlement on the southern end of the lake and bought 10 liters of fuel, just enough to get us to the next proper service station. Just beyond the settlement was a traffic jam at the mouth of a 3000 meter long tunnel. The tunnel was newly opened and mostly finished- a welcomed sign. Popping out of this tunnel we made a big curve around a bend and saw views of the most breathtaking bridge spanning deep gorge with snowcapped peaks on all sides. This was obviously the newly opened section of G312, the old section cutting a more circuitous route up, over, and then down the mountains. The road, too, was mostly completed as we drove down and across the suspension bridge, then winding down further, around, and eventually underneath the very bridge we crossed, offering up even more dramatic views. We all shared our opinions on what this scenery reminded us of- Switzerland, North Idaho, Wyoming? With one eye on the scenery and one eye on the road we carefully made our way down from the mountains, dodging road workers and vehicles coming up the wrong way on the highway in characteristically Chinese guess-as-you-go traffic revisions.

Coming out of the mountains and hitting the valley we head towards the Kazakhstan border and the wild western frontier of China. When we get there we were a little disappointed to see no heavy military presence, no Cold War tet-a-tet. Détente was in the air. Kazakhstan and China had OPEN FOR BUSINESS hung in the window. A large Chinese government border crossing building loomed 100 meters away and my mom and dad posed with the lone guard there manning the modest gate directly in front. Walkovers could enter through a side gate. You could even purchase a ticket to see off guests as they went to Kazakhstan. The long distance busses and bulk commodity haulers were lined up further away as far as the eye could see to cross into Kazakhstan. My dad checked off this bucket list item and we were left with in an anticlimactic mood as we backtracked 30 km and headed for Yining around the south side of the Tianshan Mountain range.

Yining; (Ghulja or Yining, also spelled Kuldja, Kulja, Gulja; also spelled Ining), also called Ili or Yili, is a county-level city in western Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region of northwestern China, and the capital of the Ili Kazakh Autonomous Prefecture. Historically, Yining is the successor to the ruined city of Almaliq in Huocheng County.

From 13-15th century Yining was under the control of Chagatai Khanate known as Almaligh. Another Mongolian empire, the Zunghar Khanate, also established its capital in the area. In the 19th and early 20th century, the word Kuldja or Kulja was often used in Russia and in the West as the name for the entire Chinese part of the Ili River basin as well as for its two main cities. The usage of 1911 Encyclopedia Britannica is fairly characteristic: it defines Kulja as a "territory in north-west China" bounded by the Russian border and the mountains that surround the Ili basin, and it talks about two major cities of the region:

Kulja (i.e. today's Yining), or more specifically Old Kulja (elsewhere, also called Taranchi Kulja), which was the commercial center of the region.

Suidun (i.e. Suiding, now called Shuiding), or more specifically New Kulja, Manchu Kulja, or Ili (elsewhere, also Chinese Kulja), the Chinese fortress and the regional capital.

Suiding was located some 40 km (25 mi) to the northwest of Yining, in today's Huocheng County; the regional capital was moved there, circa 1883, prior to which the appellation New Kulja or Manchu Kulja was applied to the Huiyuan Cheng fortress, which was a bit closer to Yining.

During the Qing Dynasty, Yining was the site of the Sino-Russian Treaty of Kulja 1851, which opened the area for trade.

In 1864-66, the city suffered severely from fighting during the Muslim Rebellion. The city and the rest of the Ili River basin were seized by the Russians in 1871 during Yakub Beg's independent rule of Kashgaria. It was restored to China under the terms of the Treaty of Saint Petersburg (1881).

The Republican Period of China's History saw further strife in Yining. During the Ili Rebellion, the Chinese Muslim officer Liu Bin Di engaged in combat against Soviet backed Turkic Muslim rebels, and was killed in action in November 1944 in Ghulja.

Since the founding of the People's Republic of China (PRC) Yining became the capital of an autonomous district in 1954. In 1962, major Sino-Soviet clashes took place along the Ili River.

In 1997, it what came to be known as the Gulja Incident or massacre, the city was rocked by two days of demonstrations or riots followed by a government crackdown resulting in at least 9 deaths following the execution of 30 Uighur activists.

We stayed at the Sohotel in Yining, a private hotel chain with a sister hotel in Urumqi. The hotel offered up one of the finest breakfasts (included with the room) that we had on our trip. Next to the hotel that night we enjoyed some of the best kabobs ever in a tiny all night restaurant.

Day 4:

Leaving Yining after our hearty breakfast we headed due east on Highway G218 along the Ili River. At this point the river runs through a fairly wide valley where it appears to flood frequently and meander about. We started to see some really productive agriculture too; Cotton, sugar beets, corn, peppers, apples, peaches, melons, grapes, walnuts, dates, pomegranates, sheep, goats, horses, cows- a real Silk Road

bounty. We also learned that Yining is the capital of lavender production in China and oils and soaps were readily available.

After driving through many villages on the now two lane highway, the valley started to close in and we began to climb in elevation. Once again the Tianshans were revealing their snow capped peaks, now on both sides of us and closing in around us. We then entered into a fairly wide valley along the river that was called the Nalati Grassland. Apparently this place was, and is, a winter grazing location for herders of various ethnic tribes.

From the grassland the highway enters a narrow river gorge at the end of the valley and begins to follow the river into the mountains. At this point we were at snow level and in the high alpine forest. After driving through this idyllic scenery for about 10 minutes, we came to a small police check point. These bandits told us that as foreigners we were not allowed to enter into the Yili prefecture without some type of vague transit permit and would have to turn back. We quickly saw this as a scam and simply got back in our vehicle and put those cops in our rearview mirror. They looked at us drive away and did nothing.

Here in the middle of the mountains highway G218 intersects with G217. G 217 runs north to south. We make our turn to the south and immediately begin to climb. Snow was on the highway at this point, but since the two days it had fallen, sunshine and modest traffic prevailed exposing wet pavement and not hindering our driving with icy conditions.

I knew this bit of road was full of switchbacks and climbed fairly high from the satellite images I had reviewed. I was surprised to find that the road was new, mostly, for now....

The sun had done its work except on the most protected northern slopes making for easy driving in the deep snow ruts. We had a few fun one-on-ones with descending vehicles as we climbed, and climbed. We passed out of the forest and entered into a high alpine meadow ecosystem. Along the way there were huts, likely shelters for herdsmen grazing livestock in the summer. Lower down there were bee keepers selling honey at the oddest spots. Obviously there taking advantage of the flowers that bloomed up in this pristine environment.

I'm not sure exactly how far we climbed in elevation once we reached the obvious summit but it reminded me of looking out over the Andes with the sense of really being in the middle of a remote and rugged mountain range. From this summit we began a long descent into a valley on a virtually straight road with no curves. Simply going straight down the smooth south facing gradual slope of these mountains. At the bottom of the valley a fairly thick fog had developed that was caused by the heating of the air and its effect on the snow. The fog was then gathering on the blades of grass and refreezing setting off a glittering fiesta that was transfixing when the sun broke through the fog. The yaks and horses along the way seemed to be enjoying the crunchy grass as they paid no attention to us as we snapped away with excitement seeing the yaks in the snow. The signage of the villages told me we were back in Mongol country as the Mongolian script appeared along the Chinese and no Arabic (the standard in Xinjiang). My best guess was Mongolian herdsmen made it up to this remote mountain valley to graze and never left. Apparently they have been able to uphold their traditions and lifestyle.

Later learning later we had traveled through the second largest grassland in China, called Bayanbulak Grassland, and having an average elevation of 2,500 m, it all made sense to me. They actually celebrate the annual Nadam festival there in the valley in July.

After entering this particular valley I figured we would simply follow it all the way down to the north rim of the Tarim Basin and the Taklimakan Desert, the second largest moving desert in the world. No such luck. The highway kept going and going across the frozen landscape and more mountains loomed in the distance. The road was not turning, just aiming due south for more snow capped peaks. We made educated guesses on where we thought we would go. None were correct. We went right into the mountains again up yet another river gorge. More climbing. More switchbacks. We even went through one tunnel. As I said above, the road was mostly completed, missing a few guard rails here and there. Nothing dramatic. At the top of this mountain pass we encountered an incomplete tunnel. How do you drive through an incomplete tunnel? We had a large truck with a crane on it in front of us plus on small sedan. After a brief stop at the mouth of the tunnel, the truck, the sedan, and our car went in. There were no lights; we could not see the end of the tunnel. There was construction equipment and crates and boxes set about. Only one lane of traffic could get through. Perhaps midway we came upon a construction crew set up on scaffold up to the top of the tunnel with an opening just barely large enough for the big truck to get through. They were completing the tunnel while we were driving through it! At one point we had to stop at one of the scaffold setups for about 20 minutes while the construction crew hoisted tunnel lining material up to the top scaffold deck. We sat and laughed at the hilarity of it all as the sheets of their foam lining material fell out of their loose bundle and onto the road deck. The crew fought with each other. Gas powered generators thumped away pouring out exhaust in the unventilated tunnel. The blinding construction lights powered by the generators disappeared into the distance as we dove deeper into the tunnel. Eventually we exited on the other side of this mountain and immediately started a long hairpin descent. 39 hairpin turns in all. At the bottom we found a magnificent, pristine mountain lake in another Mongolian settlement. We promised ourselves to build a vacation home there. My father joked that it was the first time he had to help finish a tunnel so he could drive through it.

What came next was a winding, bumpy, rocky, and very dusty drive for the next few hours. The highway was not completed, but that does not stop the intrepid Chinese from traveling their highways. They were literally building the highway underneath us. We drove through one more incomplete tunnel and around another on a hairy outcrop of crushed rock under a cliff overhang above a river to get through. We could taste the dust in our mouths. At one point the terrain began to change dramatically. The rivers were flowing down. We must be heading out of the mountains we thought. Sure enough, we were. Very dramatically the terrain opened up to well worn sandstone foothills of red, magenta, yellow, greens and grays. My father and I had just recently driven through Moab, UT and Monument Valley so we were seeing something familiar. We figured that this rock, geologically speaking, was much younger than the Utah rock. The sedimentation layers and erosion patterns looked similar, as well as the multitude of colors, but the range was larger in area and taller in elevation.

Driving down through the red landscape we came upon a popular tourist stop called the Mysterious Gorge. We all agreed that we had seen our fair share of mysterious gorges for the day with the hair raising driving that transpired in the mountains and kept on driving to our destination- Kuche.

We found rooms at the Kuche International Hotel for a reasonable price. The restaurant we had dinner at in the lobby was run by a family, and I mean a family, of folks from Henan Province. They must have had all their cousins, and some that weren't, working there at that restaurant. The food was OK. The prevalence of non-locals in Xinjiang is striking, especially in the service industry and government labor sectors. More on that later.

Day 5:

Kuche was established in the 3rd century BCE and was an ancient Buddhist kingdom located on the branch of the Silk Road that ran along the northern edge of the Taklimakan Desert in the Tarim Basin and south of the Muzat River. (The area lies in present day Aksu Prefecture, Xinjiang, China; Kuqa City itself is the county seat of that prefecture's Kuqa County).

According to the Book of Han, Kucha was the largest of the 'Thirty-six kingdoms of the Western Regions,' with a population of 81,317, including 21,076 persons able to bear arms. During the periods of Tang domination during the Early Middle Ages, the city of Kucha was usually one of the 'Four Garrisons' of Anhsi (Anxi) the 'Pacified West', typically the capital of it. During periods of Tibetan domination it was usually at least semi-independent. It fell under Uighur domination and became an important center of the later Uighur Kingdom after the Kirghiz destruction of the Uighur steppe empire in 840 CE.

Kucha is well known as the home of the great fifth century translator monk Kumārajīva (344-413). It was an important Buddhist center from Antiquity until the late Middle Ages, with the Sarvāstivāda school (a Sthavira school) predominating into the Uighur period, when Mahayana eventually became important. For a long time Kucha was the most populous oasis in the Tarim Basin. The language, as evidenced by surviving manuscripts and inscriptions, was Tokharian (Tocharian), an Indo-European language. Under the Uighur domination the Kingdom of Kucha gradually became Turkic speaking.

As a Central Asian metropolitan center, Kucha was part of the Silk Road economy, and was in contact with the rest of Central Asia, including Sogdiana and Bactria, and thus eventually with the peripheral cultures of India, Persia, and China.

Kuchean music was very popular in China during the Tang Dynasty, particularly the lute which became known in Chinese as pipa. The 'music of Kucha' was transmitted from China to Japan, along with other early medieval music, during the same period, and is preserved there, somewhat transformed, as gagaku, or Japanese court music.

The extensive ruins of the ancient capital city, in Chinese Guici [the 'City of Subashi'], lie 20 kilometers (12 mi) north of modern Kucha. Francis Younghusband, who passed through the oasis in 1887 on his epic journey from Beijing to India, described the district as "probably" having some 60,000 inhabitants. The modern Chinese town was about 700 yards (640 m) square with a 25 ft (7.6 m) high wall, with no bastions or protection to the gateways, but a ditch about 20 ft (6 m) deep around it. It was filled with houses and "a few bad shops". The "Turk houses" ran right up to the edge of the ditch and there were remains of an old Turk city to the south-east of the Chinese one, but most of the shops and houses were outside of it. About 800 yards (732 m) north of the Chinese city were barracks for 500 soldiers out of a garrison he estimated to total about 1500 men, who were armed with old Enfield rifles "with the Tower mark."

Kuche was a very important town for Buddhism along the Silk Road. Buddhism was introduced to Kucha before the end of the 1st century, however it was not until the 3rd century that the kingdom became a major center of Buddhism, primarily the Sarvāstivāda school of the Sthavira or Śrāvakayāna branch, but eventually also Mahāyāna. (In this respect it differed from Khotan, a Mahāyāna-dominated kingdom on the southern side of the desert.)

According to the Chinese Book of Jin, during the third century there were nearly one thousand Buddhist stupas and temples in Kucha. At this time, Kuchanese monks began to travel to China. The fourth century saw yet further growth for Buddhism within the kingdom. The palace was said to resemble a Buddhist monastery, displaying carved stone Buddhas, and monasteries around the city were numerous.

Three monasteries existed in Kuche. Those include; Ta-mu (170 monks), Che-hu-li on Po-shan, a hill to the north of the town (50 or 60 monks), one founded by the king of Wen-Su, Uch-Turpan (70 monks). Also there were two nunneries at A-li (Avanyaka); Liun-jo-kan (50 nuns) and A-li-po (30 nuns).

Another nunnery, Tsio-li, was 40 li north of Kucha and is famous as the place where Kumārajīva's mother Jīva retired.

A monk from the royal family known as Po-Yen travelled to the Chinese capital, Luoyang, from AD 256-260. He translated six Buddhist texts to Chinese in 258 at China's famous White Horse Temple, including the Infinite Life Sutra, an important sutra in the Pure Land Buddhism.

Po-Śrīmitra was another Kuchean monk who traveled to China from 307-312 and translated three Buddhist texts.

A second Kuchean Buddhist monk known as Po-Yen also went to Liangzhou (the Wuwei region of modern Gansu), China and is said to have been well respected, although he is not known to have translated any texts.

In the early 20th century inscriptions and documents in two new related (but mutually unintelligible) languages were discovered at various sites in the Tarim Basin written in Central Asian Brahmi script. It was soon found that they belonged to the Indo-European family of languages and had not undergone the Satem sound change. The only records of East Tokharian, or "Tokharian A" (from the region of Turfan [Turfan] and Karashahr), and West Tokharian, or "Tokharian B" (mainly from the region of Kucha, but also found in Turfan and elsewhere), are of relatively late date – approximately 6th to 8th century CE (though the dates are contested); but the people arrived in the region much earlier. Their languages became extinct before circa 1000 CE. Scholars are still trying to piece together a fuller picture of these languages, their origins, history and connections, etc.

We left Kuche early and backtracked north on highway G217 for about 20 km where we then headed west along a secondary road to the Kizil Buddhist caves. We did see more camels and thought that a good omen for our day. We were, after all, right on the silk road and not seeing camels would certainly devalue the experience.

The Kizil Caves are a set of 236 Buddhist rock-cut caves located near Kizil Township in Baicheng County. The site is located on the northern bank of the Muzat River northwest of Kuche. The caves extend along the cliff face for 3 km.

Driving along the rolling arid landscape you cannot see the caves as they are dug into the cut bank of the river and you don't see them until you drive down a narrow winding road and several switchbacks to the river's level and look back up at the cliff face.

The caves are said to be the earliest major Buddhist cave complex in China, with development occurring between the 3rd and 8th centuries. Although the site has been both damaged and looted, at least 1000 square meters of wall paintings—mostly Jataka stories—remain.

We were allowed to visit only 6 of the caves with the particular tickets we purchased. Our guide, a young Uyghur village girl educated at university in Aksu, was courteous, informed, and even spoke Japanese. Apparently, the Kizil caves are important for many Japanese Buddhist. We learned that the artisans painting the caves high-tailed it out of the region when the Muslims invaded and even left unfinished work behind.

The caves were “rediscovered” in 1909 by a German team and many of the most well preserved frescoes from these caves exist in German museums. Had the Germans not taken them, the valuable historical pieces would surely have been destroyed during the domestic Chinese upheavals of the 20th century.

Leaving the Kizil caves we headed through more highly productive agriculture land irrigated by the river we followed and producing the typical oasis commodities previously mentioned.

We joined up with Highway G314 outside of Aksu and stopped there for lunch. Aksu appeared to be an interesting place, for what little we saw of it. There was a very strong military presence. We were now deep into Uyghur country and my mom respectfully wore her headscarf.

The name Aksu literally means white water (in Turkic), and is used for both the oasis town and the river.

The economy of Aksu is mostly agricultural, with cotton, in particular long-staple cotton, as the main product. Also produced are grain, fruits, oils, beets and so on. The industry mostly consists of weaving, cement, and chemical industries.

From the Former Han dynasty (125 BCE to 23 CE) at least until the early Tang dynasty (618-907 CE), Aksu was known as Gumo. The ancient capital town of Nan ("Southern Town") was likely well south of the present town.

During the Former Han dynasty, Gumo is described as a "kingdom" (guo) containing 3,500 households and 24,500 individuals, including 4,500 people able to bear arms. It is said to have produced copper, iron and orpiment (As₂S₃), a mineral that alchemist believed could be used to make gold due to its color as well as medicines, although highly toxic.

The Chinese pilgrim Xuanzang visited this "kingdom" in 629 CE and referred to it as Baluka. He recorded that there were tens of Sarvastivadin Buddhist monasteries in the kingdom and over 1000 monks. He said the kingdom was 600 li from east to west, and 300 li from north to south. Its capital was said to be 6 li in circuit. He reported that the "native products, climate, temperament of the people, customs, written language and law are the same as in the country of Kuci (Kucha), (some 300 km to the east)], but the spoken language is somewhat different [from Kuchean]." He also stated that fine cotton and hemp cloth made in the area was traded in neighbouring countries.

In the 7th, 8th, and early 9th centuries, control of the entire region was often contested by the Chinese Tang Dynasty, the Tibetan Tufan Empire, and the Uyghur Empire; cities frequently changed hands. Tibet seized Aksu in 670 AD, but Tang forces reconquered the region in 692. Tibet regained the Tarim Basin in the late 720s, and the Tang Dynasty again annexed the region in the 740s. The Battle of Talas led to the gradual withdrawal of Chinese forces, and the region was contested between the Uyghurs and Tibetans.

Aksu was positioned on a junction of trade routes: the northern-Tarim route Silk Road, and the dangerous route north via the Tian Shan's Muzart Pass to the fertile Ili River valley.

Around 1220 Aksu became the capital of the Kingdom of Mangalai. In 1207-08, they submitted to Genghis Khan. The area had been part of the whole Mongol Empire before it was occupied by the independent-minded Chagatai Khanate under the House of Ogedei in 1286 from the hands of Kublai's Yuan Dynasty. After the decline of the Yuan Dynasty in the mid-14th century and subsequently the Chagatai Khanate in the late 14th century, Aksu fell under the power of Turkic and Mongol warlords.

Along with most of Xinjiang, Aksu fell under the control of the Khojas, and later that of Yaqub Beg, during the Dungan Rebellion of 1864-1877. Yakub Beg seized Aksu from Chinese Muslim forces and forced them north of the Tien Shan mountains, committing massacres upon the Chinese Muslims (tunganis). After the defeat of the rebellion, a learned cleric named Musa Sayrami (1836–1917), who had occupied positions of importance in Aksu under both rebel regimes, authored Tārīkh-i amniyya (History of Peace), which is considered by modern historians as one of the most important historical sources on the period.

The British Army officer Francis Younghusband visited Aksu in 1887 on his overland journey from Beijing to India. He described it as being the largest town he had seen on his way from the Chinese capital, with a population of about 20,000, besides other inhabitants of the district and a garrison of about 2,000 soldiers. "There were large bazaars and several inns—some for travelers, others for merchants wishing to make a prolonged stay to sell goods."

The Battle of Aksu occurred here on May 31, 1933. Isma'il Beg, a Uighur, became the rebel Tao-yin of Aksu. Aksu was the site of the a bombing in 2010.

Leaving after a quick lunch we headed southwest on G314 and were determined to make it to Kashgar before nightfall. Chinese highways are treacherous at night.

All along the way we saw huge cotton processing mills with mountains of the white stuff billowing out. Truck after truck of cotton being hauled to these mills passed us on the road. We were now right on the northern rim of the Taklimakan desert and the agriculture was surprisingly intense. No wonder China is the world's number one producer of cotton. They have invested tons of money on a huge irrigation project had been set up to irrigate small villages that could not have existed 20 years ago along the desert. Tall, fast growing trees surrounded these new oasis towns to keep the wind and sand out. With cotton prices at historical highs, it all made sense to me.

Driving our trusty Hyundai at breakneck speeds across the flat rocky rim of the desert we raced to make it to Kashgar before the two lane highway would be shrouded in darkness and unable to reveal its dangers. Plus the added thrill and danger of oil tankers and other large tractor trailer rigs heading the opposite direction, never dimming their high beams, was something I wanted us all to avoid. The stress levels were running high as it was since the beautiful new 4 lane highway abruptly ended and we were forced to drive on the mostly completed, but sometimes under repair, old highway. Off to our right was the new highway under construction, to our left, newly laid rail track with good sidings to haul commodities and passengers.

We made it into Kashgar around 9:30 pm local time. Xinjiang works on a time schedule that is effectively two hours behind Beijing's official China-wide time since it's so far to the west. We stayed at the only HomeInn in Kashgar and after a very long day of driving enjoyed a luxury of the modern day Silk Road traveler; cold beer. We had the option to stay in the more historical former British Consulate Hotel, but opted out of that one as the reviews said the place smelled musty and of mutton.

Ever since I was a young boy I have wanted to visit Kashgar. The wild west of China. Hub of the Silk Road. 200 km from Afghanistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Pakistan, Kashmir! What wonders would I discover? What intrigue of the Great Game would I uncover?

Day 6:

Kashgar, or Kashi, is an oasis city. The altitude averages 1,289 m above sea level. The city is located in the western extremity of China, near the borders with Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan. About 200 km from Kashgar sits Muztagh Ata peak on the edge of the Pamir mountain range and is sometimes considered to be part of the Kunlun Mountains that make up the northern border of Tibet. Knowing that these mountains are looming in the distance I get the feeling that we are at the end of the known world and what lies beyond is another great mystery to learn about and discover. Having come so far and be so close to famous historical places like Taxkorgan, the Kunjerab Pass, Kashmir, the Pamir Mountains, the Hindu Kush, the adventurer in me takes hold and I just want to keep driving toward those mountains and see what we can find. But, with fresh snow throughout the region and balding tires on the Hyundai, sensibility wins me over. Plus, although we would all like to see the Pamirs and Karakoram, the 6,000 m elevation is not an option for my parents.

The Tamu river runs north to south through Kashgar and the Old City butts up against it. To the southwest, and what must have been the original main city gate, are remains of the old city wall that would have been imposing in its day. Travelers entering into Kashgar from the high passes would have encountered this large wall that probably also served to protect the city from invaders from frontal assault, with the river to protect the flank. The Old City sits up on a hill with multi-terraced and multi-storied houses set amongst small narrow alleyways. All the structures are made of mud, straw, and wood beam construction, with new houses of proper brick to replace the old due to safety concerns.

Wandering through these ancient houses we are, for the first time, really transported back to the past and getting a feel for what it must have been like to be on the Silk Road. In the early morning young children run about without parents to watch over them. There are literally mosques of all shapes and sizes every 50 meters or so. Beautiful hand-carved wooden doors of all varying dimensions and colors with intricate metal work protect the inner sanctums of these ancient city dwellers. We found a small shop and purchased lollipops to hand out to the numerous children we encountered. This also served as our bargaining chip to capture their cute pictures. While the men are out during the day having their meetings and socializing in and around the mosques, the dwellings serve as the hub of the women's daily life and are most definitely ruled by the women. We saw fleeting glimpses of that daily life through some of the open doors we passed. Wonderful Atlas textiles hung just inside the doors as a curtain providing further protection from voyeurs. That did not stop my mom from being invited into not one, but two of these dwellings where she was given tea, raisins, fruit, and nuts.

The earliest mention of Kashgar occurs when the Chinese Han Dynasty envoy traveled the Northern Silk Road to explore lands to the west.

Another early mention of Kashgar is during the Former Han (also known as the Western Han Dynasty), when in 76 BC the Chinese conquered the Xiongnu, Yutian (Khotan), Sulei (Kashgar), and a group of states in the Tarim basin almost up to the foot of the Tian Shan mountains.

Ptolemy speaks of Scythia beyond the Imaus, which is in a "Kasia Region", probably exhibiting the name from which Kashgar and Kashgaria (often applied to the district) are formed. The country's people practiced Zoroastrianism and Buddhism before the coming of Islam.

In the Hanshu (Book of the Former Han), which covers the period between 125 BCE and 23 CE, it is recorded that there were 1,510 households, 18,647 people and 2,000 persons able to bear arms. By the time covered in the Hou Hanshu (roughly 25 CE to 170 CE), it had grown to 21,000 households and had 3,000 men able to bear arms.

The Hou Hanshu (Book of the Later Han), provides a wealth of detail on developments in the region:

"In the period of Emperor Wu [140-87 BCE], the Western Regions were under the control of the Interior [China]. They numbered thirty-six kingdoms. The Imperial Government established a Colonel [in charge of] Envoys there to direct and protect these countries. Emperor Xuan [73-49 BCE] changed this title [in 59 BCE] to Protector-General.

Emperor Yuan [40-33 BCE] installed two Wuji Colonels to take charge of the agricultural garrisons on the frontiers of the king of Nearer Jushi [Turpan].

During the time of Emperor Ai [6 BCE-CE 1] and Emperor Ping [CE 1-5], the principalities of the Western Regions split up and formed fifty-five kingdoms. Wang Mang, after he usurped the Throne [in CE 9], demoted and changed their kings and marquises. Following this, the Western Regions became resentful, and rebelled. They, therefore, broke off all relations with the Interior [China] and, all together, submitted to the Xiongnu again.

The Xiongnu collected oppressively heavy taxes and the kingdoms were not able to support their demands. In the middle of the Jianwu period [CE 25-56], they each [Shanshan and Yarkand in 38 CE, and 18 kingdoms in 45 CE], sent envoys to ask if they could submit to the Interior [China], and to express their desire for a Protector-General. Emperor Guangwu, decided that because the Empire was not yet settled [after a long period of civil war], he had no time for outside affairs, and [therefore] finally refused his consent [in CE 45].

In the meantime, the Xiongnu became weaker. The king of Suoju [Yarkand], named Xian, wiped out several kingdoms. After Xian's death [c. CE 62], they began to attack and fight each other. Xiao Yuan [Tura], Jingjue [Cadota], Ronglu [Niya], and Qiemo [Cherchen] were annexed by Shanshan [the Lop Nur region]. Qule [south of Keriya] and Pishan [modern Pishan or Guma] were conquered and fully occupied by Yutian [Khotan]. Yuli [Fukang], Danhuan, Guhu [Dawan Cheng], and Wutanzili were destroyed by Jushi [Turpan and Jimasa]. Later these kingdoms were re-established.

During the Yongping period [CE 58-75], the Northern Xiongnu forced several countries to help them plunder the commanderies and districts of Hexi. The gates of the towns stayed shut in broad daylight."

And, more particularly in reference to Kashgar itself, is the following record:

"In the sixteenth Yongping year of Emperor Ming 73, Jian, the king of Qiuci (Kucha), attacked and killed Cheng, the king of Shule (Kashgar). Then he appointed the Qiuci (Kucha) Marquis of the Left, Douti, King of Shule (Kashgar). In winter 73, the Han sent the Major Ban Chao who captured and bound Douti. He appointed Zhong, the son of the elder brother of Cheng, to be king of Shule (Kashgar). Zhong later rebelled. (Ban) Chao attacked and beheaded him."

The Hou Hanshu also gives the only extant historical record of Yuezhi or Kushan involvement in the Kashgar oasis:

"During the Yuanchu period (114-120 CE) in the reign of Emperor, the king of Shule (Kashgar), exiled his maternal uncle Chenpan to the Yuezhi (Kushans) for some offence. The king of the Yuezhi became very fond of him. Later, Anguo died without leaving a son. His mother directed the government of the kingdom. She agreed with the people of the country to put Yifu (lit. "posthumous child"), who was the son of a full younger brother of Chenpan on the throne as king of Shule (Kashgar). Chenpan heard of this and appealed to the Yuezhi (Kushan) king, saying:

"Anguo had no son. His relative (Yifu) is weak. If one wants to put on the throne a member of (Anguo's) mother's family, I am Yifu's paternal uncle, it is I who should be king."

The Yuezhi (Kushans) then sent soldiers to escort him back to Shule (Kashgar). The people had previously respected and been fond of Chenpan. Besides, they dreaded the Yuezhi (Kushans). They immediately took the seal and ribbon from Yifu and went to Chenpan, and made him king. Yifu was given the title of Marquis of the town of Pangao [90 li, or 37 km, from Shule]. Then Suoju (Yarkand) continued to resist Yutian (Khotan), and put themselves under Shule (Kashgar). Thus Shule (Kashgar), became powerful and a rival to Qiuci (Kucha) and Yutian (Khotan)."

However, it was not very long before the Chinese began to reassert their authority in the region:

"In the second Yongjian year (127 CE), during Emperor Shun's reign, Chenpan sent an envoy to respectfully present offerings. The Emperor bestowed on Chenpan the title of Great Commandant-in-Chief for the Han. Chenxun, who was the son of his elder brother, was appointed Temporary Major of the Kingdom. In the fifth year (130 CE), Chenpan sent his son to serve the Emperor and, along with envoys from Dayuan (Ferghana) and Suoju (Yarkand), brought tribute and offerings."

From an earlier part of the same text comes the following addition:

"In the first Yangjia year (132 CE), Xu You sent the king of Shule (Kashgar), Chenpan, who with 20,000 men, attacked and defeated Yutian (Khotan). He beheaded several hundred people, and released his soldiers to plunder freely. He replaced the king [of Jumi] by installing Chengguo from the family of [the previous king] Xing, and then he returned."

Then the first passage continues:

"In the second Yangjia year (133 CE), Chenpan again made offerings (including) a lion and zebu cattle. Then, during Emperor Ling's reign, in the first Jianning year (168 CE), the king of Shule (Kashgar) and Commandant-in-Chief for the Han (i.e. presumably Chenpan), was shot while hunting by the youngest of his paternal uncles, Hede. Hede named himself king. In the third year (170 CE), Meng Tuo, the Inspector of Liangzhou, sent the Provincial Officer Ren She, commanding five hundred soldiers from Dunhuang, with the Wuji Major Cao Kuan, and Chief Clerk of the Western Regions, Zhang Yan, brought troops from Yanqi (Karashahr), Qiuci (Kucha), and the Nearer and Further States of Jushi (Turpan and Jimasa), altogether numbering more than 30,000, to punish Shule (Kashgar). They attacked the town of Zhenzhong [Arach – near Maralbashi] but, having stayed for more than forty days without being able to subdue it, they withdrew. Following this, the kings of Shule (Kashgar) killed one another repeatedly while the Imperial Government was unable to prevent it."

The Three Kingdom to the Sui Dynasty periods in Kashgar was marked by the general silence on Kashgar and the Tarim Basin in general.

The Weilüe, composed in the second third of the 3rd century, mentions a number of states as dependencies of Kashgar: the kingdom of Zhenzhong (Arach?), the kingdom of Suoju (Yarkand), the kingdom of Jieshi, the kingdom of Qusha, the kingdom of Xiye (Khargalik), the kingdom of Yinai (Tashkurgan), the kingdom of Manli (modern Karasul), the kingdom of Yire (Mazar – also known as Tágh Nák and Tokanak), the kingdom of Yuling, the kingdom of Juandu ('Tax Control' – near modern Irkeshtam), the kingdom of Xiuxiu ('Excellent Rest Stop' – near Karakavak), and the kingdom of Qin.

However, much of the information on the Western Regions contained in the Weilüe seems to have ended roughly about (170 CE), near the end of Han power. So, we can't be sure that this is a reference to the state of affairs during the Cao Wei (220-265 CE), or whether it refers to the situation before the civil war during the Later Han when China lost touch with most foreign countries and came to be divided into three separate kingdoms.

The Sanguoshi, ch. 30 says that after the beginning of the Wei Dynasty (220 CE) the states of the Western Regions did not arrive as before, except for the larger ones such as Kucha, Khotan, Kangju, Wusun, Kashgar, Yuezhi, Shanshan and Turpan, who are said to have come to present tribute every year, as in Han times.

In 270 CE, four states from the Western Regions were said to have presented tribute: Karashahr, Turpan, Shanshan, and Kucha. Some wooden documents from Niya seem to indicate that contacts were also maintained with Kashgar and Khotan also had contact about this time.

In 422 CE, according to the Songshu, ch. 98, the king of Shanshan, Bilong, came to the court and "the thirty-six states in the Western Regions" all swore their allegiance and presented tribute. It must be assumed that these 36 states included Kashgar.

The "Songji" of the Zizhi Tongjian records that in the 5th month of 435 CE, nine states: Kucha, Kashgar, Wusun, Yueban, Tashkurghan, Shanshan, Karashahr, Turpan and Sute all came to the Wei court.

In 439, according to the Weishu, ch. 4A, Shanshan, Kashgar and Karashahr sent envoys to present tribute.

According to the Weishu, ch. 102, Chapter on the Western Regions, the kingdoms of Kucha, Kashgar, Wusun, Yueban, Tashkurghan, Shanshan, Karashahr, Turpan and Sute all began sending envoys to present tribute in the Taiyuan reign period (435-440 CE).

In 453 CE Kashgar sent envoys to present tribute (Weishu, ch. 5), and again in 455 CE.

An embassy sent during the reign of Wencheng Di (452-466 CE) from the king of Kashgar presented a supposed sacred relic of the Buddha; a dress which was incombustible.

In 507 CE Kashgar, is said to have sent envoys in both the 9th and 10th months (Weishu, ch. 8).

In 512 CE, Kashgar sent envoys in the 1st and 5th months. (Weishu, ch. 8).

Early in the 6th century CE Kashgar is included among the many territories controlled by the Yeda or Hephthalite Huns, but their empire collapsed at the onslaught of the Western Turks between 563 and 567 CE who then probably gained control over Kashgar and most of the states in the Tarim Basin.

The opening of the Tang Dynasty, in 618 CE, saw the beginning of a prolonged struggle between China and the Western Turks for control of the Tarim Basin.

In 635 CE the Tang Annals report an embassy from the king of Kashgar. In 639 CE there was a second embassy bringing products of Kashgar as a token of submission.

Xuan Zang passed through Kashgar (which he refers to as Ka-sha) in 644 CE on his return journey from India to China. The Buddhist religion, then beginning to decay in India, was active in Kashgar. Xuan Zang records that they flattened their babies heads, were ill-favoured, tattooed their bodies and had green eyes. He said they had abundant crops, fruits and flowers, wove fine woolen stuffs and rugs, their writing had

been copied from India but their language was different from that of other countries. The inhabitants were sincere believers in Buddhism and there were some hundreds of monasteries with more than 10,000 followers, all members of the Sarvastivadin School.

Contemporaneously, Nestorian Christians were establishing bishoprics at Herat, Merv and Samarkand, whence they subsequently proceeded to Kashgar, and finally to China proper itself.

In 646, when the Turkic Kagan asked for the hand of a Chinese princess, the Emperor claimed Kucha, Khotan, Kashgar, Karashahr and Sarikol as a marriage gift, but this was not to happen.

In a series of campaigns between 652 and 658, with the help of the Uyghurs, the Chinese finally defeated the Western Turk tribes and took control of all their domains, including the Tarim Basin kingdoms.

In 662 a rebellion broke out in the Western Regions and a Chinese army sent to control it was badly defeated by the Tibetans south of Kashgar.

After another defeat of the Chinese forces in 670, the Tibetans gained control of the whole region and completely subjugated Kashgar in 676-8 and retained possession of it until 692, when China regained control of all their former territories, and retained it for the next fifty years.

In 722 Kashgar sent 4,000 troops to assist the Chinese to force the "Tibetans out of "Little Bolu" or Gilgit.

In 728, the king of Kashgar was awarded a brevet by the Chinese emperor.

In 739, the Tangshu relates that the governor of the Chinese garrison in Kashgar, with the help of Ferghana, was interfering in the affairs of the Turgash tribes as far as Talas.

In 751 the Chinese were defeated by an Arab army in Talas; a blow from which they never fully recovered. The Tibetans cut all communication between China and the West in 766 CE.

Soon after the Chinese pilgrim monk Wukong passed through Kashgar in 753. He again reached Kashgar on his return trip from India in 786 and mentions a Chinese deputy governor as well as the local king.

In the 8th century CE came the Arab rule from the west, also known as the Caliphate, and Kashgar and Turkestan lent assistance to the reigning queen of Bokhara, to enable her to repel its enemies. But although the Muslim religion from the very commencement sustained checks, it nevertheless made its weight felt upon the independent states of Turkestan to the north and east, and thus acquired a steadily growing influence. It was not, however, till the 10th century CE that Islam was established at Kashgar, under the Uyghur kingdom.

The celebrated Old Uyghur prince Sultan Satuq Bughra Khan converted to Islam late in the 10th century CE and his Uyghur kingdom lasted until 1120 CE and became distracted by complicated dynastic struggles. The Uyghurs employed an alphabet based upon the Syriac and borrowed from the Nestorian, but after converting to Islam widely used also an Arabic script. They spoke a dialect of Turkic preserved in the Kudatku Bilik, a moral treatise composed in 1065 CE.

The Uyghur kingdom was destroyed by an invasion of the Kara-Khitai, another Turkic tribe pressing westwards from the Chinese frontier, which in their turn were swept away in 1219 by Genghis Khan. On his death, and during the rule of the Chagatai Khans, who also converted to Islam, Islamic tradition began to reassert its ascendancy.

Marco Polo visited the city, which he calls Cascar, about 1273-4 and recorded the presence of numerous Nestorian Christians, who had their own churches.

In 1389–1390 Timur ravaged Kashgar, Andijan and the intervening country. Kashgar endured a troubled time, and in 1514, on the invasion of the Khan Sultan Said, was destroyed by Mirza Ababakar, who with the aid of ten thousand men built a new fort with massive defences higher up on the banks of the Tuman river. The dynasty of the Jagatai Khans collapsed in 1572 with the division of the country among rival factions; soon after, two powerful Khoja factions, the White and Black Mountaineers (Ak Taghliq or Afaqi, and Kara Taghliq or Ishaqi), arose whose differences and war-making gestures, with the intermittent episode of the Oirats of Dzungaria, make up much of recorded history in Kashgar until 1759.

In 1759, a Qing army from Ili (Kulja) invaded Xinjiang and consolidated their authority by settling other ethnic emigrants in the vicinity of a Manchu garrison.

The Qing had thoughts of pushing their conquests towards Transoxiana and Samarkand, the chiefs of which sent to ask assistance of the Afghan king Ahmed Shah Abdali. This monarch dispatched an ambassador to Beijing to demand the restitution of the Muslim states of Central Asia, but the representative was not well received, and Ahmed Shah was too busy fighting off the Sikhs to attempt to enforce his demands by arms.

The Qing continued to hold Kashgar with occasional interruptions from Muslim-centered groups. One of the most serious of these occurred in 1827, when the city was taken by Jahanghir Khoja; Chang-lung, however, the Qing general of Ili, regained possession of Kashgar and the other rebellious cities in 1828. When Jahangir Khoja, with the support of Tajiks, Kirghiz, and White Mountain fighters seized Kashgar in 1826 he captured several hundred Chinese merchants, who were taken to Kokand. Tajiks bought two Chinese slaves from Shaanxi, they enslaved for a year before being returned by the Tajik Beg Ku-bu-te to China. All Chinese captured, both merchants and the 300 soldiers Jahangir captured in Kashgar had their queues cut off when brought to Kokand and Central Asia as prisoners. It was reported that many of the Chinese captives became slaves, accounts of Chinese slaves in Central Asia increased.

The queues were removed from Chinese prisoners and they were then sold or given to various owners, one of them, Nian, ended up as a slave to Prince Batur Khan of Bukhara, Omar Khan ended up possessing Liu Qifeng and Wu Erqi, the others, Zhu, Tian Li, and Ma Tianxi ended up in various owners but plotted an escape. The Russians record an incident where they rescued these Chinese merchants who escaped, after they were sold by Jahangir's Army in Central Asia, and sent them back to China.

The Kokand Khanate raided Kashgar several times. A revolt in 1829 under Mahommed Ali Khan and Yusuf, brother of Jahanghir resulted in the concession of several important trade privileges to the Muslims of the district of Alty Shahr (the "six cities"), as it was then called.

The area then enjoyed relative calm until 1846 under the rule of Zahir-ud-din, the local Uyghur governor, but in that year a new Khoja revolt under Kath Tora led to his accession to rulership of the city as an authoritarian ruler. His reign, however, was brief, for at the end of seventy-five days, on the approach of the Chinese, he fled back to Khokand amid the jeers of the inhabitants. The last of the Khoja revolts (1857) was of about equal duration, and took place under Wali-Khan, who murdered the famous traveler Adolf Schlagintweit.

The great Dungan revolt (1862–1877), or insurrection various Muslim ethnic groups, which broke out in 1862 in Gansu, spread rapidly to Dzungaria and through the line of towns in the Tarim Basin.

The Tungani troops in Yarkand rose, and in August 1864 massacred some seven thousand Chinese and their Manchu commander, while the inhabitants of Kashgar, rising in their turn against their masters, invoked the aid of Sadik Beg, a Kyrgyz chief, who was reinforced by Buzurg Khan, the heir of Jahanghir, and his general Yakub Beg (surnamed the Atalik Ghazi), these being dispatched at Sadik's request by the ruler of Khokand to raise what troops they could to aid his Muslim friends in Kashgar.

Sadik Beg soon repented of having asked for a Khoja, and eventually marched against Kashgar, which by this time had succumbed to Buzurg Khan and Yakub Beg, but was defeated and driven back to Khokand. Buzurg Khan delivered himself up to indolence and debauchery, but Yakub Beg, with singular energy and perseverance, made himself master of Yangi Shahr, Yangi-Hissar, Yarkand and other towns, and eventually became sole master of the country, Buzurg Khan proving himself totally unfit for the post of ruler.

With the overthrow of Chinese rule in 1865 by Yakub Beg (1820–1877), the manufacturing industries of Kashgar are supposed to have declined.

Yaqub Beg entered into relations and signed treaties with the Russian Empire and Great Britain, but when he tried to get their support against China, he failed.

Kashgar and the other cities of the Tarim Basin remained under Yakub Beg's rule until May 1877, when he died at Korla and Kashgaria was reconquered by the forces of the Qing general Zuo Zongtang.

During efforts to establish the First East Turkestan Republic, Kashgar was the scene of continual battles from 1933–1934. Ma Shaowu, a Chinese Muslim, was the Tao-yin of Kashgar, and he fought against Uyghur rebels. He was joined by another Chinese Muslim general, Ma Zhancang.

In 1933, Uighur and Kirghiz forces, led by the Bughra brothers and Tawfiq Bay, attempted to take the New City of Kashgar from Chinese Muslim troops under General Ma Zhancang. They were defeated. This was the Battle of Kashgar (1933).

Tawfiq Bey, a Syrian Arab traveler, who held the title Sayyid (descendent of prophet Muhammed) and arrived at Kashgar on August 26, 1933, was shot in the stomach by the Chinese Muslim troops in September. Previously Ma Zhancang arranged to have the Uighur leader Timur Beg killed and beheaded on August 9, 1933, displaying his head outside of Id Kah Mosque.

Han Chinese troops commanded by Brigadier Yang were absorbed into Ma Zhancang's army. A number of Han Chinese officers were spotted wearing the green uniforms of Ma Zhancang's unit of the 36th division, presumably they had converted to Islam.

36th division General Ma Fuyuan led a Chinese Muslim army to storm Kashgar on February 6, 1934, and attacked the Uighur and Kirghiz rebels of the First East Turkestan Republic (the 1934 Battle of Kashgar). He freed another 36th division general, Ma Zhancang, who was trapped with his Chinese Muslim and Han Chinese troops in Kashgar New City by the Uighurs and Kirghiz since May 22, 1933. In January, 1934, Ma Zhancang's Chinese Muslim troops repulsed six Uighur attacks, launched by Khoja Niyaz, who arrived at the city on January 13, 1934, inflicting massive casualties on the Uighur forces. From 2,000 to 8,000 Uighur civilians in Kashgar Old City were massacred by Tungans in February, 1934, in revenge for the Kizil massacre, after retreating of Uighur forces from the city to Yengi Hisar. The Chinese Muslim and 36th division Chief General Ma Zhongying, who arrived at Kashgar on April 7, 1934, gave a speech at Idgah mosque in April, reminding the Uighurs to be loyal to the Republic of China government at Nanjing. Several British citizens at the British consulate were killed by the 36th division.

We visited the Grand Bazaar in Kashgar situated on the east side of the Tumen River. As billed, it was extensive and comprised numerous treasure highly sought after by Silk Road travelers; hand-woven wool and silk carpets, spices, cotton textiles, fruits, nuts, you name it. I stocked up on spices (turmeric, pepper corns, etc.) and Xinjiang saffron. One of my favorite buys in Xinjiang is the rose bud tea mixed with black teas and cardamom. Exceptional!

After the Grand Bazaar we headed back across the Tumen to the Old City. My father was fitted with a Kashgarian Muslim square cap, an myself with a Tajik minority tall felt hat. We smoked cigars in a small park and watched as three sheep grazed on grass in the park prior to heading into the depths of the Old City to be someone's dinner.

Day 7:

On our second day in Kashgar we visited the Id Kah mosque, dating from 1442. The place can hold up to 20,000 people. It is constructed from yellow tiles that radiate a brilliant light in the early morning sun. The giant square in front of the mosque was relatively empty when we visited as it was still quite early by Xinjiang standards. Inside the grand entrance way is a large well-kept garden with a few covered carpeted areas for prayers. At the end of a long flower-lined path is the main mosque area that we respectfully declined to enter even though our ticket would allow it. We took photos with a few of the local mosque personalities that were hanging around, happy to have their pictures taken with us.

The areas surrounding the mosque are the center of the Uyghur culture in Kashgar. There was one lovely two storey wooden tea house that was filled with old men on its balcony sitting cross-legged on the table like platforms they use for eating and entertaining, enjoying their tea as we snapped pictures. We found an unusual amount of dentists along this narrow street as well. I later asked my Uyghur friend in Urumqi what the level of qualification was for all these dentists. He said none. Dentistry may be on of those old Silk Road trades, like gold and silver smithing, or rug making, that has survived to the present day in Xinjiang and remains one of its more vibrant traditions.

On our way out of town we stopped by the Yusup Has mausoleum, an important 11th century Uyghur poet. The place was empty. The beautiful blue tiled mausoleum was as large as most mosques and had several inner courtyards and its own mosque. Porticos on either side of the approach up to the lovely architecture were covered in grape vines and lined with roses. Still quite early in the day, the sun hitting the structure made for some great photos.

We departed from Kashgar having felt a sense of accomplishment. We saw an Old City that was still being lived in as people had lived over 1,000 years ago. Our route today would lead us east along the southern rim of the Tarim Basin skirting along the Taklimakan desert. The Kunlun Mountains, although to our south, were not visible to due to high winds and dust in the air. This problem would plague us for the rest of the journey. We felt owed a glimpse of these majestic mountains that guard the Tibetan plateau and, for obvious reasons, excluded Tibet from the Silk Road trade route. The Kunluns are all mostly over 6,000 m high and are a very formidable and natural barrier. We suspected that some traders must have come down from Tibet to participate in Silk Road trade, exchanging goods for others, but we suspected that Tibet really didn't have much to offer with respect to the mainstream Silk Road trade commodities during those times. Early on Tibet's key export was likely Buddhism and the traditions surrounding that religion-art, carvings, sculpture, writings, etc. We also left without seeing several other important sites in and around Kashgar. Direct flights from Beijing's Terminal 2 will get us back there sooner, rather than later.

On our way to Hetian, we traveled through numerous small oasis towns producing all the typical oasis commodities we had become familiar with. However, were surprised to see a large amount of rice being produced in the flooded paddy style typical to eastern China. We swept through Yarkand, an important Silk Road city, and continued along the worst paved two lane highway ever. We were bouncing along, teeth rattling, my dad even bit his tongue. Amazingly the most beautiful four lane highway lay 100 m to our right but there was no way to access it. A new rail line from Kashgar to Hetian, just two years old, was on our left. We predictably saw several trains of coal heading for Kashgar and beyond. Passenger service just opened in June 2011.

I will say that at no point in our journey did we not drive on one single of road that was not also shared with coal haulers or oil tankers. China's reliance on steam coal for power generation is truly amazing. According to the World Coal Association's website, in 2010 China consumed an estimated 2.5 billion tons of coal, with 79% of that being use for electrical power generation. Comparatively, the world No. 2 is the USA, consuming 700 million tons with 45% going to power generation. The great lengths that China has gone through to access the other black commodity hiding in the earth, oil, as we would later see, was also another amazing accomplishment.

We stopped in Yinjisha (Yengisar) just outside of Yarkand and bought knives. Yengisar is synonymous with knives. The most famous knives in Xinjiang come from this county. They are all handmade, of course, and come in different grades and sizes. Older knives can sell for hundreds of dollars and have semiprecious jewels inlaid in bone and ivory. Yengisar is also the birthplace of the father of Uyghur nationalism, Isa Yusuf Alptekin (1901-1995), the leader of the First East Turkistan Republic in Kashgar who died in exile in Istanbul.

Yarkant (Yarkand) (lit. earthen city, probably referring to the earthen walls of the capital) is located on the southern rim of the Taklamakan desert in the Tarim Basin. It is one of 11 counties administered under Kashgar Prefecture. Yarkant, usually written Yarkand in English, was the seat of an ancient Buddhist kingdom on the southern branch of the Silk Road.

The fertile oasis is fed by the Yarkand River which flows north down from the Kunlun Mountains known historically as Congling mountains (lit. 'Onion Mountains' - from the abundance of wild onions found there). The oasis now covers 3,210 square kilometers, but was likely far more extensive before the period of desiccation began to afflict the region from the 3rd century CE onwards.

Today, Yarkant is a predominantly Uyghur city. The irrigated oasis farmland produces cotton, wheat, corn, fruits (especially pomegranates, pears and apricots), and walnuts. Yak and sheep graze in the highlands. Mineral deposits include petroleum, natural gas, gold, copper, lead, bauxite, granite and coal.

The oasis of Yarkant was undoubtedly known to the Chinese from at least the 2nd century BCE, but the earliest detailed accounts of Yarkant that survive appear in the Hou Hanshu ('History of the Later Han'). They contain some rare insights into the complex political situations China faced in attempting to open up the "Silk Routes" to the West in the 1st century CE. So, it may be of interest here to include some rather lengthy passages on Yarkant (Yarkand) quoted from the "Chapter on the Western Regions" of the Hou Hanshu:

"Going west from the kingdom of Suoju (Yarkand), and passing through the countries of Puli (Tashkurghan) and Wulei (centred on Sarhad in the Wakhan), you arrive among the Da Yuezhi (Kushans). To the east, it is 10,950 li (4,553 km) from Luoyang.

The Chanyu (Khan) of the Xiongnu took advantage of the chaos caused by Wang Mang (9-24 CE) and invaded the Western Regions. Only Yan, the king of Suoju, who was more powerful than the others, did not consent to being annexed. Previously, during the time of Emperor Yuan (48-33 BCE), he was a hostage prince and grew up in the capital. He admired and loved the Middle Kingdom and extended the rules of Chinese administration to his own country. He ordered all his sons to respectfully serve the Han dynasty generation by generation, and to never turn their backs on it. Yan died in the fifth Tianfeng year (18 CE). He was awarded the posthumous title of 'Faithful and Martial King'. His son, Kang, succeeded him on the throne.

At the beginning of Emperor Guangwu's reign (25-57 CE), Kang led the neighbouring kingdoms to resist the Xiongnu. He escorted, and protected, more than a thousand people including the officers, the soldiers, the wife and children of the former Protector General. He sent a letter to Hexi (Chinese territory west of the Huang He or Yellow River) to inquire about the activities of the Middle Kingdom, and personally expressed his attachment to, and admiration for, the Han dynasty.

In the fifth Jianwu year (29 CE) the General-in-Chief of Hexi, Dou Rong, following Imperial instructions, bestowed on Kang the titles of: "King of Chinese Suoju, Performer of Heroic Deeds Who Cherishes Virtue [and] Commandant-in-Chief of the Western Regions." The fifty-five kingdoms were all made dependencies after that.

In the ninth year (33 CE) Kang died. He was awarded the posthumous title of "Greatly Accomplished King." His younger brother, Xian, succeeded him on the throne. Xian attacked and conquered the kingdoms of Jumi (Keriya) and Xiye (Karghalik). He killed both their kings, and installed two sons of his elder brother, Kang, as the kings of Jumi and Xiye.

In the fourteenth year (38 CE), together with An, the king of Shanshan (the Lop Nor region), he sent envoys to the Imperial Palace to offer tribute. Following this, the Western Regions were (again) in communication with China. All the kingdoms to the east of the Congling (Pamirs) were dependent on Xian.

In the seventeenth year (41 CE), Xian again sent an envoy to present offerings [to the Emperor], and to ask that a Protector General be appointed. The Son of Heaven questioned the Excellency of Works, Dou Rong, about this. He was of the opinion that Xian, and his sons and brothers who had pledged to serve the Han were truly sincere. Therefore, [he suggested that] it would be appropriate to give him higher rank to maintain order and security.

The Emperor then, using the same envoy that Xian had sent to him, bestowed upon him the seal and ribbon of "Protector General of the Western Regions," and gave him chariots, standards, gold, brocades and embroideries.

"Pei Zun, the Administrator of Dunhuang, wrote saying that foreigners should not be allowed to employ such great authority and that these decrees would cause the kingdoms to despair. An Imperial decree then ordered that the seal and ribbons of "Protector General" be recovered, and replaced with the seal and ribbon of "Great Han General." Xian's envoy refused to make the exchange, and (Pei) Zun took them by force.

Consequently, Xian became resentful. Furthermore, he falsely named himself "Great Protector General," and sent letters to all the kingdoms. They all submitted to him, and bestowed the title of Chanyu on him.

Xian gradually became arrogant making heavy demands for duties and taxes. Several times he attacked Qiuci (Kucha) and the other kingdoms. All the kingdoms were anxious and fearful.

In the winter of the twenty-first year (45 CE), eighteen kings, including the king of Nearer Jushi (Turpan), Shanshan, Yanqi (Karashahr), and others, sent their sons to enter the service of the Emperor and offered treasure. As a result, they were granted audience when they circulated weeping, prostrating with their foreheads to the ground, in the hope of obtaining a Protector General. The Son of Heaven, considering that the Middle Kingdom was just beginning to return to peace and that the northern frontier regions were still unsettled, returned all the hostage princes with generous gifts.

At the same time, Xian, infatuated with his military power, wanted to annex the Western Regions, and greatly increased his attacks. The kingdoms, informed that no Protector General would be sent, and that the hostage princes were all returning, were very worried and frightened. Therefore, they sent a letter to the Administrator of Dunhuang to ask him to detain their hostage sons with him, so that they could point this out to the [king of] Suoju (Yarkand), and tell him that their young hostage sons were detained because a Protector General was to be sent. Then he [the king of Yarkand] would stop his hostilities. Pei Zun sent an official report informing the Emperor [of this proposal], which he approved.

In the twenty-second year (46 CE) Xian, aware that no Protector General was coming, sent a letter to An, king of Shanshan, ordering him to cut the route to the Han. An did not accept [this order], and killed the envoy. Xian was furious and sent soldiers to attack Shanshan. An gave battle but was defeated and fled into the mountains. Xian killed or captured more than a thousand men, and then withdrew.

That winter (46 CE), Xian returned and attacked Qiuci (Kucha), killed the king, and annexed the kingdom. The hostage princes of Shanshan, and then Yanqi (Karashahr) and the other kingdoms, were detained a long time at Dunhuang and became worried, so they fled and returned [to their kingdoms].

The king of Shanshan wrote a letter to the Emperor expressing his desire to return his son to enter the service of the Emperor, and again pleaded for a Protector General, saying that if a Protector General were not sent, he would be forced to obey the Xiongnu. The Son of Heaven replied:

“We are not able, at the moment, to send out envoys and Imperial troops so, in spite of their good wishes, each kingdom [should seek help], as they please, wherever they can, to the east, west, south, or north.”

Following this, Shanshan, and Jushi (Turpan/Jimasa) again submitted to the Xiongnu. Meanwhile, Xian became increasingly violent.

The king of Guisai, reckoning that his kingdom was far enough away, killed Xian’s envoy. Xian then attacked and killed him. He appointed a nobleman from that country, Sijian, king of Guisai. Furthermore, Xian appointed his own son, Zeluo, to be king of Qiuci (Kucha). Xian, taking account of the youth of Zeluo, detached a part of the territory from Qiuci (Kucha) from which he made the kingdom of Wulei (Yengisar). He transferred Sijian to the post of king of Wulei, and appointed another noble to the post of king of Guisai.

Several years later, the people of the kingdom of Qiuci (Kucha), killed Zeluo and Sijian, and sent envoys to the Xiongnu to ask them to appoint a king to replace them. The Xiongnu established a nobleman of Qiuci (Kucha), Shendu, to be king of Qiuci (Kucha), making it dependent on the Xiongnu.

Because Dayuan (Ferghana) had reduced their tribute and taxes, Xian personally took command of several tens of thousands of men taken from several kingdoms, and attacked Dayuan (Ferghana). Yanliu, the king of Dayuan, came before him to submit. Xian took advantage of this to take him back to his own kingdom. Then he transferred Qiaosaiti, the king of Jumi (Keriyu), to the post of king of Dayuan (Ferghana). Then Kangju (Tashkent plus the Chu, Talas, and middle Jaxartes basins) attacked him there several times and Qiaosaiti fled home [to Keriyu] more than a year later. Xian appointed him king of Jumi (Keriyu) and sent Yanliu back to Dayuan again, ordering him to bring the customary tribute and offerings.

Xian also banished the king of Yutian (Khotan), Yulin, to be king of Ligui and set up his younger brother, Weishi, as king of Yutian.

More than a year later Xian became suspicious that the kingdoms wanted to rebel against him. He summoned Weishi, and the kings of Jumi (Keriyu), Gumo (Aksu), and Zihe (Shahidulla), and killed them all. He didn't set up any more kings, he just sent generals to maintain order and guard these kingdoms. Rong, the son of Weishi, fled and made submission to the Han, who named him: "Marquis Who Maintains Virtue." A general from Suoju (Yarkand), named Junde, had been posted to Yutian (Khotan), and tyrannised the people there who became indignant.

In the third Yongping year (60 CE), during the reign of Emperor Ming, a high official of this country, called Dumo, had left town when he saw a wild pig. He wanted to shoot it, but the pig said to him: "Do not shoot me, I will undertake to kill Junde for you." Following this, Dumo plotted with his brothers and killed Junde. However, another high official, Xiumo Ba, plotted, in his turn, with a Chinese man, Han Rong, and others, to kill Dumo and his brothers, then he named himself king of Yutian (Khotan). Together with men from the kingdom of Jumi (Keriyu), he attacked and killed the Suoju (Yarkand) general who was at Pishan (modern Pishan or Guma). He then returned with the soldiers.

Then Xian sent his Heir Apparent, and his State Chancellor, leading 20,000 soldiers from several kingdoms, to attack Xiumo Ba. [Xiumo] Ba came to meet them and gave battle, defeating the soldiers of Suoju (Yarkand) who fled, and more than 10,000 of them were killed.

Xian again fielded several tens of thousands of men from several kingdoms, and personally led them to attack Xiumo Ba. [Xiumo] Ba was again victorious and beheaded more than half of the enemy. Xian escaped and fled, returning to his kingdom. Xiumo Ba advanced and encircled Suoju (Yarkand), but he was hit and killed by an arrow, and his soldiers retreated to Yutian (Khotan).

Suyule, State Chancellor [of Khotan], and others, appointed Guangde, the son of Xiumo Ba's elder brother, king. The Xiongnu, with Qiuci (Kucha) and the other kingdoms, attacked Suoju (Yarkand), but were unable to take it.

Later, Guangde recognising of the exhaustion of Suoju (Yarkand), sent his younger brother, the Marquis who Supports the State, Ren, commanding an army, to attack Xian. As he had suffered war continuously, Xian sent an envoy to make peace with Guangde. Guangde's father had previously been detained for several years in Suoju (Yarkand). Xian returned Guangde's father and also gave one of his daughters in marriage and swore brotherhood to Guangde, so the soldiers withdrew and left.

In the following year (61 CE), Qieyun, the Chancellor of Suoju (Yarkand), and others, worried by Xian's arrogance, plotted to get the town to submit to Yutian (Khotan). Guangde, the king of Yutian (Khotan), then led 30,000 men from several kingdoms to attack Suoju (Yarkand). Xian stayed in the town to defend it

and sent a messenger to say to Guangde: "I have given you your father and a wife. Why are you attacking me?" Guangde replied to him: "O king, you are the father of my wife. It has been a long time since we met. I want us to meet, each of us escorted by only two men, outside the town wall to make an alliance."

Xian consulted Qieyun about this. Qieyun said to him: "Guangde, your son-in-law is a very close relation; you should go out to see him." Xian then rashly went out. Guangde advanced and captured him. In addition, Qieyun and his colleagues let the soldiers of Yutian (Khotan) into the town to capture Xian's wife and children. (Guangde) annexed his kingdom. He put Xian in chains, and took him home with him. More than a year later, he killed him.

When the Xiongnu heard that Guangde had defeated Suoju (Yarkand), they sent five generals leading more than 30,000 men from fifteen kingdoms including Yanqi (Karashahr), Weili (Korla), and Qiuci (Kucha), to besiege Yutian (Khotan). Guangde asked to submit. He sent his Heir Apparent as a hostage and promised to give felt carpets each year. In winter, the Xiongnu ordered soldiers to take Xian's son, Bujuzheng, who was a hostage with them, to appoint him king of Suoju (Yarkand).

Guangde then attacked and killed [Bujuzheng], and put his younger brother, Qili, on the throne. This was in the third Yuanhe year (86 CE) of Emperor Zhang.

At this time Chief Clerk Ban Chao brought the troops of several kingdoms to attack Suoju (Yarkand). He soundly defeated Suoju (Yarkand) so it submitted to Han."

In 90 CE the Yuezhi or Kushans invaded the region with an army of reportedly 70,000 men, under their Viceroy, Xian, but they were forced to withdraw without a battle after Ban Chao instigated a "burnt earth" policy.

After the Yuanchu period (114-120 CE), when the Yuezhi or Kushans placed a hostage prince on the throne of Kashgar:

". . . Suoju [Yarkand] followed by resisting Yutian [Khotan], and put themselves under Shule [Kashgar]. Thus Shule [Kashgar], became powerful and a rival to Qiuci [Kucha] and Yutian [Khotan]."

"In the second Yongjian year [127 CE] of the reign of Emperor Shun, [Ban] Yong once again attacked and subdued Yanqi [Karashahr]; and then Qiuci [Kucha], Shule [Kashgar], Yutian [Khotan], Suoju [Yarkand], and other kingdoms, seventeen altogether, came to submit. Following this, the Wusun [Issyk Kul, Ili Valley and Semirechiye], and the countries of the Congling [Pamir Mountains], put an end to their disruptions to communications with the west."

In 130 CE, Yarkand, along with Ferghana and Kashgar, sent tribute and offerings to the Chinese Emperor.

After this, there is very little information on Yarkant's history for many centuries. There are a couple of brief references in the Tang dynasty histories, but it seems to have been of less note than the oasis of Kharghalik (see Yecheng and Yecheng County) to its south.

One must assume that it was taken by the Muslims soon after they subdued Kashgar in the early 10/11th century.

It apparently became the main base in the region for Chagatai Khan (died 1241), who inherited Kashgaria (and also much of the land between the Oxus (Amu Darya) and Jaxartes (Syr Darya) rivers) after his father, Genghis Khan's death in 1227.

Marco Polo, describing Yarkant c. 1260, says only that this "province" (of Kublai Khan's nephew, Kaidu, d. 1301) was, "five days' journey in extent. The inhabitants follow the law of Mahomet, and there are also some Nestorian Christians. They are subject to the Great Khan's nephew. It is amply stocked with the means of life, especially cotton."

At the end of the 16th century Yarkant was incorporated into the khanate of Kashgar and became its capital. The Jesuit Benedict Göez, who was seeking a route from the Mughal Empire to Cathay (which, according to his superiors, may or may not have been the same place as China), arrived to Yarkant with a caravan from Kabul in late 1603. He remained there for about a year, making a short trip to Khotan during that time. He reported:

"Hiarchan [Yarkant], the capital of the kingdom of Cascar, is a mart of much note, both for the great concourse of merchants, and for the variety of wares. At this capital the caravan of Kabul merchants reaches its terminus; and a new one is formed for the journey to Cathay. The command of this caravan is sold by the king, who invests the chiefs with a kind of royal authority over the merchants for the whole journey. A twelvemonth passed away however before the new company was formed, for the way is long and perilous, and the caravan is not formed every year, but only when a large number arrange to join it, and when it is known that they will be allowed to enter Cathay."

The Qing dynasty gained control of the region in the middle of the 18th century.

By the 19th century, due to its active trade with Ladakh, and an influx of foreign merchants, it became "the largest and most populous of all the States of Káshghar."(Kashgar). Mohammed Yakub (also known as Yakub Beg), 1820-1877 conquered Khotan, Aksu, Kashgar, and neighbouring towns with the help of the Russians in the 1860s. The capital was Yarkant, where he received embassies from England in 1870 and 1873. The Qing dynasty defeated Yakub at Turpan in 1877 and he committed suicide, thus ending the Kingdom of Kashgaria, and returning the region to Qing Chinese control.

The Battle of Yarkand took place in Yarkant county, in April 1934. Ma Zhancang's Chinese Muslim army defeated the Turkic Uighur and Kirghiz army, and the Afghan volunteers sent by king Mohammed Zahir Shah, and exterminated them all. The emir Abdullah Bughra was killed and beheaded, his head was sent to Idgah mosque.

Almost all the ancient buildings of the old city were destroyed during the Cultural Revolution (1966–1968) with only the central mosque, the main gate of the old palace and the royal cemetery surviving.

Our destination, Hetian, is, and was, an important town for Silk Road travelers. It lies at the southern end of Xinjiang Province and right on the edge of the desert. Hetian is famous for its white jade that is harvested out of the sometimes flowing Hetian river. Geologically I am unsure of the rock in the region and the role geology has played in creating such valuable jade. Our friend in Urumqi said that a young Uighur guy exchanged a prime piece of this rock that was about the size of a grapefruit for a 32 storey building located in a prime location of Urumqi. We saw the building while we were driving around there and shook our heads in amazement. Find a rock, get a building.

As mentioned, we were all disappointed at not even catching a glimpse of the Kunluns as we traveled east to Hetian. The highway finally started to cooperate and we joined with the mostly completed new four lane highway. We made excellent time flying across the rocky alluvial plains on the northern edge of the Tianshan range. Somewhere to our north through the haze was the Taklimakan desert and the mysteries it keeps.

We arrived in Hetian before dark and found a good local hotel to stay at that was centrally located. The local bazaar appeared to be lively and we decided to return for a look the next day. We ventured up the road to the Hetian night market that offered up local delicacies of all forms; Hetian haggis, roasted goose eggs, chicken rice, fruits, mutton wontons, walnut blocks held together with caramelize sugar (one of our favorite Silk Road snacks), and noodles of all kinds.

Day 8:

We spent a leisurely day in Hetian, for the most part. Other than being harassed by the Hetian parking lot mafia, driving exceedingly fast and illegally through the city, and avoiding capture by the parking attendants hell-bent on gouging us with excessive parking fees, we came out fine.

After taking a stroll around a local park that was quite and fairly clean to calm our nerves, we went to the bazaar and decided that it was too dirty and messy to bother with. We found some outside seating at a local restaurant on an important and busy side street and were served delicious rose bud tea as we enjoyed cigars and soaked up the oasis sun.

I think it is worthwhile to mention here the flatbreads of Xinjiang. Known by many different variations of the same name, *nang*, these breads are generally baked by sticking the prepared dough on the inside vertically surface of a round earthen oven fired by charcoal. Many look like bagels with an indent in the middle. Each town has their own distinct style, size, and thickness, much like pizza crust styles, in the USA. Albeit, none are cheese filled. Hetian had the best ba-ge-le (a transliteration of bagel that I coined while in university in Beijing). The dough was slightly sour, stayed moist and soft even after one day, and was not overly chewy.

Hotan, or Hetian, also spelled Khotan, is the seat of the Hotan Prefecture in Xinjiang, China. It was previously known in Chinese as Yú tián and to 19th-century European explorers as Ilchi.

With a population of 114,000 (2006), Hotan is an oasis town lying in the Tarim Basin, just north of the Kunlun Mountains, which are crossed by the Sanju Pass, and the Hindu-tagh, and Ilchi passes. The town, located southeast of Yarkand and populated almost exclusively by Uyghurs, is a minor agricultural center. An important station on the southern branch of the historic Silk Road, Hotan has always depended on two strong rivers - the Karakash River and the Yurungkash River, the Black and White Jade rivers respectively - to provide the water needed to survive on the southwestern edge of the vast Taklamakan Desert. The Yurungkash still provides water and irrigation for the town and oasis

The oasis of Hotan is strategically located at the junction of the southern (and most ancient) branch of the famous "Silk Route" joining China and the West with one of the main routes from ancient India and Tibet to Central Asia and distant China. It provided a convenient meeting place where not only goods, but technologies, philosophies, and religions were transmitted from one culture to another.

Tocharians lived in this region over 2000 years ago. Several of the Tarim mummies were found in the region. At Sampul, to the east of the city of Hotan, there is an extensive series of cemeteries scattered over

an area about a kilometre wide and 23 km long. The excavated sites range from about 300 BCE - 100 CE. The excavated graves have produced a number of fabrics of felt, wool, silk and cotton and even a fine bit of tapestry showing the face of Caucasoid man which was made of threads of 24 shades of colour. The tapestry had been cut up and fashioned into trousers worn by one of the deceased. Anthropological studies of 56 individuals studied show a primarily Caucasoid population "similar to the Saka burials of the southern Pamirs". Recent DNA testing on the mummies has shown that the area's population clustered with Central Asians and Indians rather than East Asians.

There is a relative abundance of information on Hotan readily available for study. The main historical sources are to be found in the Chinese histories (particularly detailed during the Han and early Tang dynasties), the accounts of several Chinese pilgrim monks, a few Buddhist histories of Hotan that have survived in Tibetan, and a large number of documents in Khotanese and other languages discovered, for the most part, early this century at various sites in the Tarim Basin and from the hidden library at the "Caves of the Thousand Buddhas" near Dunhuang.

The ancient Kingdom of Khotan was one of the earliest Buddhist states in the world and a cultural bridge across which Buddhist culture and learning were transmitted from India to China.

The one Tarim city state still independent of either Qarakhanid or Uyghur control at this point was Khotan, a Buddhist kingdom whose inhabitants, like those of early Kashgar and Yarkand, spoke the Iranian Saka tongue. Khotan's indigenous dynasty (all of whose royal names are Indian in origin) governed a fervently Buddhist city-state boasting some 400 temples in the late ninth/early tenth century—four times the number recorded by Xuan Zang around the year 630. Khotan enjoyed close relations with the Buddhist centre at Dunhuang: the Khotanese royal family intermarried with Dunhuang élites, visited and patronised Dunhuang's Buddhist temple complex, and donated money to have their portraits painted on the walls of the Mogao grottos. Through the tenth century Khotanese royal portraits were painted in association with an increasing number of deities in the caves, suggesting the Khotanese royalty knew they were in trouble.

The trouble, specifically, was the Qarakhanid Empire. Satuq's son, Musa, began to put pressure on Khotan in the mid-900s, and sometime before 1006 Yusuf Qadir Khan of Kashgar besieged and took the city. This conquest of Buddhist Khotan by the Muslim Turks—about which there are many colourful legends—marked another watershed in the Islamicisation and Turkicisation of the Tarim Basin, and an end to local autonomy of this southern Tarim city state.

By 1006, Khotan was held by the Muslim Yūsuf Qadr Khān, a brother or cousin of the Muslim ruler of Kāshgar and Balāsāghūn. Between 1006 and 1165, after it fell to the Kara Kitai, it was part of the Kara-Khanid Khanate and became, in time, a Muslim state. The town suffered severely during the Dungan revolt against the Qing Dynasty in 1864-1875, and again a few years later when Yaqub Beg of Kashgar made himself master of East Turkestan.

Chinese-Khotanese relations were so close that the oasis emerged as one of the earliest centres of silk manufacture outside China. There are good reasons to believe that the silk-producing industry flourished in Hotan as early as the 5th century. According to one story, a Chinese princess given in marriage to a Khotan prince brought to the oasis the secret of silk-manufacture, "hiding silkworms in her hair as part of her dowry", probably in the first half of the 1st century CE. It was from Khotan that the eggs of silkworms were smuggled to Persia, reaching Justinian's Constantinople in 551 AD.

Khotanese carpets, were mentioned by Xuanzang, who visited the oasis in 644 CE: "The country produces woolen carpets and fine felt, and the people are skillful in spinning and weaving silk." In his Biography it is stated: "It produced carpets and fine felt, and the felt-makers also spun coarse and fine silk." Khotan Silk Factory is one of the notable silk producers in Khotan.

Not only pile carpets were produced in ancient times, but also kilims. Khotanese pile carpets are still highly prized and form an important export. Silk production is still a major industry employing more than a thousand workers and producing some 150 million metres of silk annually. Silk weaving by Uighur women is a thriving cottage industry, some of it produced using traditional methods.

On our way to Minfeng, the town at the junction with the Cross Desert Highway, we stopped at the Yutian Saturday market. Yutian county market was on the edge of the oasis that extends back to Hetian. This market was the real deal. Herdsmen selling their sheep, goats, donkeys, cows, horses were all there. Artisans, fruit sellers, bakers, you name it. All the oasis commodities were well represented in a lively and well organized environment. We later discovered that a group from Tianjin in far eastern China, had invested RMB 10 mm to fix up this market, having had it concreted and covered with long rows for the stall merchants. There was even one entire row dedicated for the butchers that would butcher the sheep you just bought in the proper Muslim method. Another row was dedicated to hats including everything from the most simple Muslim skullcap to wonderful tall lambswool and mink brimmed hats popular amongst the local ethnic population.

Leaving this last oasis we really got the feeling of being on the edge of civilization. Ahead lie a desolate desert landscape. Somewhere through the haze to the south stood the impenetrable Kunlun Mountains.

We thankfully made quick time across this bit of desert on our way east to Minfeng, also known as Niya. Dropping down into Minfeng's oasis we were once again delighted to encounter more camels, two packs in fact. One of the packs had a herder with them. We stopped along the road and I indicated to the guy that we wanted to take some pictures with his camels. He then started to chase them down. But the camels were not cooperating and we watch from the roadway as this guy ran across the rocky desert trying to catch the camels. We chuckled to ourselves, honked a few times in thanks, and drove on into Minfeng.

We quickly, and easily, found the grandest hotel in Minfeng, the Niya Guesthouse. Easily found because Minfeng has not changed much from ancient times as described below. It's still very small and only really has one intersection in town, proudly dominated by a Maoist lingum. Just what ancient Niya needed. There is, however, an oddly disproportionate number of military personnel and armed police in tiny little Minfeng. The guest house was next to the only park in town that actually looked really nice. It was full of people when we arrived in the late afternoon.

Sitting in the lobby of the Niya Guesthouse and enjoying cigars we amused in watching a convoy of police roll into the parking lot, even bringing along their giant blue and white police tour bus, and parade into the hotel. The 40 or 50 strong group shuffled about, constantly going in and out of the hotel. For the most part they settled into one banquet room and we went off to catch some local color and have dinner.

After dinner on the short walk back to the guesthouse, we saw the convoy of police leaving town. We may never know what they were up to.

Back in the park, unseen speakers were now blaring, in perfect Mandarin Chinese, "People of Minfeng, the Communist Party of China is your friend. And to prove our friendship... blah, blah, blah. Thank you for listening." The park was now empty. No one speaks Mandarin in Minfeng.

Ancient Niya was known as Ronglu during the Han Dynasties (206 BCE - 222 CE) and, according to the Hanshu Chapter 96A, was said to have had "240 households, 610 individuals with 300 persons able to bear

arms" during the Former Han Dynasty (206 BCE - 23 CE). It is situated about 115 km north of the modern town of Minfeng. Numerous Buddhist scriptures, sculptures, mummies and other precious archeological finds have been made in the region. The remains of more than seventy buildings have been discovered scattered over an area of some 45 km². It was located on the southern branch of the Silk Road.

Day 9:

Its 558 km from Minfeng across the Taklamakan desert on the amazing engineering accomplishment of the Cross Desert Highway.

The Taklamakan Desert, also known as Taklimakan, and Teklimakan, is a desert in Central Asia, in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region of the People's Republic of China. It is bounded by the Kunlun Mountains to the south, and the Pamir Mountains and Tian Shan to the west and north.

The name is probably an Uyghur borrowing of Arabic tark, "to leave alone/out/behind, relinquish, abandon" + makan, "place". Another plausible explanation is that it is derived from Turki taqlar makan, which means "the place of ruins". Popular accounts wrongly claim that Takla Makan means "go in and you will never come out". It may also mean "The point of no return" or "The Desert of Death".

The Taklamakan Desert Ecoregion is a Chinese ecoregion of the Deserts and xeric shrublands Biome.

It has an area of 337,000 sq. km. and includes the Tarim Basin, which is 1,000 kilometres long and 400 kilometres wide. It is crossed at its northern and at its southern edge by two branches of the Silk Road as travelers sought to avoid the arid wasteland. It is the world's second largest shifting sand desert with about 85% is made up of shifting sand dunes ranking 18th in size in a ranking of the world's largest non-polar deserts.

In recent years, the People's Republic of China has constructed a cross-desert highway that links the cities of Hotan (on the southern edge) and Luntai (on the northern edge). In recent years, the desert has expanded in some areas, its sands enveloping farms and villages as a result of desertification.

Taklamakan is a paradigmatic cold desert climate. Given its relative proximity with the cold to frigid air masses in Siberia, extreme lows are recorded in wintertime, sometimes well below -20 °C. During the 2008 Chinese winter storms episode, the Taklamakan was reported to be covered for the first time in its entirety with a thin layer of snow reaching 4 centimetres, with a temperature of -26.1 °C in some observatories.

Its extreme inland position, virtually in the very heartland of Asia and thousands of kilometres from any open body of water, accounts for the cold character of its nights even during summertime.

There is very little water in the desert and it is hazardous to cross. Merchant caravans on the Silk Road would stop for relief at the thriving oasis towns.

The key oasis towns, watered by rainfall from the mountains, were Kashgar, Marin, Niya, Yarkand, and Khotan (Hetian) to the south, Kuqa and Turpan in the north, and Loulan and Dunhuang in the east. Now many, such as Marin and Gaochang, are ruined cities in sparsely inhabited areas in the Xinjiang.

The archeological treasures found in its sand-buried ruins point to Tocharian, early Hellenistic, Indian, and Buddhist influences. Its treasures and dangers have been vividly described by Aurel Stein, Sven Hedin, Albert von Le Coq, and Paul Pelliot. Mummies, some 4000 years old, have been found in the region. They show the wide range of peoples who have passed through. Some of the mummies appear European. Later,

the Taklamakan was inhabited by Turkic peoples. Starting with the Tang Dynasty, the Chinese periodically extended their control to the oasis cities of the Taklamakan in order to control the important silk route trade across Central Asia. Periods of Chinese rule were interspersed with rule by Turkic, Mongol and Tibetan peoples. The present population consists largely of Turkic Uyghur people.

Setting off across the desert before sunrise with a full tank of gas and plenty of water felt fairly adventurous. We were finally going to cross the Taklamakan. I had dreamed of this since I was a boy and became even more fascinated with deserts and desert life after reading Paul Bowles' *The Sheltering Sky*. Albeit a different desert on a different continent and a world away, I was making what I felt to be a historic and epic journey.

The road is two lanes and is actually quite smooth and extremely well maintained. As the sun began to rise it cast dramatic shadows across the dunes that were now rising up around us and flowing out into the distance as far as the eye could see- a sea of sand whipped up and white capping here in Central Asia on a crisp October morning. Soon we encountered heavy vegetation on the side of the road that extended out from the highway approximately 40 or 50 meters either side. Upon further investigation we noticed that there were drip irrigation lines running parallel to the road at one meter intervals within the vegetation barrier. Every 3 kilometers was a pump house to draw water up from what must be thousands of feet below the surface to feed into the drip lines. Each pump house is manned by either one or two people (usually a husband and wife). We stopped along the way at the pump houses and interviewed these modern desert dwellers as the vegetation was so thick and thriving so well, that it was difficult to access the dunes and get any clear photos at any place along the route other than at the pump house. We learned that the workers were from all over China. They stayed in the desert for 8 months a year, were invested with mice, and became very lonely. One woman was very kind and invited us into her pump house, but the unfriendly husband seemed to want to ignore us so we declined. She complained that sand got into everything. We were, after all, in the middle of a desert. There are 108 pump houses along the Cross Desert Highway. The vegetation barrier is a mixture of what must be the heartiest plant species on earth. Some are tall like scotch broom, other short, sharp, and nasty. There plants run parallel to the road, like the drip lines, and are in some kind of strategic alternating sequence. Investigations of the drip lines confirmed to me that the water did have a high alkaline content as it was coming from very deep in the earth and under the second largest desert. Evidence of snakes, mice, rabbits, lizards, and probably lots of other creatures are thriving in the thicket of the barrier. That's good news for the foxes and birds of prey that also coexist in the harsh desert environment.

We tried to find one of several ancient cities that exist on the southern end of the desert. We are not renowned archeologists and because of this, were about as lucky as you would expect. Although, in the process we did get to drive on a very nice road, one of very few that diverges from the Desert Highway. On this side trip we passed through what can only be described as an eerie desert forest.

The Diversifolious Poplar (Populus euphratica) is found in the Taklamakan Desert, the second largest desert in China. Diversifolious poplar trees mainly grow along the riverbanks of the Tarim River. The poplar can survive extreme cold, drought, and windstorms, so it is called the "desert hero" and regarded as one of the few "living botanic fossils" on earth. Locals describe the tree's longevity by saying that it can live for 1,000 years and after it dies, it will stand for another 1,000 years before falling down, and it takes another 1,000 years for its trunk to decompose. Over 90 percent of diversifolious poplars live in the deserts in northwestern Xinjiang area.

Research shows that the existence of this type of polar tree goes back 6.5 million years ago. The Uyghurs call it "the most beautiful tree." October is the best season to see the trees as their leaves turn gold. The golden leaves and red brown trunks of the trees, set off by yellow sand dunes and the blue sky, create a distinctive scene. The Oscar-nominated Chinese movie "Hero" brought popularity to the golden poplar forests.

Apart from Xinjiang, the poplar forest in Ejina County of the Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region is also a famous destination for viewing diversifolious poplars.

We did not see any camels in the desert. Nor did we unlock any of the mysteries that it held. We flew along the desert highway and were all completely impressed with what we saw. Deserts are truly beautiful and mysterious places. They are really quite too. Walking 100m into the dunes and getting out of sight of the highway results in a strange quiet that can almost be felt much like holding two pillows over your ears. I would definitely like to return to the desert and take part in one of the camel caravans that can be arranged for a crossing of it.

An interesting subtext to the complex irrigation and project designed to save the highway from being buried by the desert is that the workers were all wearing PetroChina (NYSE:PTR, SHA:601857, HKG:0857) uniforms. Then it made sense to me. Of course PetroChina is paying to keep this road open and maintained. They need to get the oil out of the desert. Sure enough, almost smack in the middle of the desert is an oil field and a PetroChina fuel station. The Tarim Basin is one of China's oldest oil fields. The north end of the basin is where the oil is. The age of the field was noticeable when we reached the other end of the desert highway to an oil town called Luntai (literally, tire). They had drill rigs working on old well heads that, as I correctly surmised, were working on horizontal drilling and fracking of the aged wells to extract any remaining oil from the rock. China is the world's second largest oil consumer, importing 54% of what it consumes. With China's oil consumption increasing year-over-year by about 12%, the country will face energy need based challenges within the next decade.

We left the Cross Desert Highway and turned east for the run to Korla.

Korla, Kurla, or Kuerle is a mid-sized city in central Xinjiang. Korla is the capital of the Bayin'gholin Mongol Autonomous Prefecture, which is larger than France and is the largest prefecture in China. Korla is also known for its "fragrant" pears.

Korla is approximately 200 kilometres (120 mi) southwest from Ürümqi, although travelling by road the distance is more than 500 kilometres.

The Iron Gate Pass (Tiemen Pass) leading to Karashahr (modern day Yanqi) is about 7 kilometres (4.3 mi) north of the city and, as it was easily defended, playing an important part in protecting the ancient Silk Roads from raiding nomads from the north.

The Kaidu River also known as Konqi River or Kongque River flows through the center of Korla, a unique feature amongst cities in Xinjiang. Often mistranslated as "Peacock River", the Chinese word "kongque" is actually a transliteration of the Uyghur word "konqi", meaning "an abundance of water".

Korla has long been the biggest centre in the region after Karashahr itself, having abundant water and extensive farmlands, as well as controlling the main routes to the south and west of Karashahr. Due to the discovery of oil in the Taklamakan Desert, Korla is now both more populous and far more developed than Karashahr. Korla is home to a huge operational center for PetroChina's exploration in Xinjiang.

Korla was known as Weili during the Han Dynasty. Weili is said in the Hanshu or 'History of the Former Han' (covering the period 125 BCE to 23 CE), to have had 1,200 households, 9,600 individuals and 2,000 people able to bear arms. It also mentions that it adjoined Shanshan and Qiemo (Charchan) to the south.

In 61 CE, the Xiongnu led some 30,000 troops from 15 kingdoms including Korla, Karashahr, and Kucha in a successful attack on Khotan.

In 94 CE, the Chinese general Ban Chao sent soldiers to punish the kingdoms of Yanqi (Karashahr), Weixu (Hoxud), Weili(Korla), and Shanguo (in the western Kuruk mountains).

"He then sent the heads of the two kings of Yanqi (Karashahr) and Weili (Korla) to the capital where they were hung in front of the residences of the Man and Yi princes in the capital (Luoyang). (Ban) Chao then appointed Yuan Meng, who was the Yanqi (Karashahr) Marquis of the Left, king (of Kashgar). The kings of Weili (Korla), Weixu (Hoxud), and Shanguo (in the western Kuruk mountains) were all replaced."

After the rebellion of the "Western Regions" (106-125 CE), only the kings of Korla and Hoxud refused to submit to the Chinese. Ban Yong, the son of Ban Chao, along with the Governor of Dunhuang, attacked and defeated them.

The 3rd century Weilüe records that Korla, Hoxud and Shanwang (Shanguo) were all dependencies of Karashahr. In May, 1877 Yakub Beg, the Muslim ruler of Kashgaria, died here, prompting the reconquest of Kashgaria by the Qing dynasty.

Francis Younghusband, passed through "Korlia" in 1887 on his overland journey from Beijing to India. He described it as being prosperous and the country round about well-cultivated, with more land under cultivation than any other town he had passed. Maize seemed to be the major crop but rice was also grown. There was a small Chinese town, about 400 yards (370 m) square with mud walls about 35 feet (11 m) high and with a ditch. There were round bastions at the angles, but none at the gateway. A mile (1.6 km) south was the Turk town, but its walls were in ruins. It had one main street about 700 yards (640 m) long. "The shops are somewhat better than at Karashahr, but not so good as at Turfan."

Day 10:

Korla is not a beautiful city. For that matter, very few of China's modern cities are. We slept on the hardest beds in the world at a hotel more renowned for its karaoke than for its accommodations. We were on the 6th floor, the karaoke on the 5th. Needless to say, none of us slept well that night. Bleary-eyed we gladly left Korla behind and set out to find Iron Gate Pass. After a few wrong turns we eventually found the place north of the city in a mountain gorge. China has so many wonderful historical sites to visit, if you can find them. Nothing is marked, locals are ill-informed, and you need a satellite map and GPS device to find the places. Iron Gate Pass is not made of Iron. The name was given because the river valley that is cut through the mountains was the only safe place to pass through the Tianshan Mountains from north to south. All other routes had no water. And, due to the flowing river and narrow dimensions, the pass was easily defended from invaders. At the very small tourist stop that is today's Iron Gate Pass all that exists is a rebuilt Chinese-style defensive gate about 12 meters high. I was surprised to see my first and only Silk Road marker in Xinjiang. I know of one other that exists in Xi'an, one of the ancient capitals of China.

Leaving the Iron Gate Pass we headed north and east through Yanqi that sits on Bosi Lake. The "Golden Scenic Tourist Development Significance Zone" that is today's Bosi lake raised our eyebrows. Bosi Lake is apparently China's largest freshwater lake. Not for long from what we saw. As you enter the valley that Yanqi and Bosi lake sit in a heavy smog envelopes you. The short drive from the highway to the lake is

dominated by not one, but two huge coal fired power stations. One currently under construction. Heavy industry dominates the surrounding areas. We turned our noses up at the expensive admission price and continued on our way to Turfan. We took a wrong turn and ended up on back roads into Turpan. This turned out to be a pleasant change of plans as we were afforded a different view of the approach to Turpan that reinforced my fondness for the place.

The Kingdom of Yanqi (also known as Karashahr) was an ancient Buddhist kingdom located on the branch of the Silk Route that ran along the northern edge of the Taklamakan Desert in the Tarim Basin. During the Han dynasty it was a relatively large and important kingdom. It was said to have had: "15,000 households, 52,000 individuals, and more than 20,000 men able to bear arms. It has high mountains on all four sides. There are hazardous passes on the route to Qiuci Kucha that are easy to defend. The water of a lake winds between the four mountains, and surrounds the town for more than 30 li [12.5 km]."

Karashahr become known to Europeans (as Cialis - an Italianized transcription of the Turkic Chalish) in the early 17th century, when the Portuguese Jesuit Lay Brother Bento de Góis visited it on his way from India to China (via Kabul and Kashgar). De Góis and his traveling companions (an Armenian merchant named Isaac, and a Greek one, named Demetrios) spent several months in the "Kingdom of Cialis", while crossing it with a caravan of Kashgarian merchants (ostensibly, tribute bearers) on their way to the Ming China. The travelers stayed in Cialis City for three months in 1605, and then continued, via Turpan and Hami (all parts of the "Kingdom of Cialis", according to de Góis), to the Ming Empire border at Jiayuguan.

An early 20th century traveler described the situation of Karashahr as follows:

"The whole of this district round Kara-shahr and Korla is, from a geographical and political point of view, both interesting and important ; for whilst all other parts of Chinese Turkestan can only be reached either by climbing high and difficult passes—the lowest of which has the same elevation as Mont Blanc—or traversing extensive and dangerous waterless deserts of sand-hills, here we find the one and only convenient approach to the land through the valleys of several rivers in the neighbourhood of Ili, where plentiful water abounds in the mountain streams on all sides, and where a rich vegetation makes life possible for wandering tribes. Such Kalmuck tribes still come from the north-west to Tal. They are Torgut nomads who pitch their yurts round about Kara-shahr and live a hard life with their herds. . . ."

Just as these Mongols wander about here at the present day, so the nomadic tribes of an earlier period must have used this district as their entrance and exit gate. The Tochari (Yue-chi), on their way from China, undoubtedly at that time passed through this gate to get into the Ili valley. . . ."

The highway climbs up and out of this valley and into a desolate, steep, and hilly terrain void of much vegetation. It is no wonder the old Silk Roaders did not travel this way. We continued through this uninviting landscape for what seemed like hours until we finally dropped down out of the mountains and on the flat valley that drops into Turpan. The Turpan Depression is the 3rd lowest exposed place on earth sitting at -154m below sea level. The city sits at just 30m above sea level.

Day 11:

Turpan has long been the centre of a fertile oasis (with water provided by karez) and an important trade centre. It was historically located along the Silk Road's northern route, at which time it was adjacent to the kingdoms of Korla and Karashahr to the southwest and the town of Qarakhoja (Gaochang) to the southeast.

The peoples of the Kingdoms of Nearer and Further Jushi (the Turpan Oasis and the region to the north of the mountains near modern Jimasa), were closely related. It was originally one kingdom called Gushi which the Chinese conquered in 107 BCE. It was subdivided into two kingdoms by the Chinese in 60 BCE. During the Han era the city changed hands several times between the Xiongnu and the Han, interspersed with short periods of independence.

After the fall of the Han Dynasty, the region was virtually independent but tributary to various dynasties. Until the 5th century CE, the capital of this kingdom was Jiaohe (modern Yarghul - 16 km west of Turpan).

From 487 to 541 CE, Turpan was an independent Kingdom ruled by a Turkic tribe known to the Chinese as the Tiele. The Rouran Khaganate defeated the Tiele and subjugated Turpan, but soon afterwards the Rouran were destroyed by the Göktürks.

The Tang Dynasty reconquered the Tarim Basin by the 7th century CE. During the 7th, 8th, and early 9th centuries the Tibetan Empire, Tang, and Turks fought to conquer the Tarim Basin. Sogdians and Chinese engaged in extensive commercial activities with each other under Tang rule. Sogdians were mostly Mazdaist, in Turpan inns were located, many brothels catering to merchants were available Kucha and Khotan. In Astana, a contract written in Sogdian detailing the sale of a Sogdian girl to a Chinese man was discovered dated to 639 CE. Wu Zhen, who worked on the Astana site asserted that, despite the fact that individualslaves were common among silk route houses, from early Niya documents an increase in the selling of slaves was recorded in Turpan documents.

The Uyghurs established a Kingdom in Turpan (known as the Uyghuria Idikut state or Kara-Khoja Uyghur Idikut Kingdom) that lasted from 856 to 1389 CE, surviving as a vassal of the Mongol Empire. This Kingdom, led by Idikuts, or Saint Spiritual Rulers, was established after the fall of the Uyghur Empire to the Kyrgyz Turks. The last Idikut left the Turpan area in 1284 for Kumul, then Gansu to seek the protection of the Yuan Dynasty, but local Uyghur Buddhist rulers still held power until the invasion of the Moghul Hızır Khoja in 1389. The conversion of the local Buddhist population to Islam was completed nevertheless only in the second half of the 15th century.

The Moghul ruler of Turpan, Yunus Khan, also known as Ḥājjī `Ali, (ruled 1462-1478) unified Moghulistan (roughly corresponding to today's Eastern Xinjiang) under his authority in 1472. Around that time, a conflict with the Ming Dynasty of China started over the issues of tribute trade: Turpanians benefited from sending "tribute missions" to China, which allowed them to receive valuable gifts from the Ming emperors and to do plenty of trading on the sides; the Chinese, however, felt that receiving and entertaining these missions was just too expensive. Yunus Khan was irritated by the restrictions on the frequency and size of Turpanian missions (no more than one mission in 5 years, with no more than 10 members) imposed by the Ming government in 1465, and by the Ming's refusal to bestow sufficiently luxurious gifts on his envoys (1469). According, in 1473 he went to war against China, and even succeeded in capturing Hami in 1473 from the Oirat Mongol Henshen and holding it for a while, until Ali was repulsed by the Ming Dynasty into Turfan, but he reoccupied it after the Ming left. Henshen's Mongols recaptured Hami twice in 1482 and 1483, but the son of Ali Ahmed, reconquered it in 1493 and captured the Hami leader and the resident of China in Hami (hami was a vassal state to the Ming). In response, the Ming Dynasty imposed an economic blockade on Turfan and kicked out all the Uyghurs from Gansu. It became so harsh for Turfan that Ahmed left. Ahmed's son Mansur then took over Hami in 1517. These conflicts were called the Ming Turpan Border Wars. Several times, after occupying Hami, Mansur tried to attack China in 1524 with 20,000 men, but was beaten by Chinese forces. The Turpan kingdom under Mansur in alliance with Oirat Mongols tried to raid Suzhou in Gansu in 1528, but were severely defeated by Ming Chinese forces and suffered heavy casualties. The Chinese refused to lift the economic blockade and restrictions that had led to the battles, and continued restricting Turpan's tribute and trade with China. Turfan also annexed Hami.

Francis Younghusband visited Turpan in 1887 on his overland journey from Beijing to India. He said it consisted of two walled towns, a Chinese one with a population of no more than 5,000 and, about a mile (1.6 km) to the west, a Turk town of "probably" 12,000 to 15,000 inhabitants. The town (presumably the "Turk town") had four gateways, one for each of the cardinal directions, of solid brickwork and massive wooden doors plated with iron and covered by a semicircular bastion. The well-kept walls were of mud and about 35 ft (10.7 m) tall and 20 to 30 feet (6 to 9 m) thick, with loopholes at the top. There was a level space about 15 yards (14 m) wide outside the main walls surrounded by a musketry wall about 8 ft (2.4 m) high, with a ditch around it some 12 ft (3.7 m) deep and 20 ft (6 m) wide. There were drumtowers over the gateways, small square towers at the corners and two small square bastions between the corners and the gateways, "two to each front." Wheat, cotton, poppies, melons and grapes were grown in the surrounding fields.

Turpan grapes impressed other travelers to the region as well. The 19th-century Russian explorer Grigory Grumm-Grzhimaylo, thought the local raisins may be "the best in the world", and noted the buildings of a "perfectly peculiar design" used for drying them.

Indeed, many visitors to Turpan have great things to say about the place. I have now been to Turpan twice and could certainly spend more time there. It is clean, small in size, and there is a 20 meter wide grape trellis that bisects the city from north to south, used as a pedestrian walkway and is the center of Turpan's outdoor lifestyle. There are very few tall buildings in Turpan and thankfully no industrialization. The city's limited water resources, predominantly agrarian culture, and close proximity to Urumqi have kept the town in check. Turpan is only 180 km from Urumqi and far enough to not welcome commuters, and yet close enough so that people are moving to the Big City looking for better opportunities. That has helped to keep Turpan's population small and concentrated. The three obvious changes that Turpan has undergone since the first time I visited four years before is the completion of a new cultural activity center and the disappearance of the donkey cart taxis that take us around town, plus the change of name of our favorite local hotel. Only the name had changed. Nothing else.

As my parents had not been there before we visited the Emin Minaret and Jiao He, the 2nd century BCE ancient city that was home to some 6,500 residents at its height. The Emin Minaret, an Afghan-style mosque, was founded by Emin Hoja, a Turpan general, in 1777. The mosque sits south of town about 3 km and is built of simple multi-patterned brickwork. The 30 m high minaret gently slopes to a conical point and is encircled with numerous patterns of laid brick. Its best to view this place in the early morning when the sun is hitting the sharp angles of the brick and creating lively shadows across the beige monochrome of the mosque. The interior is comprised of a very simple exposed wood beam construction in the main prayer hall. A side door just inside the main entrance exits into an open air courtyard that is flanked with steps that climb up to an enclosure on above the main entry door and further out to an open air walk looking out onto the square in front of the mosque and vineyards of the surrounding countryside.

Out at the ancient city we luckily arrived before most of the day trippers from Urumqi in their giant tour buses. Turpan, luckily perhaps, does not have too many hotels that attract multiday tourists. This also helps to keep the city in check. The ancient city sits on a long leaf shaped island in the middle of the river. High cliffs protect it on three sides. The city was literally carved out of the earth. Streets, residences, a Buddhist monastery, watch tower, all carved out of the hard brown earth. There is a main street, numerous alleyways, evidence of wood beam construction within, and blackened ceilings from cooking and daily life. The place is big too. It goes on and on for maybe 1 km or more. Brick paths guide modern day visitors to key sections of the site. From the vantage point of the city you can look out at the fertile oasis that follows the river and rises up out of the low valley. The barren hills above the tree lined

vineyards are dotted with the characteristic Turpan grape drying houses. These are windowless square or rectangular brick structures about 4 m tall. Every other brick is missing so a checkerboard pattern is left allowing air to flow through and slowly dry the grapes in the hot dry air. A small wooden door is the only way in or out. The grapes are left on the vine and are hung from the ceiling of the drying houses on long poles with shorter spindles protruding. Once dried, the raisins are simply removed from the drying poles, thrown on a clean piece of white dirt, separated, graded, bagged, and then sent off to market. It is rumored that Turpan has at least 127 different kinds of raisins. We saw some that are as big as my thumb.

We left the ancient city and drove down and through the river and up the other side through a village to the top of the hill that provides a different vantage point to view the ancient city and allows for a close up look at the drying houses. I had visited this very spot 4 years ago and immediately felt drawn to it.

We left Turfan and I promised myself to return soon. It's such a quick drive from Urumqi and still unspoiled. Extremely rare for any important destination in China.

On the main highway that climbs up from Turpan to Urumqi we saw evidence of a new high-speed rail line punching its way through mountains heading east. Presumably this will link Urumqi with Lanzhou in Gansu Province, and all points in between.

The token wind farm project that sits just south of Urumqi has become anything but token in the last four years since we can through there before. None of us had ever seen so large a wind farm. Only four appeared to be paying the rent out of the hundreds that now covered thousands of hectares.

Back in smoggy Urumqi we found our HomeInn and settled in, eating a simple early meal next door at an unremarkable Uighur restaurant.

Day 12:

We were not in a hurry to return the rental car just yet. Of the allotted 300 km we were allowed to drive per day we had already driven 15 days worth of distance in just 10. In total, we drove 4,500 km. PetroChina made some money from us on the fuel, but the trusty Hyundai could go 729 km on a full tank. Good fuel economy.

Since we were not in a hurry to leave town, we spent an extra full day with our Uighur friend Hasan and told him about our adventures. We also purchased some gifts and teas to take back home. Our particular favorites include the Turkish imported food products that can be found in most shops near the Grand Bazaar. We had lunch in a wonderful restaurant on the old Embassy Street. Iskar Chicken, the dish was called, served at Iskar's Restaurant. My father really wanted to quiz Hasan on the so-called sinification of Xinjiang. Hasan avoided the issue entirely. Hasan did ask us if we ever felt fearful of any terrorist in the south. We certainly had not felt unsafe at any time in our journey. Hasan said the issue was pretty simple. He said the Chinese government was the wind, and the Uyghurs the trees. If the wind blows, of course the trees will sway. The big question is will the Uyghurs continue to sway or bend to the wind.