

Xinjiang and the Old Silk Road.

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Part the First.

Ahh! The Silk Road. Road of my childhood dreams, of long robes and camels and caravans and nomadic herders; of dark knotty djins that came for you in the night and stole your liver; of bearded travellers disappearing in the desert without a trace. Of Marco Polo and his twenty year sojourn in the Orient, progressing from court to court, from yurt to fort over endless steppe on the Silk Road.

Fabled stories of Kublai Khan sweeping over the grasslands, swarming into China and building himself a pleasure dome where blossomed many an incense bearing tree. Of how the Mongols ruled China for centuries and adopted Chinese ways.

Fabulous tidings reaching back to Europe of riches beyond belief and the perils that went with the search. Above all, tales of trade. Before wars, during them, after them. Trade on horseback, on camels, donkeys, mules, asses and yaks. Trade in wool, explosives, in rudimentary cannons and firearms, trade in paper and printing, inventions, tinctures, ointments, anointments, scents, spices, woods, herbs, livestock, precious metals. Trade in carpets, spices, gold and rubies. Trade in things nobody at the other end of the line had heard of.

Traders setting off until they met someone who would trade their wares for something else and add value, always adding value, selling further on up the road and buying something to trade on the return journey.

But the biggie among them was silk. Bolts of it, teased out from silkworms once they had eaten enough mulberry leaves to make their cocoons. Fine silk, able to take embroidery and dye, beautiful bright colours, silk worth kings' ransoms and then some. The finest Courts in London, in St Petersburg, in Alexandria, in Athens and Constantinople, in Venice dressed in the craze of the age—silk. Silk carried on the backs of camels for thousands and thousands of kilometres, always driving west, and then buying new wares to take back to China.

Always the trading, travellers bringing together caravans of convenience to face the perils of the road that we would find hard to fathom, hazards that would give an OSH official palpitations.

What sort of perils?

Well, for a start there were personal and group perils inflicted by brigands of every hue, not to mention plain robbers, thieves, assassins, warlords. Then there were officials as corrupt then as they are today but without the manners and with the same powers to just disappear people. You want to get this in or out of our gates? Well, I may be in a position to facilitate your movement but for a consideration. Or not. No? Well, in that case... followed by a slitting of throats and the compulsory acquisition of your goods anyway, being no use to you dead. Next please! Mind you they couldn't kill them all for that would ruin the trade altogether and the Silk Road would alter course a little to avoid the danger spots. Better that a few, even most traders got through to regale fellow travellers of the safety and munificence of the caravanserai in Yarkand, well, for most of them anyway.

Not to mention perils of living—picking up unusual diseases, even plagues, childbirth on camel back, perils of getting sick with the nearest doctor four hundred days travel away. A long time to put up with a toothache.

Then there are the perils of geography.

Although there is dispute, the road from Shanghai runs out of cobbles and sedan chairs and turns into ruts and camels at Xian, the home of the terracotta army. From Xian, the Silk Road ventures timidly into the desert bordering Gansu, where Tibetans live and still practise Buddhism, [but we are to learn nothing about them here for we are to speak of Uyghur's.]

Xian was the last outpost of Han China, the end of the Great Wall, the beginning of the wasteland that is the Tarim Basin, the Gobi Desert to the north and the mighty Takla Makan Desert to the west. The Silk Road branches at Dunghuan. Turn right for Turpan, Urumqi and the steppes of Kazakhstan and on to Turkey. Turn left to find Yarkand, Hotan, Kashgar, Tashkurgan and the Karakoram Road to Pakistan and Tajikistan, or to Afghanistan and the road to Persia, and Turkey. Each road skirts the deepest, the driest, the way-losingest part of the Takla Makan. The southern route edges the foothills of the mighty Kunlun Range which is the border of Tibet. The northerly route runs through the equally mighty Tien Shan mountains, both ranges are at least a thousand kilometres long and hundreds wide. Both routes are determined by oases every ten to thirty days trudge at camel pace at fifteen kilometres a day. Each is endless stony desert, dry desert, sandy dune-desert, the sort of desert that defines the word sere. The routes cross mountainous desert, as well as endlessly flat eye-shimmering wasteland. The travellers picked their way over the land, steering by the stars, searching for tracks, praying that the dust ahead foretold friend not foe.

Another thing about the geography of Xinjiang, which by the way means New Frontier, is that the Takla Makan is as far from the sea as you can be on this earth. A desert surrounded by mountains on every side. The wind blows up on the Himalayas and the Karakoram Range and the Hindu Kush, just over there and ahead of you. The wind drops its bundle on the southern side and swoops down mercilessly on the interior gathering enormous speeds as it hurtles upon our hapless travellers. The winds blew camel trains to smithereens, sand-blasted them with stony grit, dried their mouths to sandpaper in a waterless wilderness, covered their tracks and then swallowed them whole in a shifting dune, never to be seen for thousands of years until a storm took a new direction and uncovered them—perfectly desiccated. I've seen them in the wonderful Museum of the Uyghurs, the mummies from the Takla Makan, still wearing their robes, their silks still dyed bright yellow, their hair blond, their camels alongside, teeth bared, the victims of a wrong turn in the night two thousand years ago, the fitful beacons lit by the hopeful caravanserai owners to guide the travellers in, unseen.

Then as now. Now the wind continues unabated, mostly easterly. Now it blows the Beijing-Urumqi Express clean off its tracks so there have to be special wind shelters along the line. Now the wind blows the rotors of eighty thousand wind turbines.

It is dry here, as in it never rains, although it snowed very briefly when I was in Turpan which brought the whole town outside. Dry as dust, moisture-less except in the oases, and even then it is spring or artesian water that gives sustenance. Takla Makan is the extreme of Xinjiang which is extreme in itself, of forty degrees hot, and a bone-chilling shelter-less minus fifty which is something to ponder. Extremes of altitude, too, from the Turpan Depression at below sea level to over 24,000 feet in the Pamirs.

There is a river in the Takla Makan, called the Tarim River. It runs from the Pamir mountains through Kashgar and spills into the desert until it disappears two thousand kilometres away into an inland marsh the size of Scotland called Lop Nor. Say no more!

You may be interested to learn that the Silk Road was the only road to Europe right up until the English forced the Chinese to open their ports in the 1840s to provide a more certain and faster way west via India and Cape Horn. This put the skids under the future of the Old Silk Road. But I digress.

Also passing along the Silk Road were the Khans, from Genghis to Kublai who spent the thirteenth century subjugating all in the West. Even to the gates of Vienna they went in their hordes with their gers which we know as yurts. They trundled their baggage trains right along where we are going ourselves. It could take ten days for the army to pass a given spot along the Silk Road, especially in the mountains, and there are a lot of them!

For a thousand years and more it was the only way to Europe and there was money to be made, fortunes even, kingdoms perhaps. From the Middle Ages on, [although whose Middle Ages I am unsure as it was the Golden Age of Islam,] emissaries of potentates, adventurers, Khans, Emperors, Kings and Holy See passed along the Silk Road in both directions, bringing good news and bad omens of places beyond the Pale. Bringing stories of an amazing thread that could be woven into fine almost sheer fabric and also into strong thread that resisted abrasion. Thread that came from a worm. Amazing!

Silkworms and their love affair with mulberry was a tightly held trade secret that stayed glued to Kashgar, until one homesick lass took some worms with her to Constantinople in order to remind her of Kashgar three thousand kilometres back up the trail over mountain pass and vast steppe. Monopoly over.

A useful tree the mulberry. The bark yields paper and was the basis of the first paper money more than a thousand years ago. It also makes fine furniture, firewood, roof beams for mud brick houses, and the daily and sole diet of the silkworm which produces the most durable, although expensive thread in history, right up to the time of petrochemicals.

At the other end of the road the Chinese were persuaded that cotton was spun from the bodies of vegetable sheep to make a fine thread. Such tales they told!

By the way, Takla Makan means Eater of Hosts, and we are not talking of the people who welcome you into their homes, as the Uyghurs are excellent hosts and make a point of it.

So here we are on the Silk Road. We are in Xinjiang, the New Territory, formerly Sinkiang on your Atlas, once it was called Eastern Turkmenistan. We are in the Uyghur Autonomous Region of Xinjiang, although not really. Autonomous that is. There is no voting in Xinjiang. Or in China for that matter.

It is late October 2012. It is cold. It is cheek-chill windy. What trees there are have mostly lost their amber leaves, there is snow on all the mountains.

Sit with me as we travel from the Turpan Depression to the Roof of the World, the Pamir Plateau, over the Karakoram Highway. Let me speak to you of the Silk Road of today. Let me spin you a tale of the world of the Uyghurs, the Kyrgyz, the Tajiks, the Hui. Let us take green tea, chew on a kebab and eat da pan ji for lunch. Wrap yourself in a pashmina. Put your feet up. Dream a little.



Part Two: the Wonderful World of the Uyghurs.

Brace yourself. The beds are going to be hard. That's the way China is. And was. In cold climates much use was made by the Han Chinese of the kang, a brick sleeping platform with a flue underneath coming from the fireplace and then up the chimney. Heated up during the day and you were warm overnight, as was the whole family. Not a big issue for the Uyghur, who sleep on layers of carpets today and even in their nomadic past when they slept in yurts.

My beds in Xinjiang were universally warm and comfortable with nice pillows. As for the hardness of the mattress—it took me exactly nineteen minutes on the first night to adapt. It was a combination of resolve [minor] and tiredness which sneaks up on the traveller, [major.] Some Westerners, however never adapt. You can see them in the mornings at breakfast. They look like their knees are tied together as they search for their white bread and peanut butter and apple jelly.

We start our Silk Road journey in Turpan, an old town even by Silk Road standards. It is in a depression, although all of the people I saw were smiling in one way or another. It is second in lowness only to the Dead Sea which is salty. Turpan is fertile, especially when it has water. It gets its water from the snow-fed Tien Shan mountains sixty kilometres away, via underground tunnels called karez, a word worth Googling. Kings and princes had these tunnels dug to irrigate the land and made their money renting out the water rights, just like they will do in Canterbury. The tunnels are usually 10-30 metres below ground, with holes every 30 metres or so to pull out the gravel. There is a mound of stones and rubble surrounding every pithead. You can see the lines of the tunnels from the air, marked by their mounds. The karez are as straight as a die and slope gently down to Turpan carrying cold, clear water. They are still maintained today in the same way by farmers crawling through, clearing blockages and sending the rubble up by bucket on a rope. Impressive.

In the desert sun they grow table grapes and chillies and all kinds of vegetables, especially eggplant, which I have developed a taste for, having hated them in younger days. Turpan is the grape vine of China. The reason for this is the wind. It is dry and it blows all the time, especially after harvest. Farmers construct mud-brick drying-houses with gaps in between the bricks to let the air circulate. They hang up the grapes on vertical pegs for a week or two and hey presto, raisins, sultanas by the thousands of tons. The same for chillies, although they also lay them out directly on the bare earth after harvest, a sea of red heat in the making.

Turpan is a garden town oasis bright with sinuous rills. The grapes grow over the streets and form long corridors of coolness in the desert sun. Until winter that is, when everything above ground hibernates. So the farmers prune back the grape vines and lay them in long trenches, cover them with hay and soil and wait out the winter. That's what they were doing when I visited. Doing it quickly too, as it had begun to snow—an event unseen by many who were older than me.

Turpan is a cosmopolitan town. Today it is a modern administration centre for government with around 300,000 inhabitants, an increasing number of whom are Han Chinese. The town is small in the scale of things—so small that everyone knows each other, says Zibah disdainfully. Zibah lives in Urumqi!

The men wear green embroidered peakless caps to mark their Muslim Uyghur-ness. The hats are all the same. Older men who have done a haj wear white caps. In the winter they doff their caps to don brown fur hats with a conical peak, which I prefer. The men all wear suits, some of them ancient, and clearly worn year-round. Men herd fat-tailed sheep in suits made from fat-tailed wool. The suits are cheap and serviceable.

The women are 'tradituous', in the words of my ever inventive guide, Zibah, whose grasp of English enchants me. Tradituous, because most of the women wear head scarves over their hair, Muslim style. However the Uyghurs are not fundamentalist, so the full burka and other raiments are eschewed. Bright colours feature red usually for the women who look happy, love their children—they are permitted two—and ride side-saddle as pillions on their electric scooters. The women are taller than most of the men. Zibah tells me that they wash their hair every Tuesday as laid down in the Koran. She does not wear a head scarf except on religious occasions, and sees herself as modern and liberated. She is the only Uyghur woman I saw wearing jeans—mind you I was informed that they were designer-jeans. All the women wear boots and put their nicest clothes on for market day. Everybody cherishes babies.

The Uyghurs look less like Chinese than just about any people around. It is quite a shock to come from Mainland China, as the Uyghurs sardonically call it, and see that people could be quite so different. Originally they were nomadic sheep herders and traders. Now they are farmers and yearn to be shopkeepers. They certainly feel close to the land—their stories are of herding and sheep and camels and storms and battles to hold on to what they had. A peaceful people who have settled in Xinjiang, they look most like Turks, or Croatians or even Sicilians. Uyghurs will love me for saying this as they love the Turks. Their language is Turkic. If Uyghurs could have passports, Turkey would have a serious immigration problem. They watch Turkish television on community translators and can follow the weepies which are very popular and the soaps, which have their own pages in the Uyghur newspapers. I can only go by Zibah's accounts of this for the newspapers are in Arabic script.

The young men have round faces and pink cheeks and they grow a beard or at least a moustache, something which gives them great pride—and a further point of difference between themselves and the Han Chinese who cannot. Lots of people have green eyes.

Three wheels rule in Turpan, as it does throughout Xinjiang except Urumqi, where people drive cars. Multi-purpose three wheel scooters and trucks, mostly electric, steer their way slowly through rule-less traffic. They carry impossible loads of gravity-defying dimensions. Every house has one in its courtyard. There are still the old single-bangers with enormous fly-wheels, with a single revolution every ten yards that makes a very satisfying low frequency combustion that you feel in your gut. Smoke pours out of them, which is unpopular with the Police who are trying to enforce the electric-vehicle rule to reduce smog, with some success.



Market day in Turpan



Night Market



Back-loading in Xinjiang.

I stay in the Turpan Petroleum Hotel, for that is what Turpan sits above—an ocean of oil, which is being pumped east to Shanghai as we speak. It is a very comfortable hotel built by government for wealthy government-business people. My room had two bowls of fresh fruit which was a welcome touch. The hotel is enormous with a cavernous lobby. The Regional Governor of Turpan Prefecture held a dinner the evening I was there, which meant the restaurant was closed to guests. He brought his squadron of rifle bearing soldiers with him—all Han Chinese, as of course was he. A reminder of another point of difference. No Uyghur may own a gun.

My guide and driver stay in a tour-guide hostel to save money—we are young, they say gaily. I hasten to add they stay in different quarters as each is married with a child. They are both very traditional about this.

In the evening we sit in the Turpan night market, munch kebabs and spit-roasted fish from local ponds. There are families walking and talking in the evening air, just like in Spain, a stroll before dinner. We even manage to find a place that sells red wine. Lao Lan wine from Turpan and considering the utter lack of competition, not too bad. The main dish is, of course, lamb which Uyghurs eat at least every day, this time cooked with copious chillies, Sichuan peppers, onions and tomatoes. I am told there are at least 100 ways of cooking lamb and intend to try every one of them. This time it comes with belt noodles which are as wide as a belt but taste a lot better. Uyghur men love noodles and eat little rice. This is the wheat world of the Uyghur.

Everyone has a cell phone. At 1 cent a text = 1/100 RMB = 0.02 cent NZ, I am not surprised. A voice call is 2 cents RMB a minute. It is 4G as well, something we don't have. A text in NZ costs 20 cents which is 1 RMB. Oy vey! Coverage is an honourable 100% of Xinjiang. As a result everyone has one, even sheep herders in the Tashkurgan hinterland. They all shout into them, letting their immediate neighbours, which are Karakul sheep, know all about their innermost concerns. But I digress.

In Gaochang we visit an ancient town dug into the ground and raised above with mud-bricks. It is deserted and has been since the twelfth century. It was originally a Buddhist city high above two converging rivers, perfect for defence. The spread of Islam through Central Asia eventually wound its way to Gaochang where the king was persuaded to convert to the true faith. He did, and therefore so did all his people. The trouble was their beautiful city with its ornate religious carvings, paintings and statuary was now no longer so beautiful. In fact the city had become idolatrous overnight. Too big to pull down and start again, the king moved his people to Turpan where they are today.

We move deeper into the desert, to the Flaming Mountains, so called due to the red soil and sand in the sunlight, to come across the narrow Mutou River, a thin strip of green along each bank. Here we visit the Bezeklik Thousand Buddha Cave city. Monks lived here from the fifth to the fourteenth centuries and had links with the Tibetans of Gansu, further down the Silk Road. The township was also a caravanserai for travellers. These caves were also deserted following Islam conversion and the thousand Buddhas of each grotto were left carved and painted on the walls and ceilings of the caves. And there they stayed until a German and American archaeologist arrived in 1907 to take the paintings away to Western museums, where they remain to this day—an act of singular, but probably well-meant vandalism that takes my breath away. Worse, they will not give them back.

Mind you what was not plundered by the archaeologists was destroyed by the children of the Cultural Revolution who are all in their forties and fifties now. I look at them and wonder just what did they do in those horrifying days. I am told the nation has forgotten—probably just as well, as all of them knew hardship and some of them did unspeakable things to each other.

It is remarkable that anything is left of Bezeklik at all, and this is due to a small clan of people who stayed on as caretakers, kept themselves to themselves and cropped the river terrace below the township for the next 600 years, tending the caves. A nice story. By the way you can see some of the paintings in, I think, the New York Met Museum. Another lot were kept in the vaults of the Reich museum in Berlin and were destroyed in WWII.

A serene place of sheltered green shrubs and trees hugged up against a river terrace, with hemispheric ceilings sticking up from the walls of the caves into an impossibly-blue sky. A small plot of land below for crops and fruit for the caretaker clan, the thin river and then the abrupt severity of the desert—a welcome sight indeed for travellers on the Silk Road. I liked it there.

I was disappointed to learn that the evocative Bezeklik means wall paintings. So often this happens to me when I conjure up images to go with the sheer exoticism of a place. The magical Tutaekuri River in Hawkes Bay, with its pools and shady banks means simply dog-shit. At least Takla Makan means Eater of Hosts. Probably pay me not to learn the meaning of Shangri La.

But enough already. We have a date with da pan ji.

Back onto the highway, and such a highway! What was at first a camel track for travellers is now two and three lanes each way, one direction Urumqi and beyond to Kazakhstan, the other to Shanghai which is 3200kms away. The distances are vast and they have the trucks to go with them. They stack them on top of each other for the return journey. Going east is coal, steel, sulphur, industry materials. Also going east are raisins and chillies for Xinjiang is the centre of China's love affair with the red fire. Going west are Han Chinese.

Entering Turpan involves a 15 km slow descent from the mountains. In their haste, trucks do not engage lower gears for this descent, relying on brakes, the drums of which get red hot and catch fire. It is common to see burning trucks at toll-booths shooting flames as they wait to pay their toll and move on. Car-transporters stack vehicles two-wide and twelve deep in two layers, forty-eight cars, most Volkswagens, I think, for Urumqi has a massive VW plant there.

Drivers get sleepy and jack-knife off the road or into each other or just end up stranded axle-deep in sand alongside the highway, emerging from the cab, (and I saw this,) looking sheepish. Dead trucks litter the side-lines.

Trucks are not allowed to enter city limits in China until after ten pm so there are truck-stops that stretch for miles leading to Urumqi. They stop alongside stone and mud-brick houses with flat roofs, each with a single window—the ubiquitous house of the agricultural Uyghur, unprepossessing on the outside but warm and carpeted inside, and with a satellite dish.

We pull off the motorway, through yet another wind farm which stretches to the horizon, into one of these truck stops. There are trucks lying on their side so that the engines can be removed by hand for scrap and parts. There are mountains of parts that might just come in useful. There are drivers asleep in their truck beds. There is rubbish everywhere. It billows and swirls and lands.

And there is da pan ji. For we have come to the most renowned village for this in the whole of Xinjiang. Rough looking cafes line both sides of the rutted road. They are full of people, many of whom travel 90km from Urumqi to savour this particular da pan ji. It is cooked by Hui [pronounced who-way] people who are Chinese Muslims and who raise their chickens in the salt marshes that surround us, giving a delicate salty taste to the dish. Da pan ji is Big Plate Chicken served for communal consumption, which for us was three people. As a Westerner I was studiously ungazed-at while my driver Mohammed-Ali, and my guide Zibah did the ordering. That's something about the Uyghurs. They are very mannerly and unintrusive. I like them. The noise resumed as the Uyghur world ate.

Green tea. A plate of green vegetables at my request. Fried tripe with chili. And da pan ji. It comes in a huge tureen. It is red with fiery dry-fried chili and capsicum. It is spiced with Sichuan pepper, star anise, cumin (which goes into everything), oil, soy and sweet alcohol free wine and slices of potatoes, in a bony, soupy, heady, spicy mixture that steams before us menacingly. After a time, the belt noodles come out to be mixed in the soupy remains and slurped up. Uyghurs do a world-class line in slurping. The da pan ji is so good I nearly enquire about residency requirements! Google it for a recipe that will knock your socks off. Your bowels will thank you for the experience.



Da Pan Ji



Mutou River on the Silk Road.



Bezeklik Caves



Tradituous women go shopping



Electric carry-all.



Electronic scales for street vendor.

Part Three: Urumqi and the Grand Bazaar.

The capital of Xinjiang, Urumqi is a quirk of geography. It's the most remote city from the sea on earth. There you go! It is also regularly in the top ten most polluted cities in China, and sometimes in the top one, which is saying something. Partly to do with geography, hemmed in by the pass to Kazakhstan between the Bogda Shan and the Tien Shan mountains, and partly to do with an antiquated coal-burning heating system for the city which commences at the end of October. It's not even a very old city, once overshadowed by Turpan, 200 km down the road and which we have already visited. It is a new lamps for old kind of a place.

It has however, the largest Han Chinese population in Xinjiang. It is the government centre and government centres tend to be run by Han Chinese. The Han form 75% of the population, with more settlers arriving daily, with the Uyghurs only 13% and in decline. Uyghurs are hopeful of getting a passport by being registered in Urumqi as it is highly unusual to get one from Kashgar, the biggest Uyghur city. Even so it is not easy for a Uyghur to get a passport. After all, who knows where they might go? Just across the border to Pakistan to become fundamentalised? Not likely—they would high-tail it for Turkey.

Three million people live here, mostly trading with Central Asia. And coughing. Here the shop signs tend to be in Mandarin with Arabic subtitles. Here people reflect their higher standard of living by driving cars rather than trikes.

Urumqi has a bloody fine Museum of the Uyghur, which not only describes all of the peoples who live in Xinjiang and their former lifestyles, it also has the mummies you read about in the first part, looking completely lifelike in a dead sort of way but most interesting. It also has some very detailed three dimensional models of deserts and mountains and stuff. Definitely worth a go if you have to go as it has really clean toilets, which is a rarity in itself, so not to be missed.

The Grand Bazaar is the largest in Central Asia. It covers three blocks wide and two blocks deep and three to four stories high. It once sold everything from nuclear parts to Kalashnikovs and AK47s. No more, for once a misguided Uyghur lad was found to be a member of Al Qaeda, the Americans immediately lost interest in the plight of the Uyghurs and asked China to join them in the war on terror, which China did with alacrity, clamping down like nobody's business on the Uyghurs due to guilt by association. Not to mention the late 1980s when Uyghurs 'caused' riots against the Han and many deaths occurred, mostly Uyghur. All in all, a downturn for Uyghur affairs and the loss of a profitable side-line for Bazaar stallholders. Now it is the clearing house for Central Asia for furs, carpets, silk, wool, Turkish clothes and an array of cheap household goods. You can get minks and sables and even polar bear skins, quite recently 'late.' There are Russians hocking stuff off, but they are avoided, being prone to drunken violence even while they are upright and who have some gangland ways about them.

Urumqi is also a rail and air hub. You can catch a train from here to Rotterdam. You can fly to Ankara in four hours. In five you can be in Europe. In other words you are equidistant from Beijing and Rome but still in China. For this and inducement reasons which we will not go into, a large number of European firms have a toehold here, VW being one, but so too GM. It has rapidly become an entrepot town, transshipping goods for China and points west, north and south. China Coal, China Gas, China Oil and China Tel are really big here. They are owned by the government, as is any business with the name China in the front. China Southern has a terminal all to itself. It is a seriously big airline and I had never heard of it until I flew with them. The seats however provide a new definition of small and unless I had travelled Premium Economy I would have had to remain standing for the duration.

Speaking of times, the whole of China operates on Beijing time. This includes Xinjiang which, if it were anywhere else on earth, would be two hours behind Beijing. But, no. These are the rules, so the Uyghurs shrug their shoulders and have their own times. They start work very early in the morning at nine, and eat at nine pm. All official clocks, however are Beijing time, as are trains and airlines, so if you are a tourist it really pays to stick to the rules.

Urumqi is a sister city with Peshawar and it is hard to understand why. The Chinese do not like the Pakistanis and their fundamentalist Madrassas just across the border, even though they are political allies at government levels, (their only other ally being North Korea.) Mainly this is from fear of incitement of the mild Uyghurs, who are Sufi Muslims. Even the Urumqi taxis will not stop for the Pakistanis, especially outside their embassy which is close by my hotel. The Uyghurs, by the way, think the Pakistani fundamentalists and their trans-border pals, the Talibani are utterly misguided and their treatment of women awful. Uyghurs, as you have probably worked out, are pro-Western. Very.

But back to the Grand Bazaar, which, apart from soaring minarets of gold, has the best pashminas and silk carpets in the world. This is according to Zibah who has an eye for these matters and who is extremely fashion conscious, being a beauty in her own right. She points out that there are no tourists here apart from me, and she is right. This is a working market for thousands of people to buy and sell on any given day. There are few if any trinkets to attract tourists. She takes me to several wedding stalls and models pashminas of unbelievable fineness for me. I splurge out for the females in my world and retire shaking to my hotel room.

Left to my own devices for dinner, I eat at the hotel restaurant. Perfectly adequate too. I have garfish cooked for me and enjoy a light beer. It is a big-city hotel with regulation lobby the size of a football field. The glass roof of the front door is being bolstered for the winter snows which have just arrived.

Musing over my day, I watch and listen to a Chinese woman in her forties playing the grand piano. Her dress-sense flawless in pastels, she plays with talentless precision. She follows the music metronomically, but devoid of expression. Two newly-weds stand in front of some steamed dumplings, dewy-eyed, fingers touching and oblivious of it, he tall and she tiny. The pianist spies them and confuses volume for sensitivity without success. I clap politely when she finishes in the hope it is terminal. I was clearly the only one listening. An expressionless nod in my direction she picks up her handbag and walks away. Her outfit is worth thousands.

From my room on the thirteenth floor I cannot see the street for smog. I have green tea and pack my bag for an early start. I must leave the hotel at six am Beijing time, which is really four, and there will be no breakfast. All the same I am excited. I have a date with some livestock at the crossroads of the old Silk Road.



My guide models a pashmina at a wedding stall. Urumqi Grand Bazaar.

Uyghur hats, a street of them to choose from.

An Interlude: On children and conundrums. Some late-night musings.

China has a one child policy. Had it for yonks. It has had the desired effect of slowing the population growth of the world's largest nation. It has also had some other consequences which may not have been intended. Here are some of them that I can see. Yeah, I know. So now he's is an expert already! But these are things you think about when you travel alone with no-one to bother at night. Indulge me a little, or move on to the next chapter.

The one child policy has enabled mum and dad to have their child, leave it with the grandparents to bring up, and head to the east to get work to support the family by remittances and the occasional [read once a year] trip home. Great. It has led to huge growth in the eastern coastal areas and some, [read the main source of] income going home to the hinterland.

But China is an agricultural nation. Hundreds of millions work the land in small groups of li—tiny plots in which they grow what the government wants plus their own sustenance and in a good year there is a little left over for sale and some cash. Trouble is that the one child policy means that there are no longer children to work the land. Trouble is too that mum and dad have left the land to work in the cities. Trouble also that there is simply no money in farming on the tiny scale of agriculture throughout China.

Consequence? Rural depopulation and a rapidly aging agricultural sector. Untended plots and declining productivity as elderly people struggle with the seasonal round of back breaking manual labour. But it gets worse. The one child has to go to school, now for nine years, so until they are fifteen or thereabouts they are not available for much farm work. Education also sets them free in terms of knowledge about the world away from the paddy. It is most likely they will head for the cities at the first opportunity, not least to be with their parents. Now they are implementing a twelve year compulsory education program which will exacerbate the loss of labour on the farm. Are they going to follow in the footsteps of their grandparents, or their own parents? What would you choose?

Farming is no longer cool in China—if it ever was. Especially if you are a girl! There are only 79 Han Chinese girls for every hundred lads, and I'm not going into why. Guess what? The girls can get choosy for the first time in Chinese history. Who are they going to choose? The farming lad who will be a peasant for the rest of his life on a tiny plot which he cannot augment? Nope. She's going to go with the one who has the dosh, and a future, maybe the house, but certainly a job with prospects. Is she going to stay in the village, given the choice? Nope again. So here we have the prospect of a significant number of young men consigned to a life of bachelorhood working on the farm, childless and getting old quickly.

So let's look at how this affects Xinjiang.

If you are a Uyghur, you are allowed two children, which people see as a blessing. Apart from that the same considerations are at work as the rest of China. With one exception. Uyghurs don't leave Xinjiang. In part it is not easy to get the permit to travel east for work, or elsewhere in Xinjiang for that matter. In part it is a reluctance of factories in Mainland China to employ Uyghurs, or any other minority, who can be seen as trouble makers. In part it is because Uyghurs are isolated in Xinjiang by their own culture. They will not or cannot eat non-Muslim food. But also they will not or cannot eat non-Uyghur food, let alone food that has been cooked by non-Uyghurs. In the end this is a self-imposed isolation.

Result? Burgeoning unemployment in a province entirely without any welfare parachutes.

Solution? Bring the industry to Xinjiang so the people can get work, pay for their children to go to school. [Yes, it surprised me too.] Save a little, look after the old people and get by. Who is doing this? The Guangdong and Shenzhen Provincial Governments have been 'encouraged' to take up huge tracts of land in Urumqi and especially Kashgar to build new industries that will lead to employment of the Uyghurs. And they are bringing their own Han Chinese people with them to be the management team and the supervisors. Interesting. Here we have state sponsored migration in true colonial style—bring out the experts [experts or ex-pats?] from

home to supervise cheap labour in remote areas, with the nice notion that everyone benefits. And so they will—for a time. After all there is insatiable demand for food in China. And Xinjiang, for all that is mostly desert, is also the centre for a lot of fruit and vegetables not to mention chillies.

In a way this is an elegant option for the government. But the option will have a similar effect on the rural hinterland. Children have to go to school. After twelve years of schooling it ain't gonna be easy to keep them down on the farm, with plots so small there is no room for expansion. The magnet is urban, not rural. Working with your hands is not the attractive option of New Zealand where farming is mechanised and highly productive and in the end profitable. Not to mention honourable. I suspect the dream of the average farm boy in Uyghurville is a job in a suit in the city, with your own electric trike. Maybe a shop.

The prognosis for farming for the Uyghurs? Amalgamations of land holdings to increase size and mechanisation enabling intensification. Happening already. Same thing has happened in New Zealand. People leaving the land will become urban workers still based on agricultural industry for their living. In the end it means fewer people on the land, whichever way you cut it.

Different story for the Kyrgyz and the Tajikis. They are still what the Uyghurs used to be—semi nomadic herders. Indeed they used to be fully nomadic until the concept of borders came around which hemmed people in and forced them to set up base somewhere for the winter. And so they do today. By late October the herders had come down from the mountains where they had followed their animals over alpine pastures, shifting their yurts and tents with them as they travelled for the five months of the growing season. In their winter houses they keep their livestock in folds overnight, stack their yak dung for fuel, ready to hunker down in their flat-roofed stone houses for the long cold winter. Every morning on the Karakoram Highway I saw old men stamping their feet as they walked out of the village with their stock, bleating and moo-ing in a yakish kind of fashion, and snorting in camelish, and off they went to forage for whatever was left of the summer pasture nearby. As often as not they were talking on their cell-phones. But not one child did I see. For they were at school. The children no longer follow the herds and flocks to the mountains—that is something for the old people to do. The children stay in the village and go to school. At least families can have two children, but families cannot continue to live the ways of old if the children are to be educated.

Can you see where this is going? Sooner or later there will be no old people to go to the mountains, with precious few of the young ones wanting to take up the life of a semi-nomad. In the short term, as is happening now, there will be some amalgamation of herds and flocks so that there can be some contract grazing of animals in the mountains. But the way of life definitely has a sunset clause on it. What do the people do all spring and summer back in the village without animals to tend? If you like the romance of nomadic herding, now is the time to go to the Pamir Mountains. But do it soon. Their yurts are hand made from felt.

The response to this in the Pamirs is to build Tashkurgan, its main village, into an industrial, tourism and transport hub for the border region, build houses for the Tajiki people to live in and industrialise the herding systems to maintain meat and wool and other agricultural outputs. That way the kids will go to school as well. Might also mean Tajikis in a tourist theme park to keep the romance going. I predict this will happen.

In my travel I saw only one tractor that looked like it might be owned by a contractor, and it had a plough on the back. The rest? Rotary hoes at best, for that's all you can use on such tiny plots, especially the irrigated ones. I saw winter wheat being planted on lots a lot smaller than my front lawn. No room for machinery or any economies of scale.

Change is coming, and it will hurt in my view. The urbanisation of the Uyghur will be followed by that of the Kyrgyz and the Tajiki. Also, within the twelve year admirable policy for minority peoples to have the same chance in education as the Han Chinese, is a strategy that all Uyghurs are aware of, and many of them dread. The children who have hitherto been educated in their own language, will now also have to learn Mandarin. From the outside this makes sense. It is the national language. No Uyghur is spoken at airports or rail stations, or the rest of China. Mandarin is the language of officialdom. Naturally therefore, the children should learn it.

But how long before that is the only language taught at school? This is a question that vexes many, not least the Council of Muslim Elders and Clerics who foresee the loss of their culture. Prime Minister Wen was informed at a forum of these worthy gentlemen recently that if the medium for education became Mandarin, the Uyghur culture would be at threat. Wen's response? The Hui people are Muslims. They speak Mandarin.

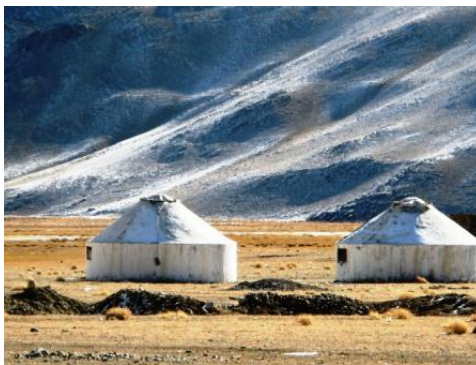
They have retained their culture. We are Chinese, so we will all speak Mandarin Chinese. In other words, if people want their culture to survive they can teach it at home.

I have the itchy feeling I've heard this before. It ain't easy to be a minority. You either adapt to the circumstances, live well but die a little. Or you don't adapt and die a little anyway, nursing grievances along the way. But I also get the feeling that the children will have a better chance than their grandparents to get on. And that is what you have to do in China.



Boys are Little Emperors, spoiled and not likely to be farmers.

Who will her parents choose as her husband?



See it now. It will not last. Pamir Plateau Kyrgyz yurts set up for grazing of yaks and camels..



Tajiki lads heading back to the fold, but for how long?

Part Four: Kashgar.

Urumqi Airport welcomes me with a search at the entrance to check-in. In the space of one hundred metres I take off my belt and shoes whilst being patted down for explosives [first time] and anything else [second time.] this includes my nether regions, the inspection performed by don't fuck-with-me-women with cold eyes. There are three passport/ID card checks even though this is an internal flight. After the easy going style of the Uyghurs, the airport is shrill, voices bark in Mandarin, nobody smiles, and it is only seven [or five!] in the morning. Once we are herded through to Departures there are hundreds of people eating packaged noodles on the run—hot water is free.

We climb steeply, gathering height to get over the mountains that surround Urumqi. The snow is charcoal grey already. Out over the Takla Makan desert, surrounded by jagged mountains that go the roof of the world—the Pamirs and the Hindu Kush. I am going there in a day or two. I am very excited for four hours even though my bum is tortured by the diagonal stance I need to assume to sit down. Then down below me like a mirage in the desert is Kashgar.

What a boisterous city. It bustles all the time. It started as a river town in the desert, the last stop before the Silk Road to Pakistan, Afghanistan and beyond to Turkey and Europe. It is an agricultural town of fruit and vegetables and cotton and wheat. Canneries line road into town. Beyond lie the mountains. Behind me the Kunlun Range and Tibet. Ahead the Pamir Mountains and the Hindu Kush, and Kyrgyz and Tajik people. Around me is dust blown in from the desert. I am in the footsteps of Marco Polo and all the Khan Kings and it is not hard to imagine them coming down out of the mountains to sojourn in this hospitable extended Uyghur caravanserai.

It is Sunday, livestock market day. It is dusty, noisy, exuberant, smelly and busy. It is everything I could have hoped for. Up to fifty thousand farmers come for hundreds of kilometres around to buy and sell camels, yaks, karakul fat-tailed sheep, Kashmiri goats [cashmere], donkeys, antelope, oxen, cows, horses. They are sold one by one where they stand. Buyer and seller put their hands together covered by their sleeves and talk with their fingers so no-one knows the final price.



There is buy and selling everywhere. Thousands of individual deals are struck. As each animal is purchased it is bundled into a trike or truck or trailer and hobbled until each farmer has what he came for. It is all over in a morning. The surrounding roads are covered in dung as the animals are driven back home if they are close, in trucks if they are not. I eat a fresh mutton pie made from naan, crusty and tasty straight out of the tandoor. Samsa. You must try it when you are there, as you assuredly will be. There are also tubs of fresh pilaf, called polo, yellow rice and glistening lamb. There are carcasses of fat-tailed sheep hanging on hooks for those who want fresh meat. It is worth visiting Kashgar just for the Sunday livestock market.

Kashgar old town has fascinating little alleyways that disappear around dark corners. They are so narrow the buildings lean into each other and are kept apart by poplar poles. Women pass fleetingly at corners, some in full robes and yashmaks. There are few windows and low doors. Children smile and want to hold my hand. There are streets of handcrafts, one street for each. In the Pot-making street stall holders bang out their pots and lids to order. I bought some hand-made metal walnut crackers. Who knows—might come in handy. There is a street for musical instruments, mostly stringed and crafted right there in the stalls. I visited one tiny shop which has been in the same family for many generations. Every type of stringed instrument, made from scratch. Music is a big part of Uyghur life. All the instruments will be sold, and the luthier will take orders.



I also see numerous mosques, some of them famous, but I'm not fussed by that kind of stuff. Mostly built by kings in love with themselves. Give me live people any day. Lunch is spicy lamb and rice with fried mushrooms coated in sesame.

I spend time wandering around the People's Park. Mao is there gazing down on his people, hand outstretched. He is wearing a heavy coat which no Uyghur could afford. He is popular in Kashgar as he brought about many developments for the people for which they thank him. The town missed most of the excesses of the seventies. They thank him for that as well.

By five pm [or three] the drums have started up and will play non-stop for a couple of hours. Pomegranates are being sold from a trike outside my hotel. I buy one and spit the seeds along with everyone else into the bin alongside the stall. I watch the scene for an hour or so. Chaotic traffic, people crossing at random, the horns of otherwise silent scooters, people strolling in the sun. In the nearby market frenetic vendors shout their wares selling everything possibly needed in a Xinjiang household. Street cafes sell kebabs. Police move people on. Young people hold hands but not in front of their parents—after all most marriages are arranged, so these must be truly liberated young ones. Buses snort and growl full to the gunnels. It is every man for himself in Xinjiang.

The hotel is tired and it is a long time since a vacuum cleaner has visited my room, but it has a bed and if I close the window it is quiet enough. The main lobby has a side room which for reasons unknown to me is full of sleeping policemen draped over couches, their rifles on the floor. The food is a buffet which is an adventure in itself. I am not sure what I ate, but it included a large bowl of prawns and squid in a hotpot swarming with chilli and what might have been bok-choy.

We leave mid-morning for the Karakorum Highway, our destination Tashkurgan, a Tajiki town and the last homely house before Pakistan. The journey is three hundred kilometres and will take all day. We stop in the last town before the mountains to buy a picnic lunch of pears and apples. Enormous trucks negotiate the crowded single street of the town which is also the main highway. They have these deep boom-box air horns that blare at the lowest possible register so that you do not so much hear them as feel them deep in your gut. Magnificent, and people sure do get out of the way. In the mountain roads the sight of trucks bearing down on you hurtling along, brake drums smoking, horns rumbling, is enough to shift the bravest or the most foolish driver, one of whom is my driver, out of the way.

In the foothills the land becomes more barren, the mountains more snow-covered. We are in Kyrgyz lands. The houses are stone with flat roofs and an adjacent fold for livestock and the men wear whitish felt hats with a conical peak. Maize dries on the roof, as does hay and fodder for the winter. Old men stand around chatting watching their flocks, following their cattle and camels for the day, seldom more than a dozen animals. The ground now is brown but I am told in spring it is green and lush. As we climb, cows give way to yaks and

camels, villages are further apart. The mountains loom above us, impossibly high, plumes of snow billowing from their peaks under a bright blue sky.

My driver is Adil, speaks no English, and probably possesses no drivers licence, which is possibly why he is petrified of the Police. He is a lazy driver, one hand on the wheel, and at the bottom spoke only. On the way to Tashkurgan he passes on blind corners, but to be fair so does everyone else. He free-wheels down the hills. Fortunately the roads are brilliant even in the narrow gorges, except where building sized stones fall on the road from above. We climb up through a gorge for more than an hour. There are four power stations being built along its length. It is narrow and tight and apart from the odd truck thundering down towards us it is awe-inspiring scenery. I am on the Karakoram Highway and it is proving everything it is cracked up to be! Almost at the top we arrive at the army post where our paperwork is inspected minutely and we are looked at severely. Our vehicle is searched for Madrassa- crazed fundamentalists. The officer asks a question about my passport. She says Xin Seelan, New Zealand. He looks at it blankly, shakes his head and passes it back to her. I am good to go. We reach a hydro lake and take a breather. We are at 2,700 metres and we need to make sure I am able to cope with the altitude.

While we do this the driver and I have a wee chat, via Zibah. We establish that he is a driver and that I am the employer. He nods at that. We will go where and when I want so long as Zibah agrees with it. He agrees with that. He will be a good driver. But of course, he smiles. Good drivers have both hands on the wheel at all times and they keep their eyes on the road. Perhaps, he says, warily. Not perhaps, Adil. Good drivers do not pass on blind corners. A good driver is not in a hurry and he never ever takes his wagon out of gear to go down hills, for verily I am frightened about an accident. Such things are the will of God, he murmurs. Not of my god, I say, as I do not have one. I believe in good drivers. Adil is lost on this narrow point of theology and may lose face if I continue, but I think the point has been made. The matter of a tip at the end of the journey comes up in conversation, as in, will there now be no tip? Gravely I suggest that one could begin on a new footing as of now, but that I will make deductions also from now. Adil is all smiles and a good driver from then on. To this day I think he believes good drivers are my gods. In the end he got his tip. 'Good Driver,' he beams at me at the airport, almost with a Kiwi accent.

I do not appear to have altitude sickness so we climb on up. The air is cold and clear, until we pass an iron ore mine and a coal mine close together, during which it is cold and dusty. We reach the pass to the Pamir Plateau at 4,700 metres. The mountains above are magnificent and seem to be just metres away. Yaks wander around foraging. The air is thin and I feel a little breathless but if I take my time I can walk around OK. The Tajiki villages are small with houses close together, each with their yak-fold, satellite dishes on some of the roofs, the smell of yak dung burning, the odd pick-up truck poking its nose out from a lean-to. Tracks of quad-bikes disappear towards the mountains. My phone has reception of course so I send a text to a mate. 'I am on the roof of the world. Before you die, come here.' He lives in Pekapeka. I am in the Pamir Mountains. Beat that Marco.

We drop slowly down to Lake Karakul. It is a jewel. There is already ice around the edges and icy cold air makes it hard to breathe. We stop for a picnic, which we have inside the wagon. I then take a walk along the edge. Early that morning Steve Tew had called to tell me the sad news that Sir Wilson Whineray had died. He had not been well for some time. My boss for six years, we never had a cross word, and although he knew his task was to cast a cold eye over my performance, and did so unblinkingly, nevertheless we became friends. Knowing I could not be there for the funeral, I had a wee service for him in my own way and threw a single cufflink into Lake Karakul for him. By this time it was well below zero and late afternoon. I bought a Kyrgyz felt hat from a lad who probably robbed me blind, but it gives me another memory of Karakul Lake.

Tashkurgan is a river town amongst parched rough grazing. The river flows intermittently and not at all in winter. Fields are irrigated and the poplars are in the last stages of losing their golden leaves. The women are sensationally dressed whenever they leave the house. Even the street cleaners have full yellow or red shawls under a pillbox hat, red skirts, knee length leather boots and carry handbags. They have red faces and look like anyone in New Zealand, Maori or pakeha and also a bit of both. Some have fair hair. They are also very traditional, and very serious about their Islam, according to Zibah, a modern, and a Uyghur.

Tashkurgan is a wild west town in every sense, yaks roam the streets, as do goats and cattle. Horses clop along the road. There are yurts between the houses. There is also a good deal of construction. This town is going

places. There are more cranes than in the whole of Auckland, yet this is a village of fewer than 50,000 people. The PLA is here in large numbers to manage the borders. Their fort is over the hill. Afghanistan is fourteen kilometres away just over there. Pakistan is a hundred kilometres away over the Karakoram Pass at 5,200 metres and just closed today for the season by ice. The road is two-laned bitumen to the border and rutted rock and shingle after that, according to fellow guests.

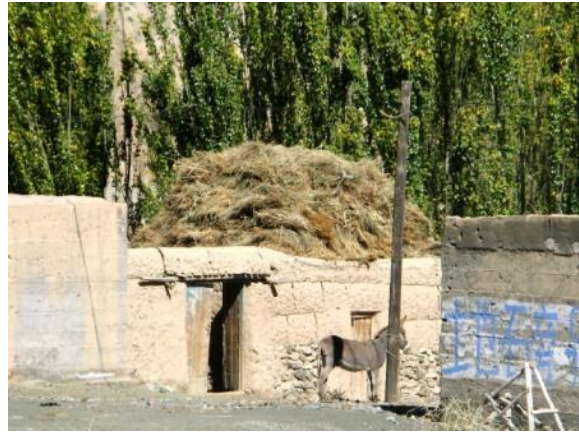
I stay in a modern guest house, The Crown, owned by a Singaporean couple. It is clean and comfortable and has become a homely haven for travellers in its short life. I give it five stars on Trip Advisor. The restaurant has a view of the mountains to die for and the menu is excellent. I ask guide and driver if they would like to join me. They are uncomfortable. They too were expecting to stay here, in the guide quarters. However they discover the chef is Han Chinese, even though the menu is Muslim. They stay elsewhere.

I have a brilliant night chatting to a party of Hong Kongers who have scintillating English and a broad view of the world. They have come to Tashkurgan for exactly the same reasons as me. I have spicy lamb, of course, and eat high altitude fish from a fish far nearby. We have a glass of beer which goes to our heads in the thin air. I sleep dreaming of Genghis Khan, who stayed here for a winter. It is hard to believe I am still in China.



The morning brings clear light and a stiff breeze. It is -17 according to the temperature dial on the wagon. Muztag rears up above us, the highest mountain in the Pamirs. It has untold glaciers. To the west lies Pakistan, the north-west Afghanistan, to the north Tajikistan. A stone fort bars the way of yesteryear to the valley that will take us back to Kashgar and Mainland China. From around here rivers flow to the Caspian and Aral Seas, to the Indian Ocean and into the Takla Makan. Wars have been fought here for millennia, mainly about mountain passes and roads for trade. Where I sat and ate apples at Karakul Lake travellers have stopped, fed their animals, drunk the water, pitched their yurts and then moved on towards mountain pass or fertile valley carrying trade on the Silk Road. I pass old men stamping their feet once more as they take their sheep out to graze. Women sweep their steps, children go to school in uniforms, their mums dropping them off on scooters. The roofs hold bright yellow maize, there is a queue for petrol at the gas station. Just like any other town at 14,000 feet in China on the Silk Road.





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