

Trouble of halting on hard salt crust.

We were fortunate enough, on the line taken for our crossing, to escape the necessity of spending a night on that portion of the sea-bed which is covered with a hard salt crust. But from what I saw of that surface I could realize how little chance there was that even hardy camels, to say nothing of other transport animals, could secure on it a minimum of rest and comfort during halts. Professor Huntington mentions how his small party had to hew down with the axe hummocks of rock-salt a foot high in order to get places smooth enough for sleeping.⁵ And Lāl Singh's party had the same trying experience at their Camp 89. Thus the precaution of spreading pieces of felt for their animals to lie down on would obviously suggest itself to wayfarers of old, when benighted on such ground, practical as Chinese are in arranging devices of this kind when travelling. The reference to this custom is also of value because it clearly establishes the fact that the ancient Lou-lan route, the only one which offered occasion for such a practice to grow up, led across the dried-up sea-bed and did not merely skirt it on the north.

Prevalence of dust haze.

What we read in Li Tao-yüan's account about the mists and clouds which rarely allow the stars and the sun to be seen in that region, is entirely in keeping with the atmospheric conditions that prevail over the whole Lop basin for the greater part of the year. The hazy skies that we experienced there between December and March are a direct result of the winds which almost constantly sweep across these great wastes. Whether blowing from the east-north-east, their most frequent direction, or from any other quarter, they necessarily carry with them fine dust, the product of ceaseless erosion carried on over the soil of the surrounding regions. This in the barren hills to the north and east and in far the greater portion of the sandy plains westwards is wholly unprotected by vegetation. During the spring and summer the region in the centre of the Lop basin is inevitably swept at frequent intervals by violent Burāns bringing thick clouds of dust, and rain or snow such as would clear the atmosphere for a time must be there of extremely rare occurrence.

Terror of lifeless waste.

That the old Chinese travellers across these dismal wastes were struck by, and made special note of, the absence of animal life is easily understood. It was impressive even for us who had already passed through a dead land in Lou-lan. This, in the times of the ancient traffic, still held life in its riverine belts of jungle, as well as in its scanty cultivated area. It is equally natural to find that the imagination of those early Chinese wayfarers peopled those forbidding wastes with 'plenty of demons and strange beings'. As I have had occasion to point out elsewhere, the same superstitious fear of the dangers from evil spirits haunting such ground clung to the southern route past the Lop basin, in the times of Hsüan-tsang and Marco Polo. This fear is as lively now as ever.⁶

Correct topography of Li Tao-yüan's account.

Coming now to the concluding remark of Li Tao-yüan's notice, we readily recognize in it definite indications of correct topographical knowledge. We have seen that the region in which the 'Town of the Dragon' was located comprised the whole of the ancient salt-encrusted sea-bed and the desert ground adjacent to its shores. Keeping this in view, it is easy to prove the correctness of the statement that this region 'touches, on the western side, Shan-shan and connects, on the eastern side, with the Three Sands'. A glance at the map shows that the westernmost extension of the sea-bed reaches the present Kara-koshun marshes and therefore the vicinity of the Mirān tract (Map No. 30. c, d. 1), where one of the chief settlements of ancient Shan-shan was situated.

'Three Sands' located.

As regards the 'Three Sands', I have proved, I think, elsewhere that the locality meant is that which in the *Wei lio's* account of the 'route of the centre' is referred to as the desert of the 'Three

⁵ See Huntington, *Pulse of Asia*, p. 251.

⁶ Cf. *Serindia*, i. p. 293; ii. pp. 560 sqq. See also Yule-Cordier, *Marco Polo*, i. pp. 196 sq., 201 sq.