

‘crossed the Salt Lake’, but on reaching the confines of Ta-yüan ‘consisted of not more than a few thousand men’. Finally on its return to Tun-huang after a fruitless campaign of two years ‘only one or two out of every ten soldiers were left’.²⁰ A fresh effort was then made under the Emperor’s orders to repair this failure. When the newly formed army left Tun-huang in 102 B.C., we are told by Ssü-ma Ch’ien that it ‘consisted of sixty thousand men, not counting those who followed as carriers of secret supplies of extra provisions; a hundred thousand oxen; more than thirty thousand horses; donkeys, mules, and camels numbering myriads, and a commissariat well stocked with provisions, besides arms and cross-bows. All parts of the Empire had to bestir themselves in contributing offerings’.²¹ For the transport of provisions intended for this huge expeditionary force all minor offenders ‘from the whole Empire were made to serve as carriers, while ‘wagoners with their carts went in endless lines to Tun-huang’.

Heavy losses incurred.

As the Chinese army on its arrival at the capital of Ta-yüan is reported by Ssü-ma Ch’ien to have consisted of thirty thousand men, the numbers with which it and its attendant host are said to have started by the Lou-lan route are probably not greatly exaggerated. But the losses by which ultimate success was purchased in the vast adventure were proportionate to these efforts; for we read that ‘when the army [on its return] passed the Yü-mên Gate, there were left of it scarcely more than ten thousand men and a thousand horses’.²²

Triumph of Chinese organized enterprise.

It is hard to form an adequate conception of the enormous scale of the supply and transport arrangements which such enterprises along the Lou-lan route must have called for, or of the extent of human suffering which these terrible desert wastes must have witnessed. But since the substantial correctness of the contemporary record left by the ‘Herodotus of China’ is not subject to doubt, we must recognize in this conquest of all the formidable difficulties of the desert route one more proof of that wonderful power of organization which likewise enabled Chinese leaders to triumph over nature’s greatest obstacles in other regions and other epochs.

²⁰ See Hirth, ‘The Story of Chang K’ien’, *J.A.O.S.*, xxxvii. p. 110.

²¹ Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 111 sq.

²² See *ibid.*, p. 115.