

The morning was cold, but calm, when we resumed our journey. In contrast to the previous days the course to-day was practically S. To the S and SW of Ma-lien-ching-tzu stands a solitary and rather larger mountain at a distance of a few miles. We reached and almost skirted its eastern point after crossing a stretch of sandy clay soil. The road crossed a small hill running eastward from the foot of the mountain. The ground here consisted of a mixture of gravel and sand. In the E, SE, S and SW the plain seemed to be bounded by mountains. When we reached the top of the southern foot of the mountain on the right, we espied an opening due W with level ground. The telegraph poles ran due S until they were lost in the distance. About 12 miles from Ma-lien-ching-tzu we came to and crossed a group of moundshaped mountains with a surface of black gravel except in those places, where the grey surface of the rock protruded. S of the group of mountains, a mile in width, we found ourselves again in the same plain. On the left a long, lesser mountain ridge came into sight, running at an angle to our road. The vegetation had become more and more sparse in the course of the day's journey. There were long stretches without a trace of vegetation, and when grass appeared, it was mostly thorny plants that would not even satisfy the indiscriminating stomach of a camel. In a couple of places white deposits of salt could be seen. The road is firm and good for the greater part. It was only in crossing the group of mountains that it was stony and for a couple of short stretches deep and sandy.

We met rather less than a dozen intrepid settlers from Honan. One of them was at least 50 years of age. An army transport of 16 arbahs enlivened the dreary plain for a short time. It was accompanied by a tungling and his wife and child and a dozen ludziun troops from Chihli. Ta-chien-tzu is not far from the ridge of hills referred to on the left. It consists of 4 sarais. There are 3 wells (saliferous water) and a spring with good water. The mails are carried by a post of 6 men from the garrison at Ansi. Both here and at Ma-lien-ching-tzu the sarais were very bad. Snow from November to March, up to 1/2 arshin (?) in depth. Rain is very rare, at most once or twice a year during the spring and summer. Easterly burans are common in spring.

The road resumed its SE direction and continued across the same plain, which rose slightly southward. The soil was sandy clay. Tufts of reeds and spiky grass occurred at rare intervals. About 4 1/2 miles from the sarai we crossed the northernmost of three low mountain spurs coming from the east and running close to each other. The two others do not come up to the road. A little S of the last lie the ruins of Sha-chuan-tzu near a spring, about 7 miles from Ta-chien-tzu. In the S a hill coming from the W was visible and the road took a distinctly ESE course until we had rounded its easternmost point. The same plain continues southward, but now in a tongue, 1—1 1/2 miles wide, enclosed in the W, S and E by mountains. 2—3 miles from Sha-chuan-tzu we left this unusually long plain behind us and were among the mountains in the S. For 2—3 miles the road wound between the long hills covered with black gravel and small stones. Then for another 2—3 miles over another small plain and then again mountains that continued until we reached the Hung-liu-yuan-tzu sarai. This lies in a small open space, enclosed on all sides by the same small, black hills that seem to rise up, one behind the other, without cessation. Three poor sarais, a spring