

It is difficult to believe that under the political conditions prevailing from the ninth to the twelfth century the Tarim basin could have played so important a part as a channel for the interchange of cultural influences between Western Asia and China as before. It was a time when China, under the weakening rule of the T'ang and then later under the Sung dynasty, was obliged to maintain towards Central Asia a policy of passive defence if not of rigid seclusion.

The phenomenal rise of the Mongols under the great Chingiz Khan, another Napoleon, in the first quarter of the thirteenth century brought about vast changes in political conditions throughout Asia. By the time he died in Kansu, A.D. 1227, his astonishing conquests had brought all countries from the Black Sea to the Yellow river under direct control of the Mongol 'Great Khan'. The operations continued by his immediate successors ended some thirty years later in uniting the whole of China under the same Mongol dynasty which by its several branches held sway over all Central Asia as far as Persia, and over a great part of Eastern Europe as well. The establishment of one sovereignty across the whole of Asia again cleared the way for direct intercourse and trade between China, the Near East and Europe.

For more than a century the trade routes to the north and south of the T'ien-shan saw an undisturbed flow of traffic. The accounts preserved to us of envoys, traders and travellers from Europe then seeking far-off Cathay tell us a good deal of those routes and of the ground which they crossed. None of these accounts, in accuracy of detail and human interest, approach the immortal record of Marco Polo, the greatest of mediaeval travellers.

The Mongol dominion over China which Marco Polo still