

CHAPTER IX

TRACKING THE ANCIENT ROUTE ACROSS THE DRIED-UP LOP SEA

IN the next chapter I shall give an account of the long desert journey which in February and March 1907 brought me by Marco Polo's route from Lop to Tun-huang and led to the discovery of the ancient Chinese border wall near this westernmost oasis of China proper. This journey had allowed me to locate with certainty the eastern starting-point of that forbidding desert route to Lou-lan, which for centuries had served China's earliest intercourse with Central Asia and the West. But an attempt to trace it right through was possible only from the side of Lou-lan. From there also it was bound to prove a formidable task. So I had to wait until seven years later when my third expedition allowed me to undertake it.

On January 8, 1914, I arrived at Charkhlik. Once again the little oasis had to serve as the base for my explorations in the Lop desert. But my difficulties were greatly increased by an event which, as a small but significant result of the troubles caused in Turkistan by the Chinese revolution, may receive here brief mention. Before I started on New Year's Eve from Charchan for Charkhlik, I learned that a band of Chinese 'revolutionaries', in other words, gamblers