

like, when he tries to gain his company again he will hear spirits talking, and will suppose them to be his comrades. Sometimes the spirits will call him by name; and thus shall a traveller oftentimes be led astray so that he never finds his party. And in this way many have perished. Sometimes the stray travellers will hear as it were the tramp and hum of a great cavalcade of people away from the real line of road, and taking this to be their own company they will follow the sound; and when day breaks they find that a cheat has been put on them and that they are in an ill plight. Even in the daytime one hears those spirits talking. And sometimes you shall hear the sound of a variety of musical instruments, and still more commonly the sound of drums. Hence in making this journey 'tis customary for travellers to keep close together. All the animals, too, have bells at their necks, so that they cannot easily get astray. And at sleeping time a signal is put up to show the direction of the next march. So thus it is that the desert is crossed."

It did not need my journey to convince me that what Marco here tells us about the risks of the desert was but a faithful reflex of old folklore beliefs he must have heard on the spot. Sir Henry Yule has shown long ago that the dread of being led astray by evil spirits haunted the imagination of all early travellers who crossed the desert wastes between China and the oases westwards. Fa-hsien's above-quoted passage clearly alludes to this belief, and so does Hsüan-tsang, as we have seen, where he paints in graphic words the impressions left by his journey through the sandy desert between Niya and Charchan.

Thus, too, the description we receive through the Chinese historiographer, Ma-tuan-lin, of the shortest route from China towards Kara-shahr, undoubtedly corresponding to the present track to Lop-nor, reads almost like a version from Marco's book, though its compiler, a contemporary of the Venetian traveller, must have extracted it from some earlier source. "You see nothing in any direction but the sky and the sands, without the slightest trace of a road; and travellers find nothing to guide them but the bones of men and beasts and the droppings of