

showed plainly that the art of fortification, as seen in the extant towns of this region, had practically remained unchanged since T'ang times or probably even an earlier period. But, as a peculiar feature possibly accounted for by local conditions, it deserves to be mentioned that the town possessed two walls facing east, the inner built at a distance of about 200 yards from the outer. The latter had to bear the full force of erosion and was traceable only as a line of badly decayed segments. The inner had suffered many breaches, but its massive foundations were still continuous and the bastions and gate recognizable. Is it possible that the inner east wall was raised for protection when the outer had been reduced by the relentless wind to a condition beyond hope of repair or defence? The shrinkage in population which must have long preceded abandonment might also have recommended this expedient.

However this may be, there was evidence that desolation had come over this little town, not at once, but as a slow, lingering death. On the top of the débris mounds emerging above the drift sand I found remains of poorly built dwellings manifestly of later date, and statements of villagers, whom curiosity drew out from the hamlets of Ch'iao-tzū to watch my proceedings, indicated that some of these had been temporarily tenanted even within memory of man. Herdsmen grazing their ponies on the marshy steppe northward used to seek shelter there against the icy blasts of the winter. Even at the present day the ruined town saw temporary residents in the shape of people coming to collect saltpetre from the soil once occupied by buildings. In more than one place at the foot of the west wall I saw the little smoke-begrimed caves which these humble folk had dug out for quarters.

In front of the largest there rose, on what was plainly a worked-out rubbish heap, a tiny mud shrine such as I had often seen near detached farms or even by the side of fields in the oases. Sticks of pine wood, commonly burned for incense, lay on the miniature altar, evidence that this modest sanctuary still saw worship. But, luckily, no religious scruples had prevented Kao Ta-lao-ye, our active