

tracks practicable on the east and west of it, had formed an important line of communication to the oases on both sides of the T'ien-shan and to the Tarim Basin. In fact, since the more direct route from Tun-huang to the region north of Lop-nor had to be abandoned after the fourth century A.D., this Northern road became practically the main channel for trade and military operations alike.

So as we passed from one wretched little road-side station to the other, with its mud-built hovels, scanty well, tiny post of soldiers, and occasional road-side temple (Fig. 257), it was of interest to observe conditions of traffic which could have changed but little since old times. The difficulties of getting a sufficiency of reed straw, and in places even of water, for a large number of animals must always have hampered military movements along this line. I could therefore appreciate the efforts it must have cost the Chinese, after the crushing of the last great Tungan rebellion, to assemble at Hami the large force which overawed and quickly extinguished Yakub Beg's rebel dominion in Turkestan. Without the retention of Hami as a *point d'appui* the task might have proved impossible even for such an organizer as Tso Tsung-t'ang. At the same time my journey through a desert which still possessed occasional wells and some scattered grazing allowed me to realize better how in ancient days parties of raiding Huns could push their way south for attacks on the Tun-huang *Limes* before the desert of the western Pei-shan became wholly impassable through desiccation.

To Chiang-ssü-yeh this weary desert journey recalled associations of a more personal nature. At the wretched station, appropriately named 'K'u-shui' after its more than usually brackish water, he related quite humorously how he had been returning to his native Hu-nan some nineteen years before, and how his travelling companion had here fallen ill and died. He packed up the corpse in what felts he could raise at these hovels and took it along in his cart to An-hsi. He had previously performed the funeral rites and taken the precaution to burn a well-penned prayer to the dead man's spirit, asking him to preserve the corpse in fair condition for a week and to prevent a breakdown of