

If we except the statement about the extent of the region, which it is impossible to check as the direction and limits of measurement are not definitely indicated,³⁸ and make due allowance for Chinese faith in the existence of 'demons and strange beings', still as robust now as ever, every point of this description is fully supported by the observations I made on that trying journey of ten days by which in 1914 I traced the line of the ancient Chinese route to Lou-lan where it passed through, or skirted, the great salt-encrusted sea-bed.³⁹ We have there a perfectly correct description of the hard crumpled-up crust of salt covering the whole bottom of the ancient dried-up Lop Sea across and along which the Chinese route to Lou-lan led. The big cakes and hummocks of hard salt which compose the surface of this vast, dismal expanse, and show below it in the innumerable cracks and fissures, are just as the old Chinese account graphically describes them.⁴⁰ Without the precaution of spreading felts, which wayfarers of old, benighted on such ground, were evidently accustomed to resort to, not even hardy camels, and still less any other domestic animals, could find a minimum of rest and comfort during halts. The constant winds blowing across these great wastes, especially from the east-north-east, and carrying with them fine dust, the product of ceaseless erosion, must make the hazy skies we experienced there in February and March a regular feature almost all the year round. Later in the spring and during the summer Burāns with their thick clouds of dust must be frequent. The total absence of animal life on and around the salt-encrusted dry sea-bed was striking and impressive even for us who came from the dead land of Lou-lan.

Route
through
salt-en-
crusted old
sea-bed.

Li Tao-yüan's notice concludes with the following instructive remarks: '[The region in which is found the Town of the Dragon] touches, on the west, Shan-shan 鄯善 and connects, on the east, with the Three Sand Deserts 三沙. It constitutes the northern limit of the lake. This is why the P'u-ch'ang [lake] also bears the name of the Marsh of Salt 鹽澤.' I have already pointed out in a note that the 'Three Sand Deserts' obviously correspond to the desert of the 'Three Ridges Sands' 三隴沙 which the *Wei lio* mentions as being passed, at their northern extremity, by the central route.⁴¹ The place meant is the belt of high dunes crossed by the caravan track from Tun-huang, a short distance north-east of Bēsh-toghrak. From this point to the west as far as Lou-lan there extends a well-defined region, that portion of the great Lop depression which contains only wastes of dried-up salt lake and bare clay, fringed by the Kuruk-tāgh glacis. This region is correctly described in Li Tao-yüan's notice as forming the northern border of the P'u-ch'ang lake, i.e. that portion of the old Lop-nōr marshes which, at the period from which his information dates, still held water, at least in places. That this portion has undergone considerable shrinkage within historical times through the progress of desiccation is a belief which I share with Professor Huntington. But the question is not one which calls for examination here.

Region of
Dragon
Town
located.

³⁸ If we may assume that the extent of a thousand li was intended to represent the distance from the easternmost edge of the habitable Lou-lan area to the spot where the ancient route passed the northernmost point of the 'Three Sand Deserts' (I take these to be identical with the desert of the 'Three Ridges Sands' of the *Wei lio*; see above, pp. 418 sq., and below, chap. xiv. sec. ii), the measurement is remarkably accurate. From my Camp xcix near the last ruin traced on the Lou-lan side (*L.J.*) to Camp cxii in the sandy belt north-east of Bēsh-toghrak, where I place the passage of the 'Three Ridges Sands', the aggregate of my marches along the line of the ancient Chinese route as measured by the cyclo-

meter amounted to 230 miles. This corresponds closely to 1,000 li, taking the mile as equal to 5 li, which on level desert ground I have found an ordinarily correct estimate.

³⁹ Cf. my *Third Journey of Exploration*, *G.J.*, xlviii, pp. 127 sqq.

⁴⁰ For a graphic description of the salt-encrusted sea-bottom where Prof. Huntington crossed it further south, cf. *Pulse of Asia*, pp. 251 sq.; also the photograph reproduced in the frontispiece of that work.

⁴¹ Cf. above, note 38 and p. 418; Chavannes, *T'oung-pao*, 1905, p. 529.