## CONTENTS

| ONE | THE ROAD TO TURFAN | 13 |
| TWO | BEYOND THE NORTH WIND | 30 |
| THREE | URUMCHI | 57 |
| FOUR | TO THE WALLS OF KARA-KHOJA | 79 |
| FIVE | THE YEARS BETWEEN | 99 |
| SIX | RED TARTARY | 120 |
| SEVEN | KASHGAR | 141 |
| EIGHT | OASES OF THE SOUTH | 161 |
| NINE | BENEATH THE ROOF OF THE WORLD | 181 |
| TEN | IN THE MOUNTAINS OF HEAVEN | 200 |
| ELEVEN | THE DRAGONS OF LORD SHEH | 225 |
| ENVOI | LEAVING HAMI | 245 |
| APPENDIX | SINKIANG POPULATION FIGURES | 248 |
| | BOOKS AND REFERENCES | 249 |
| | INDEX | 253 |
ILLUSTRATIONS

YARKAND: THE CLOTH MARKET
THE WALLS OF ANCIENT KARAKHOJA
THE ROCK TEMPLES OF BEZEKLIK
PEASANT OF KARAKHOJA VILLAGE
TURFAN: PEASANTS IN NEWLY-FORMED CO-OPERATIVE
STUDENTS AT SINKIANG INSTITUTE, URUMCHI:
  OSMAN — A KHOTAN UIGHUR (top left)
  ASIYA — AN ILI UZBEK (top right)
  MAITI — AN ALTAI KAZAKH (bottom left)
  A HAN MECHANIC (bottom right)
KASHGAR: MARKET DAY
KASHGAR MARKET
KASHGAR OASIS: A 'RICH PEASANT'
KASHGAR PEDLAR
KASHGAR: BIRDS FOR SALE
KASHGAR: BAZAAR
KEMBERNISSA, STAR OF THE KASHGAR DANCE ENSEMBLE
KASHGAR: COVERED STREET
KASHGAR: WOMEN'S LITERACY SCHOOL
KASHGAR PEASANTS: IMPROMPTU DANCE
THE MAN WITH THE TAMBOURINE
YARKAND: EMBROIDERER
YARKAND: HATTERS' CO-OPERATIVE
YARKAND: CHILDREN
ILLUSTRATIONS

YARKAND: CO-OPERATIVE COMMITTEE facing page 144
ILI: NEW GIRLS' HIGH SCHOOL
THE KASHGAR DANCE ENSEMBLE
KIRGHIZ STOCKBREEDER: BOSTON TEREK

KIRGHIZ YURTS 145
KASHGAR PAMIR: KIRGHIZ NOMADS 192
KIRGHIZ LOCAL GOVERNMENT OFFICER
KAZAKH STOCKBREEDER: TIENTHAN

KAZAKHS AT BALAK-SU 193
KAZAKH WOMEN: BALAK-SU 208
KAZAKH FIELD HOSPITAL PATIENTS
TEKES: CATTLE TOWN

SPRING WISDOM, THE MIDWIFE OF TEKES COUNTY 209

MAP

CHINA'S FAR NORTH-WEST facing page 256
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This part of Chinese Central Asia I have usually called Sinkiang; but sometimes I have called it Chinese Turkestan or Eastern Turkestan, or even — the name has some credit in romance, if none in geography — High Tartary. They are all one and the same place: its proper name, since 1955, is the Sinkiang-Uighur Autonomous Region of the Chinese People’s Republic.

The English spelling of Uighur and Kazakh and other Turkic names — taken from a modified Arabic script — is of course according to taste, and I have used mine: Chinese names I have sometimes written by the Wade convention, and sometimes not. The photographs are my own.
This book is dedicated
with affection

to

TSE YUN

staunch friend of many miles
CHAPTER ONE

THE ROAD TO TURFAN

Nothing was known of the country, it was hidden in mystery far beyond the Himalaya.

SIR FRANCIS YOUNGHUSBAND

I

After leaving Urumchi I went down to the oasis of Turfan; and I fell in love with the country.

This happened to me while climbing the road that goes up through the Celestial Mountains and winds down their southern flank to the desert of Takla Makan. And I suppose that is why this journey through Chinese Turkestan seems always to have begun along the road to Turfan, winding in the summer air between the granite and the snow, although it was not a true beginning but only a link in many travels, many meetings.

It is a road that echoes with the marching of forgotten men. History comes out of a long silence in this country at the world's back door; but it is good history and strong, once you have caught the stir and glitter of it, and it glows with the dark authentic splendour of unpolished antique gold. This broad pass of stones is one of the grand corridors of man. Beneath the wide eagles of High Asia, this small road has carried men and caravans for centuries past numbering, back and forth between Eastern Asia and Western Asia, China and the Mediterranean. It runs like a bright vein upon the shadowed cliffs.

Tse Yun and I had come a weary way to reach it; but now our intended resting-place was only fifty miles ahead, and we could make a good twenty-five miles an hour in the Pobeda (Polish made) they had lent us in Urumchi. So we stopped at Davanshin, near the top of the pass, to ease ourselves and enjoy
the pleasures of arrival. I think we should have stopped in any case, though, for all the books I had read about Chinese Turkestan seemed to come eventually to this high place, to the ‘city of the pass’, where a fort of mud was said to hold the gullet of the Tien Shan that channels men and goods between Middle Asia and the Chinese borderlands. And there it was upon its mound of clay; but the country was at peace, and now its molting crenellated walls were deserted but for rooks and jackdaws, while donkeys groaned and pissed where soldiers, fearfully, had stopped walking seven years before.

Camels came sloping up the pass in line ahead. The people in Davanshin said they would be carrying cotton from Kashgar, a thousand miles eastward; they would have been weeks on the road. They had followed the interminable trail along the southern feet of the Tien Shan, of those Celestial Mountains whose tops and ridges really seem to lift the sky, and steered through the oasis cities of Aqsu and Kucha and Karashahr, and threaded themselves among the black rocks of the Toqsun gorges, and tramped with forward-nodding straining necks upward to the stones of the pass. Tomorrow they would be in Urumchi, their journey’s end; but then, after a while, they would go back to Kashgar with consumer goods from China proper, with cloths and cooking-pots for the ladies of the south, lumps of iron for the smithies of Khotan, garden rakes and ketman blades and half a hundred other things that were not yet manufactured in those distant parts.

Their drivers kept off the road wherever they could, partly for the comfort of their beasts and partly because they feared the heavy transport lorries that were pounding up and down the road for all the hours of daylight. These drivers were the last of the professional camelmen of Inner Asia, a ragged sturdy crew of half a dozen, that I saw, who kept pretty much to themselves and spent during their journey, or so it was complained by the shopmen of Davanshin, as little as they could: no doubt, of course, because that was all they had to spend. Such camel caravans no longer cross the Gobi.
Davanshin has the glowering attraction that belongs to mountain strongholds, at any rate when you see them from far off; but on close inspection it is bleak and bare and squalid, and looks as though the storms of war had repeatedly stripped it in generations past, which of course they had; and now it owes whatever glory it possesses to a superb position beneath snow meadows that lie along the summits of the Tien Shan. Yet it is after Davanshin, southward and downward to the desert, that the beauty of Chinese Turkestan begins really to unfold: then the traveller’s way is one of scenic drama.

For this is not an everyday or easy beauty. Made to be loved or loathed, this is the take-it-or-leave-it beauty of a great and savage wilderness: of crags and jagged rocks and blue sky above, and of sands beneath that melt far off into a sullen mist turning from red to violet as the day proceeds, and breathing out heat like the mouth of a furnace. For all these contrasts, Chinese Turkestan must surely rank among the most handsome and exciting countries in the world.

Beyond Davanshin, descending now, there is a black-throated gorge; and then the road comes out high above a sweltering gravel plain that slides, its skyline trembling with the desert heat, down into the empty sands of Takla Makan. This prospect is tremendous. Straight ahead, but sloping away in mirage after sky-reflecting mirage, the gravel plain seems to glow so hot that dust-flames leap and lick the ultimate spurs of the Tien Shan as they wade down into the desert, and make them burn with dull red fire. Yet high up on the western side, and astonishingly near in this chancy light, there lie the pure white snows of the peaks beyond Bogdo Ola. They preside serenely over the suffocating sand, so far below them and yet so close, and above the small red hills and the unseen cities of Turfan and Luktshin and distant Qomul.

These white mountains and red deserts are the framework of humanity in Chinese Turkestan. It is a tough country; it has made a tough people.
And this is also where, on going down the glacis of the Tien Shan into the smoking desert, one may begin to grasp the size and structure of the country.

This is the middle of Asia. From north to south, this is the halfway mark between the Arctic Ocean and the shores of southern India: from east to west, the long link that clasps Persia and Afghanistan and Kashmir at one end, and China at the other. It lies beyond Tibet.

It is very large: 600,000 square miles, or twice the size of Texas, or Germany and France and Italy put together; and one-sixth of all of China. Shaped like an oval bowl a thousand miles long, it consists largely of a desert, called Takla Makan, that is really a westward extension of the Gobi. This desert is encircled by tall mountains. On every side but one, the eastern side where the sands of Takla Makan flow into the sands of Gobi, these mountains march round their desert in unrelieved procession. There is nothing else like it on earth. Along the north, for more than a thousand miles, the guardian summits are the Tien Shan, dividing Chinese from Soviet Central Asia; along the west there is the sudden wall of the Pamir, barring out Tadjikistan and Afghanistan beyond it; and where the Pamir end the Karakorum, curving south, begin; and where the Karakorum end, high on this Tibetan rooffree of the world, the Kun Lun Shan begin, and the Kun Lun Shan and the Altyn Tagh — if one can still imagine those ghostly summits in all their line of march, one unendingly behind another — reach back to the plains of China.

Inward from these mountains a few rivers flow, Yarkand darya and Kizil darya and the rest, and lose themselves in the desert. They come to no good; but they leave some good behind them. Wherever they flow from the mountains and join the sands of Takla Makan they allow irrigation and hence cultivation. Half a hundred middle-sized oases, and many small ones, have long sustained humanity upon this
desert-circling fringe. Some of them were established as early as neolithic times. They became centres of ancient civilization. They grew into posting cities that linked together the two ends of the Ancient World. Their known history, going back to the third century before Christ, is neither small nor ragged.

This narrow belt of cultivation between the foot of the mountains and the uninhabitable bowl of desert is now occupied by some four-fifths of the five million people who live in Chinese Turkestan. These oasis-living people are the Uighurs, and they are mainly peasants. Above them and in strong contrast to them, living in the mountain valleys and amid high summer pastures, there dwell other kinds of people, although they too, like the Uighurs, are mainly of Turkic origin and language branch. These are stock-breeding nomads, Kazakh and Kirghiz and Uzbek and Tatar and a non-Turkic people called Tadjik; and altogether they number about three-quarters of a million.

For the last hundred years or so these peasants and nomads of High Tartary have had, to put it mildly, a stiff time of it. Little was known of them; and what was known was far from promising. A few bold Westerners penetrated the country in the second half of the nineteenth century, mainly in the interests of Russian or British political and military intelligence; but their records are scanty. Until Younghusband wrote the account of his famous journey of 1887 from Peking to Kashmir, little public knowledge came from these adventures. Younghusband, true enough, went through without much trouble: others before him had been less fortunate. Schlagentweit, coming in from Kashmir, had been murdered; so had Hayward. Dalgleish, after accompanying Carey on ‘one of the most adventurous and daring journeys that has ever been made in Central Asia, a journey right round Chinese Turkestan and into the very heart of Tibet’, was to suffer the same fate. So would the French explorer, Dutreuil de Rhins. The only considerable Western traveller to have survived in Sinkiang, before
Younghusband’s time, had been his uncle, Robert Shaw, whom the imperial government in Delhi had sent as British political agent to a lord of Kashgaria called Yakub Beg.

Close on Younghusband’s heels there came the Swedish explorer, Sven Hedin; and after Hedin, Aurel Stein, and after Stein a great many archaeologists from Russia and Germany and France and Japan. Later on there were new stories of the country from travellers who managed to overcome more or less appalling obstacles to the getting into Sinkiang and the getting out again. Yet all these reports, for one reason or another, said little of the people.

The people remained unknown. For this the principal reason lay in the sheer difficulties of travel: so busy were they, these old travellers, at the dogged task of moving from A to B, deceiving high officials, corrupting low ones, dodging warlords, sidestepping peasant rebellions, and working day and night merely to survive, that they had neither time nor opportunity to throw more than casual glances at the people among whom they travelled. Perhaps they also lacked the will: either they were plotting mountains, counting Russians, or collecting antiquities, and the local populations stood like shadows in the background. So that the people emerge in nearly all these travellers’ tales as grey and white figures that are never more than faintly seen. They are in fact a brilliant people in manners and in dress; but their brilliance regularly paled, it would seem, before the lurid frightfulness of travel through this land.

III

On that same leg of my journey, going down from Urumchi, Tse and I and various companions (for travel in Sinkiang tends to be a communal affair) reached Turfan before nightfall, and put up outside the city wall in a fine garden, well watered and with poplar groves sheltering a clean little guesthouse, that had once been the property of one of the lords of Turfan but was now a State farm. The choice had not been mine: with an eager
Anglo-Saxon misapplication of energy I had tried to stay inside the city wall — inside the bazaar, as the shoptined centre of any Sinkiang oasis is generally called — for it had seemed to me that having come so far I ought to be right at the heart of things, and the heart, I thought, must be somewhere near the centre. Moreover I was tired with much travel, and so inclined to be crotchety; and annoyed because there was nowhere else, they said, where one could stay.

Tse, for all that, would have none of this bazaar stuff; and he was quite right. The heart of an oasis, he pointed out, was not at the centre but along the periphery: that is where people liked best to live and work and sleep. I understood this next morning, soon after five o'clock, when clear light filtered through the pale foliage of apple saplings aloft on slender trunks, and small refreshing streams ran guttering beside them into the neighbouring poplar grove. When things go well and people are well together, life in an oasis cannot help reminding you of some kind of earthly paradise: the shade of slender trees and the sound of murmuring water, the pale greenness of it all, are a miracle of pleasure after the baleful sand and heat outside. What in cool latitudes might soon reduce itself to a miserable garden and a muddy brook is here, thanks to the bewitching sun, a kind of rural heaven.

And everyone, it seems, is up and about soon after five, tooth brushing and face washing and throat clearing and so on, squatting side by side where skilful irrigation has made the water of a stream well up into a small fountain. Already, in this grateful morning light, a blue-clad study group is forming in the garden beyond the inner wall: half a dozen people are reading a newspaper to each other. I stroll past a girl who sits beside the water of the stream: her face gleams pink as she nods good morning, and she rises to her feet, leaving her toothbrush and flannel in the washing bowl she has, and walks over to a young man who is reading by himself, astride upon a stool in the middle of a patch of fallow. She is Chinese, perhaps a girl from the coast of the Yellow Sea three thousand miles away;
but already she is an oasis-dweller with a proper respect for the morning and the evening, and a weary distrust of all those boiling nightmare hours that fill the middle of the day, especially at Turfan.

The evenings, if possible, are even more consoling. After nightfall in Turfan, when Tse and I were there, an enormous saffron moon would mount the sky as though unseen hands were pushing it up from somewhere not a dozen miles away. Towards it you stroll into the inner garden and then beyond the inner wall into the outer garden; and now the heart of this oasis beats with a rustle of wind in the poplars and the splashing of frogs as they plump into the brook, with the small swirl of water into side canals leading into gardens where subdued voices talk lazily over a last cigarette: while above them pointed poplars stand in a scissor-cut frieze across the star-filled sky. Perhaps all this is why the Uighur people — the people of Turfan for a thousand years and more — have a pleasure-loving sensual reputation. Perhaps the reputation is deserved: I rather think it is.

They have in any case — and Turfan was our introduction to it — a genius for producing the poetic moment. Out of their dust and squalor they can easily emerge as heroes, lovers, men of giant stature. They walk in the streets of an evening, and they are squalid and have nothing but their small daily lives; and then a singer goes by with a two-stringed guitar, and everyone is suddenly transformed. Men and women come up behind him and follow him; they stop when he stops; they look aside when he looks aside; they sit on a bench when he sits on a bench, quietly, respectfully, thankfully, because this man has the keys of another world, of a world where dreams and reality somehow meet. There is, moreover, nothing so good as a guitar for killing boredom.

All that is part of the grand Islamic tradition. The Arabs have the same faculty for strewing stars about their feet. And although the Uighurs of Chinese Turkestan are not at all the same people as the Arabs of North Africa, it remains true that
a common loyalty to Islam has given them a remarkably similar pattern of life. The principal mosque of Turfan is a poor affair of wood and peeling plaster with nothing of the majesty and grandeur of the mosques of the West; yet against a lurid sunset its moon-cupped minarets will yield no glory to those that hang above the Golden Horn. I imagine it was always like this. One needs only to read such careful Arab realists as Ibn Battutah, who wrote six hundred years ago of travels half across the world, to understand the venerable age of this tradition: 'In Fez, too, I ended my travels, for I had assured myself that of all countries it is the most beautiful. The poet has truly said of it:

Ask me my proof:
Why in the west countries you find the sweetest, best?
'Tis this: Hence rides the full orb'd moon,
And thither hastes the sun at noon.'

This quality in Islamic life, oasis life, of lifting the ordinary into the extraordinary, of making much of little, of turning prose into poetry, was a comfort in the swelter of Turfan. And it furnished links between Turkestan and less exotic places. On a visit to Algeria I had once gone to Tlemcen, which is the finest city of the western part of that country, and seen the famous shrine of Sidi Boumédine. This is not really an impressive structure, although it contains some good workmanship and has the patina of history upon it: but here, most clearly, one could glimpse the operation of this magic quality in Arab life. One could see how fine and cool and full of comfortable promise that distant tower, with its shadow and its fountain, must have been for a man come painfully out of the desert or the windy coastlong Tell. Arab poetry speaks continually of fountains and hills and shadows, and therefore of beautiful women, just because such things and such women are rare and always will be rare; and Uighur poetry, born in a land that is physically not much different from the land of the Arabs, but is also poor and dusty and dangerously
near to sorrow, is much the same, as many of its ballads show:

The waters of Karakhoja
Flow from shaded gardens:
And the dark-browed beautiful woman
Lights the flame of love in my heart.
My love, did you come to solace me?
Or did you come to scorch me with this flame?
Lying on your bosom
Oh my love!
I have lost my soul...

Fountains and shadow may be rare enough in these parts; but honesty compels me to explain that the girls of Karakhoja and Turfan, who listen to this ballad and others tending to the same line of thought, are altogether a handsome lot. They wear bright coloured robes and glittering caps and scorn to veil their soft brown faces, and have much more standing with men than peasants will generally allow, Muslim or not.

Slowly the fire-fly twinkle of cigarettes dies out and disappears, and the murmuring of voices stills itself: in the soft desert night, men and women go to bed. Above a frieze of black poplars the vast improbable moon of Turfan steers off unwieldily toward the mountain tops, and looks as though it may never clear them. A rustling silence settles over us. We sleep.

IV

One dreams of making such journeys. By and large, one is wiser to rest content with the dream: it is almost certain to be better than the truth. Besides, I am a stay-at-home by nature. Yet Chinese Turkestan had long held me in my dreams; and I was hypnotized enough to admit that in this case the dreams might be less than the reality. Then, too, I had grown a habit of longing to travel there. None of my friends, moreover, thought that I should manage it: I did not think so myself. And this improbability was also an attraction.
Here was a region, after all, not yet opened to the outside world. It was exceedingly remote: it was utterly unknown. Scarcely a foreign traveller had gone through in ten or twenty years. Nobody whom I consulted in London could tell me anything new about the place. They referred me to the books; and the books were long since out of date. Some of the best of them, indeed, were as much as half a century out of date.

Only my friend Euripides, who is a Greek of Asia Minor and hence a man of learning, enterprise, and sense of history, had much to say upon the matter. But he was far from pleased. We were lunching together at the Nag’s Head, in Covent Garden, and Euripides poured cold water on what he called ‘romantic vapouring’. He wagged his finger at me. ‘You disappoint me once again,’ he said. ‘First you go and waste your time in Africa. Now you will waste your time on a lot of Turks. Turks!’ He raised hopeless eyes to the ceiling: we were, I should add, in one of the darker moments of the Cyprus war. ‘When there is Greece, my friend, waiting for you.’

I countered: ‘But I am not a man of sensibility and learning,’ for I knew this Greek gambit. ‘Besides, they aren’t Turks. They are Uighurs and Kazakhs and so on.’

Euripides does not mind this kind of argument: in fact, it puts him in his element. He can usually go one better. He did so now: where, after all, have Greeks failed to penetrate? ‘Yes, I know all that,’ he agreed. ‘For, unlike you, I have been there. Oh, a long time ago.’ He swept aside a gesture of homage and went on to complete my list of Sinkiang peoples, striking finger upon finger and fixing me with an angry eye: ‘Kirghiz and Tatar and Uzbek and so on and so on. Just as you say, my friend. But it makes no difference. They are all Turks.’

He enlarged on a favourite theme. ‘An accursed people, my friend. Do you not know that? Do you not know that it was those very Turks who came between China and Byzantium? Do you not know that without those very Turks — ah, without Jinghis Khan and all such sad barbarians — Chinese influence
would have married with Greek influence? And have civilized Europe?' He gazed on me pleadingly: 'My dear friend, even Europe might have become civilized. Just think of that. Might still be civilized, even today.' And he thumped the table, which is not at all his way, for he is a man of gentle manners, and repeated: 'Even today.'

We stared at one another across the gin-and-tonics of the Nag's Head, and the sorrows of the world bore heavy on us. But then Euripides, who is not a Greek of Asia Minor for nothing, nor a fellow countryman of King Midas and Herodotus, not to speak of others of that generous ilk, went on to say: 'Of course, a very nice people for all their misfortune. They cannot help being what they are. And they make wonderful carpets; or so they used to, when I was there. But Turks, my friend, all Turks. When Greece, as I say . . .'

But I interrupted Euripides at this point; for I had one or two ideas of my own.

It was, I believe, a giraffe that was initially responsible. A giraffe, no doubt, is never less than surprising: but a giraffe in China, and one which landed there in the year 1414, was a good deal more than that. There has even come down to us a picture of that singular beast, haltered to a rope that is held by a bearded Arab and evidently much put out with the whole undignified proceedings: after all, it must have felt terribly bored with foreign travel by that time, and its welcome, upon arriving in China, had not quite met with expectation. It had come all the way from the African kingdom of Melinda, far down the coast in what is now called Kenya, only to be announced as a unicorn (because, apparently, of a likeness between the Somali word for giraffe, girin, and the Chinese word for unicorn, k'ilin). Even the Ming emperor of the day, evidently not too keen about unicorns, had declined to signal its arrival by accepting a Memorial of Congratulation. But on second
thoughts he did go out to the Fengt’ien gate of Peking and receive it in state together with a celestial horse (vulgarly called a zebra) and a celestial stag (that was possibly an oryx). ‘This event,’ he modestly admitted, ‘is due to the abundant virtue of the late Emperor, my father, and also to the assistance rendered me by my Ministers. That is why distant people arrive in uninterrupted succession.’ He added: ‘From now on it behoves Us even more than in the past to cling to virtue and it behoves you to remonstrate with Us about our shortcomings.’ The revival of self-criticism and criticism in revolutionary China would obviously have met with his approval.

Now of course this giraffe did not get to China by way of Turkestan. It went by Arab ship across the Indian Ocean and eastward through the Malacca Straits to Canton. But its arrival in China was the cause, or one of the causes, of something really new in world history. For one giraffe ardently prompted the desire for another: and the following year, 1415, another giraffe did arrive, but this time together with ambassadors from its home country. According to imperial custom, ambassadors of barbarian peoples, whether European or African or any other, were always to be ceremonially escorted home again. So it became necessary to send a naval expedition to the east coast of Africa, whence these giraffe-bearing ambassadors had come; and a year or so afterwards, for the first time in history, Chinese vessels sailed beyond the coast of Arabia and put down their anchors in a properly African port. They were ahead of European mariners by nearly a hundred years.

This was the source of my own interest. I had been trying to look into the history of East Africa before Europeans first made landfalls on it. There were some Arab records, fairly well known, and then a great many Portuguese records (partly, it seems, still inaccessible); and then there was the surprising fact of this Ming fleet’s arrival off Melinda some twenty years before the Portuguese, painfully crawling down the West African coast, had so much as managed to double Cape Bojador in what
is now Morocco. This arrival, it transpired, was no more than the highpoint in a Chinese–African commerce which had begun, with Arab intermediaries, as long ago as the tenth century and perhaps earlier: Arab shipmasters had begun using the port of Canton, which they called Khanfu or Sin al-Sin, as early as the seventh century. Having in mind all that it was not so surprising to hear Sir Mortimer Wheeler, after a tour of Tanganyika in 1955, saying that he had seen more broken Chinese porcelain in a fortnight than ever in his life, for in the Middle Ages the history of what was now Tanganyika had been written in Chinese porcelain. The Chinese–African connection promises much to historians of pre-European Africa.

Tracing these maritime trade links, I worked back through time until I had reached the early years of the Christian era, the arrival in China of merchants from the Roman Mediterranean, and the discovery of the trading use of the northwestern monsoon which could blow ships safely across the Indian Ocean instead of their having to creep along the coast. Arrived there, though, I could discover no more links by sea; and began, at first in idle curiosity, to wonder whether they had gone by land. That is how I fell upon the story of the old caravan roads through Inner Asia, and got my first real glimpse of Chinese Turkestan. This, for me, was the beginning of the road to Turfan; and it proved a long way round, but well worth it. For the story of the old caravan roads through Inner Asia, linking the Jade Gate of Chinese antiquity across Turkestan to the Stone Tower of Tashkurgan, to the Kasmiri passes, to the northern roads for Bukhara and Samarkand, and onward to Balkh and the cities of the Mediterranean, is surely the greatest traveller's tale of all.

Of the peoples who lived along these caravan roads between the Jade Gate and the western mountains there were records, moreover, that told surprising things. Here in these oases of what is now Eastern or Chinese Turkestan, fruitfully mature settlements had existed for hundreds of years before the first Han emperors, in the second century before Christ, sent in their
armies. The people of these settlements were not only the gatekeepers of the great inland road between East and West: they possessed a civilization of their own, and one with much to claim for itself.

What richness lay concealed in these ancient oasis cultures of Inner Asia was afterwards forgotten or unknown in the outside world until the end of the nineteenth century.

'The idea of archaeological work [in Sinkiang], [records Aurel Stein in 1903] first suggested itself to me in the Spring of 1897, in consequence of some remarkable antiquarian acquisitions from that region. Among the papers left by the distinguished but ill-fated traveller, M. Dutreuil de Rhins, were fragments of ancient birchbark leaves which had been acquired in the vicinity of Khotan. On expert examination they proved to contain a Buddhist text in an early Indian script and language, and were soon recognized as the oldest Indian manuscript then known, going back to the first centuries of our era. . . .'

Now why should Indian relics be found far north of the great mountain barriers, and in a country that was traditionally associated either with the nomads of Mongolia or else with China? Aurel Stein, Hungarian-born inspector of schools in the Punjab, made up his mind to answer this. He secured from the imperial government and the local governments of Punjab and Bengal a grant of 9,000 Rupees (about £600 in the currency of the 1890s), and leave of absence for a year's exploration in Chinese Turkestan. His discoveries, like those of Hedin just before him, made history.

Others followed. There began an international race for antiquities from Chinese Turkestan. Stein continued his work. The Germans sent out four expeditions between 1902 and 1914: the French sent expeditions: the Russians and the Japanese sent expeditions. These bold scholars staked out 'spheres of interest' and 'fields of discovery', and quarrelled vigorously over the one and the other. By 1914 this rich mine of ancient art
had lost nearly all its treasures. They are scattered now over many museums, mostly in Europe; but the greater part of the German collection evidently failed to survive the bombing of the second world war, and may be seen now only in the coloured pictures of the published records. By a narrow margin, China had failed to save its cultural heritage in Turkestan. Nowadays it is a sad and weary sight to stare at rock-temple frescoes where these ruthless old collectors used their knives. Many of the frescoes had survived for over a thousand years: had they managed to survive a bare half-century longer they would be there to this day.

These glimpses of the past were a powerful stimulus to curiosity. And then, one asked, what had become of these peoples in the years between? Civil wars, rebellions, repressions appeared to fill their history. In the 1930s it had seemed to stray British travellers that Sinkiang was fast becoming a province of the Soviet Union; yet in 1949, it was said, the Chinese Communists had carried their revolution into Sinkiang, and Sinkiang was now a part of the Chinese People's Republic. Was this really so? And if it was, then what had become of Chinese imperial rule among these strikingly non-Chinese populations? Would they take the same road to independence as the neighbouring peoples of Outer Mongolia; or would they be content with some other status within the traditional frontiers of China?

It would be interesting to find answers to these questions; to see this land of legendary splendour; to travel where others had found their way so hard beset but so rewarding. This broad segment of High Asia, much larger than Tibet and much more various in its peoples and its history, was perhaps the world's last hidden country. But in that, of course, lay the difficulty: could one manage to get there?

Mr. Huan Hsiang, who is the distinguished Chargé d'Affaires of the Chinese People's Government in London, listened with a friendly patience when finally, in the spring of 1955, I broached the subject of going to Sinkiang. 'It is an area not yet opened to
foreign travel,' he said. 'All the same, it is also one of the most interesting parts of China. Especially now. Let us at least ask for permission.'


The family said: 'Mind you are back for the holidays.'
CHAPTER TWO

BEYOND THE NORTH WIND

Beyond the Issedones live the one-eyed Arimaspians, and beyond them the griffins who guard the gold, and beyond the griffins the Hyperboreans, whose land comes down to the sea.

HERODOTUS

I

I REACHED Peking in forty-eight hours' flying time from London, or fifty-five hours allowing for the difference on the clock. This breathless sweep through Eastern Europe and European Russia, Siberia, the Mongolian People's Republic, and finally the plains of Hopei, was exhausting but efficient. It was quicker than going by way of south-east Asia and Hong Kong: also, it was cheaper. The return fare London–Peking, including some reservation cables, cost about £425.

Everything was easier and more comfortable than four years earlier, when I had first made this trans-Asian journey to China. Then, in 1952, I had arrived in Prague and obtained a Chinese visa only to find that no Soviet visa was forthcoming, and had kicked my heels for a week in Prague while bureaucracy in Moscow wrestled with itself. 'Beria business,' people in Moscow had said to me afterwards: 'Just another little swipe at Soviet-Chinese relations.' However that may be, formalities in 1956 were reduced to a minimum: having secured my Chinese visa in London, I found that a Soviet transit visa was issued automatically. And having bought my ticket in London, I embarked with enough baggage for several months but was never once asked to open bags along the route, nor on arrival in Peking. Upon entering the Soviet Union (at Vilnius in Lithuania) I declared myself innocent of carrying hashish or opium or pipes for the use of, reindeer horn, old antlers, or
even wormwood; and that was that. Such is the physical unity of our world that I waited only an hour at Moscow airport before taking an onward seat in the routine plane for Siberia.

This Siberian–Mongolian route to China will one day be a big line of world communication. We flew in the twin-engined Ilyushin passenger planes that were familiar from my earlier passage, but next year, they said, they would be using their new Tupolev jet airliners on the Moscow–Peking run; and that would more than halve the time of flight. The current issue of Krokodil was saying that this jet airliner would come back westward in pace with the dawning of the day: you would be able to leave Eastern Siberia before breakfast and arrive in Moscow before breakfast too. Very shortly, with this sort of thing, arrival will precede departure.

It is a splendidly impressive journey. After Kazan the whole of Tartary is spread in nameless plains and shining rivers as you fly eastward, until the skylines slide away beyond the Urals and are lost in Siberian mist. The landscape glows a soft and greyish green. The spring comes late: even in May there were pockets of snow in gullies and among the clouded woods, and here and there a long half-moon of brilliant ice where some river made a curve and the bank still lay frozen. In the southern distance there are huge rivers; now and then these rivers swallow the land in great sky-reflecting lakes and vivid streams. It is a land that is full of water.

Towards Omsk we fly over wide lands that are going under plough, and some of them are green already with shoots of early grain. Tongues of rich earth lick hungrily through the bare birch spinneys: broad gashes of sudden cultivation in a seemingly unbounded wilderness. Except for collective farms now and then there is scarcely a trace of population. It is a land that looks hard to tame. This is a place to measure the heroic side of Soviet life.

All sorts of Europeans and Asians, so far as I can see, now use this new north-east passage: businessmen and delegations mainly, and in steady numbers. Gone for ever are the remote
mysteries of Omsk and Tomsk and all that; but there are still some surprises. Not least among these, I fancy, are the brand new airport stations that stand in plush and pillared majesty on these Siberian and Mongolian airfields. They evidently represented, in 1956, the latest thing in Soviet architecture, because they were not there at all four years earlier; yet for all their newness they are oddly out of date. Designed after the manner of English town halls in the dreariest Victorian period, they are about as well fitted to be airport stations. It is strange that a people so manifestly primed with technical know-how should be satisfied with buildings so absurdly out of joint with their purpose. But perhaps they are not satisfied.

Omsk airport yielded another sort of surprise. A slender silver-gleaming jet stood near our landing point: from its markings one could see that it was not on military business. I inquired about it of a genial Russian in the next seat: we had fallen into conversation over Siberia — he was something important, I gathered, in the Vladivostok fisheries. ‘That?’ he said. ‘That is the postal plane.’ And added with cautious humour: ‘It’s all right, you know, it doesn’t carry any atom bombs.’ Later inquiries in Moscow led to a statement that fast mails were now being carried across the Soviet Union in small jet planes like this one: they are, it seems, a civilian version of the Ilyushin-28 three-man bomber.

Siberian airport stations adjusted to the notions of mayoral taste around the year 1875, when bicycles were thought to be dangerously fast: and jet planes as good as those made by Ilyushin and Tupolev — for anyone who can work it out, the explanation of this contrast may enclose a good deal of the truth about the Soviet Union today.

II

The clock is racing on, and Novo Sibirsk, beyond Omsk, is already four hours ahead of Moscow. It is nearly one o’clock in the morning before we fly in over the lights of Irkutsk, one of
the principal cities of Eastern Siberia and the junction for Ulan Bator and Peking. Its lights spread out below us, invitingly: we yawn and think longingly of a bed to lie and stretch our legs in after these long cramping hours; but we do not come down as we should, we fly straight on. Is there anything the matter? We now experience one of those small events which throw a light, now and then, on the realities of international life.

No: there is nothing wrong. To some Germans who are flying on a business mission to Peking, and to me, one of our four Soviet fellow-passengers explains after talking to the pilot: ‘A ground mist over Irkutsk. Impossible to land.’

But down there below us, those lights so sparkingly clear? Well, there is a ground mist. Heads are politely nodded, and nothing is said. Nobody believes it.

Twenty minutes later we come down at what is evidently a small and little used airfield which is called, we learn, Ust’ Urda. ‘It is,’ says our Soviet friend, ‘the former capital of the Buriat Mongol Republic.’ That is all he says, for he is very much one of those Russians who think that explanations are a positive dishonour; and by now, because of this, there is a certain murmuring among the foreign contingent. We do not want to know about the Buriat Mongol Republic, but why we are here, and for how long, and whether there are beds, and if not why not. Our Soviet friend has heard us murmuring, of course, and he cannot possibly approve of it. But it must be awkward for him: after all, he knows that we saw those lights, he must have seen them himself: . . .

We troop into the airport station at Ust’ Urda; and this is where we should be glad of one of those lush Victorian city halls, complete with many-spangled chandeliers and yards of dark blue plush about the doors and double windows, but also with wagonloads of food and plenty of easy chairs; for the airport station of Ust’ Urda belongs to an earlier, and truly Siberian, period. An old woman of advanced years bustles in with a broom and waves it mysteriously about the floor, and tries to make the old clay oven give forth heat; but with this
she is not at all handy, and the maize stalks she feeds into its stone-cold jaws will do no more than fill the room with dusty smoke. Somewhere in the background a monstrous bust of Lenin looks in the dim electric light as though made of crumbling yellow plaster: I approach and tap it with my finger, and it turns into marble.

We should, at this point, give a great deal for a nice little explanation, probable or not, of why we are here and how long we shall stay. After all, we are commercial passengers: we have paid our way. But the crew has magically disappeared.

The minutes pass, and murmuring gains confidence. Disloyalty sticks up its ugly head. Subversion is in the air. Theories are exchanged in well-heard whispers. One of the Germans says to me: 'There's been a crash, eh? They don't want us to see it, they're clearing it away.'

Our Soviet friend, meanwhile, has taken a seat at the desk in the middle of the room, in front of the bust of Lenin, and now taps loudly with a paper-weight. The whole good name and prestige of the Soviet Union, it seems, rests on his sturdy shoulders; and he is more than ready to defend them. Our distrust of him, we may as well realize, is nothing compared with his distrust of us. We all stop talking and look guilty and unhappy. It is clear that this small defiant man in front of Lenin has presided over a thousand unruly meetings: manifestly, he is going to call us to order and pass straight to the first item on the agenda, which is to reproach, condemn, and utterly denounce our disbelief in the matter of invisible ground mist. And quite right too; it will be child's play for him. We wait in fatalistic silence, knowing our guilt. But nothing happens: our chairman sits and taps without a word and presides over an invisible meeting of his own, shooting us from time to time a glance of pity mixed with pride.

Someone comes in and says there will be a car to take us to Irkutsk and we shall sleep there. Someone else comes in and says there will be no car to Irkutsk and we shall sleep here. Inspection reveals a number of beds and mattresses, and far-
sighted ones amongst us make their early pick with due regard to the dangers of neighbourly snoring. Murmuring gets out of hand: after all, there is nothing else to do. The stove gives up trying to get itself alight and goes out. A dark yellow silence creeps down on us. If only we could have an explanation. . . .

Suddenly the pilot arrives, and our whispered discontent is extinguished like a winter’s candle when the door blows wide. This pilot is one of the largest men I have ever seen; he is also one of the happiest. He strides in among us like a healthy hurricane, beating great hands together, and shouts in a voice of joyful thunder: ‘Well, we’re off, aren’t we?’

The mist, it seems, has cleared away, and we can fly into Irkutsk. Everyone is happy and gets up to leave Ust’ Urda with fond farewells to the two old women and the one old man who inhabit its silence. The Germans sling on their batteries of photographic accessories and cameras; and we are off.

But our chairman is too old a hand to close the meeting without making his point. With a little frown and a faint smile to show that he has fully understood our collapse into wretched disbelief, is willing to overlook it, but wants us to do better next time, he says: ‘I know you couldn’t see the mist over Irkutsk. All the same, it was there. That’s how it is with ground mists, you know. Very often you can’t see them until you’re coming in to land.’

Twenty minutes later we slide comfortably into Irkutsk.

But disbelief is a strong and muscular plant after all these years and all these lies. Perhaps it may be especially vigorous among travellers through Siberia. One of the Germans says to me after landing: ‘Did you see that mist?’

‘Of course not. It’s cleared away.’

He looks at me with eyes that are full of strong Germanic pity. A little stung by this, for it is four o’clock in the morning by now, I retort crossly: ‘All right, did you see that crash?’

He shakes his head and looks at me wonderingly, a little despairingly, and goes away.
III

Below us the Great Wall of China marched across the jagged hills that lie north of Peking, and seemed even more impressive, for size and human mastery, than the pyramids at Gizeh. This tremendous stone rampart is so wide across the top, they say, that two chariots could drive abreast and still leave room for infantry on either hand.

Along these hills to the north of Peking, towards its eastern extremity, the Wall is at its best preserved. Far to the west, where the Wall ends at the ancient Jade Gate in distant Kansu, there was said to be little more left of it than a dim line of crumbling clay barely six feet high and so thin that time and shepherds had often breached it wide. But should I see it there? Should I reach Kansu, let alone Sinkiang, far back behind me now in Middle Asia? As I sat in the aeroplane rapidly losing height for Peking and watched the villages below, it seemed anything but probable.

A young lady of shy and slender charm bade me welcome at the airport. 'I am Miss T'eng,' she said, 'of Chinese Inturist. Are you all right?'

'Yes, thank you, quite all right.'

'Oh, that is good.'

She went on: 'I have booked you a room at the Pei-fang, for there is no room at the Sa-chow, nor at the Ho-pei, nor at the Peking. Do you mind that?'

'No, that's very good.' I knew the Pei-fang from an earlier visit. Although it is not by any means the best hotel in Peking, nor very quiet, nor very comfortable, it has some decisive advantages over the larger and more lush establishments. To begin with, it gives directly on one of the principal thoroughfares of Peking, the Ha-te-men, so that when you step from its front door you are at once immersed in the rush and scurry of ordinary life, and that is good for a visitor to China. Then it is almost next door to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, where I should have to complete preparations for travelling, if I could,
into the far north-west. It is also cheaper than other hotels; and you can always catch a pedicab near by. This year, as it turned out, the Pei-fang enjoyed another advantage: old friends from Italy, Franco and Teresa Calamandrei, were established there, and apart from the pleasure of being with them there was the not inconsiderable fact of their having, over two or three years' residence, exercised a steady influence on the kitchen. European food at the Pei-fang, I should say, is now as good as any to be had in Peking. There is no more interesting food than Chinese; but the visitor to China is wise to change his diet slowly, and meanwhile, if he is lucky, he can stay at the Pei-fang.

The evening of my arrival happened to be Saturday. Miss T'eng said that Mr Chen of the Information Department of the Foreign Office would be glad if I rang him up. I got through without difficulty: Mr Chen asked that I should visit him on Monday morning.

'Wouldn't you like me to come over straight away?' The hurry of Europe was still upon me.

'No, no, please take a rest. You will need it after flying from London.' The Chinese can move fast when they want to; but they prefer to move slowly.

On Monday, though, Mr Chen was waiting for me punctually on time. What is more, I found that I was expected to walk straight past the sentries at the Foreign Office and through the courtyard and up the steps and into the wide entrance hall. There a clerk took my name and showed me into a comfortable waiting room. No other Foreign Office in the world, from my experience, has reduced the red tape of fresh arrivals to anything so brief as this. Mr Chen came to greet me, a courteous and tactful man speaking good English, and asked me to say where I should wish to go. I drew out a list and stated preferences. Mr Chen was straightforward and informal. They would like to think about it, he said: there'd be several days to wait, and meanwhile wouldn't I like to have a look round Peking?
So with Miss T’eng for guide I passed several days, while waiting for official appointments to come ripe, in meeting people and seeing the old and the new. English friends in Peking added to my doubts of reaching the far north-west by remarking that one or two other Western travellers had lately failed to secure permission. But now I stopped worrying about that: I had done everything I could think of, and the best thing now would be to wait patiently and assume that all would be well.

Much had changed since 1952; much had stayed the same. Ha-te-men was still a dusty thoroughfare of smells and poverty and ever-threatening squalor. Ancient trams still clattered down its screaming tracks. Pedlars still called their wares or struck their wooden clappers or rang their brassy little bells. Pedicab drivers, unmoved by the new morality, still hoped for three or four times the fare from any sucker who was fool enough to give it them. And yet in Ha-te-men, behind this same long clattering perspective of little shops and shutters, daily life was also different from before: down its multifarious alleyways the hand of social change had passed in 1956 with profound and extraordinary effect.

China in 1956 was the scene of great change: of change that was even more important for the future, perhaps, than the revolutionary upheavals of previous years. For the upheavals of previous years had aimed primarily at preparing the ground for a new order of society: the changes of 1956 were already far advanced in the active construction of it. To have stopped halfway would have condemned China to stagnation and continued poverty: and yet this evolving of a new order required great organizational reform in the structure of Chinese society. It was these organizational changes, it seemed to me, that were really worth looking at in China now.

New buildings, new swimming pools, new hotels, new factories, roads, and railways: all these could be seen elsewhere, and often better done elsewhere. They are the darlings of official propaganda; and Chinese enthusiasts, understandably
enough, will show you a new factory at the drop of a hat. But the organizational changes, the changes in social order and individual outlook that were visible in 1956: these are not to be seen, I think, anywhere else in the world, or not at this level of significance.

Four years earlier the accent in private and public talk had lain repeatedly on the passing of the old. 'We have got rid of this. We have stopped that. We have prevented abuse. We have ended corruption.' Then the Central People's Government had been only three years old. Now in 1956 the accent had shifted: it was the building of the new — the gradual displacement of primitive organization by advanced organization — that made the news and gossip.

These organizational changes could even be summarized by a handful of figures. Four million shops and small businesses had abandoned individual trading and 'gone socialist', or partly so. Nine-tenths of China's peasant families had formed one million producers' co-operatives. Here were the beginnings of a different China.

Later I should watch these processes of change in places as remote as the shadowed valleys of the High Pamir; for China today is a unified society in a sense that is surely much deeper than at any previous time. Meanwhile I wandered into little shops in Ha-te-men and elsewhere in Peking, and inquired with Miss T'eng's assistance about the manner of their going into 'partnership with the State'; for it appeared an improbable thing that they were glad to have done that. Yet of all the shopkeepers of whom I asked such questions, whether in Peking or elsewhere, only four old men of Turfan had refused to make the change: all the others, if with varying emphasis and confidence, seemed well enough content with it.

Force or persuasion? 'Western reporters', said Mr Chen, 'sometimes think we have used force. But in fact we have used no force — except perhaps the force of circumstance.' There is much in that comment. The more I thought of it afterwards the more it seemed to me one of those Chinese explanations which
TURKESTAN ALIVE

contain, within a bland and even platitudinous exterior, the essence of deep-probing truth. But could one accept it?

IV

Miss T’eng and I took our books one morning to the Northern Lake, a delectable pleasure ground in Peking, and idled away some hours of sunshine. She was reading an English book — I have forgotten what — and wanted to ask the meaning of difficult words; and I was lazily making notes. On the terrace of a teahouse raised on a lofty hill above the blue and white lake we had found a shady corner. A waiter brought tea. Around us a score of boys and girls from Peking University were chatting and gossiping and pecking at their books, and also drinking tea. Several were learning English; one or two already knew a little. ‘From Shanghai,’ said Miss T’eng. We chatted about their studies, about my travels. And all over China I should have agreeable meetings like this.

Now it happened, some months later, that I was in Budapest during the Hungarian rising. Official Hungarian propaganda had dwelt for years on the achievements of the Hungarian Communist regime headed by Rákosi. Yet this Rákosi regime would disappear almost overnight, hated universally for its misery and horror. In Poland, it seems, things were not much better; and what it was like in the Soviet Union, through the years preceding Stalin’s death, we know from Krushchov’s famous speech of February 1956. During all these years, notwithstanding such realities, we had been regularly told by Communists that all was progress in the Soviet Union, that all was sweetness and light in Eastern Europe.

Is it different in China? If a given system of ideas and action could carry others into the misery of personal dictatorship and police terror, why should it carry the Chinese anywhere else? If ‘democratic centralism’ became terror in Hungary, why not in China too? If rigged trials were possible in Eastern Europe, why not in Eastern Asia?
Now Mr Chen had no thought of saying that the revolution itself was carried through without violence and coercion. It was in fact a most violent affair, involving the embattled suffering of millions of men and women over many years, and its triumph in the end was that of a powerful army and a dominant political idea carried forward by a strong political machine. The violence, of course, was as purposeful as surgery to a gangrened limb; and the triumph, beyond any doubt, was one of the really great saving operations in the history of man. But after that?

Mr Chen would say that tens of millions of peasant families had abandoned private ownership for co-operative ownership merely through the force of circumstance and millions of shopkeepers had done the same, and both in order to improve their standard of life: but could one believe him? Personally, after long weeks of wandering in China, I think the answer is yes: that Mr Chen was substantially right when he said it was the force of circumstance — by which, of course, he meant to exclude violence and terror — that had impelled these great organizational advances in 1956. For the overriding fact is that most Chinese seem now to be broadly agreed on the important issues of today and tomorrow.

The bankruptcy of the old regime — of the Kuomintang — goes a long way to explain this. But the circumstances of this revolution, and the nature of its leadership, also help to explain. For Chinese revolutionaries have had the aid and reinforcement not only of the long traditions of Chinese civilization, but also of two circumstances of quite outstanding and unique importance: that they have made their own revolution — a revolution that was manifestly necessary to the saving of China — and thus grown strong and confident in making it; and that, having made it, they were not invaded by enemies as the youthful Soviet Union was invaded, but were powerfully aided by their friends. All this in China has made for skill and patience, and now, after a tough and harsh beginning, even for gentleness.

By 1949 the revolutionaries had extended to the whole of
China their 'people's democratic dictatorship'. And they could justly claim that this contradiction in terms was only apparent: that the dictatorship necessary to the building of a modern China was that of a large majority over a small minority. With this undoubtedly democratic backing they swept away a decadent and miserable landowning system: they expropriated all those important businessmen and bankers whose loyalties were tied to the old regime and its foreign backers: they doubled and trebled the number of school places: they founded a public health system: they embarked on the building of modern industry.

By 1952 — when I was first in China — this period of revolutionary change was giving way to a new period. Changes now were no longer a direct and violent break with the old order: already they were beginning to grow out of a new order — and as logical and necessary extensions of it. Thus the social movements one could watch in the China of 1956 were not so much revolutionary as evolutionary — and therefore peaceful.

And after these weeks of wandering through China it also seemed to me, thinking of it later, that the western world astonishingly underestimated the importance to China — and so to the whole of Asia and perhaps in the end to much of Africa too — of these extraordinary events. For they altered the face of this enormous country, fruitfully and irreversibly: and they did it with a degree of concord and unity of aim such as visit people only in the grand climactic moments of their national life.

Of course there were reservations. The curse of an inefficient and irresponsible bureaucracy loomed over the horizon. 'Little emperors' thrust up here and there, and exercised little tyrannies. A proper legal system was still lacking. Bully-ragging of intellectuals occurred: the creative arts were all too often reduced to propaganda. These miseries were real. Yet measured against the general gain, and against a growing pressure for democracy, perhaps they were relatively unimportant.

No doubt it is true that nothing in society can be guaranteed
for far ahead: the great revolutions and their leaders may sow the seed of greater happiness, it remains for lesser men to cull the fruits and make them multiply. No society is finally good, finally static. Societies ‘live only as they are remade’; and China is no exception. Yet for us, after all, it is the difference between China yesterday and China now that challenges a judgment. What were the scope and nature of these great reforms of 1956? It could make little sense to travel through China without trying to measure that.

‘I forgot to tell you,’ said Miss T’eng, closing her book, ‘that tomorrow it is arranged for Kao P’ei Tien.’

Kao P’ei Tien is a goldfish farm. It has fish on the largest scale, in number if not in size. They glow red and gold beneath unmoving mirrors of pale green water; they glide within the shade of lace-leaved willows and burn into purple splendour, like sultry carp, before they sink and disappear. In the milky pools of Kao P’ei Tien they are mysterious and beautiful.

They are not so famous as the feather-finned monsters that lie in bowls in the Forbidden City, pensioners of the State in their old age and puffy laxitude; but they are more useful. Hsin Ch’ing, chairman of Kao P’ei Tien co-operative, told me with off-handed pride: ‘We are supplying Peking with a lot of its goldfish.’ People in Peking do not go in much for cats and dogs; but they do go in for goldfish.

Kao P’ei Tien is also growing grain and vegetables: their fields lie all around these green pools. These fields are like well-tilled gardens, but they enclose 3,000 acres. This is a big farm even for the plains of Hopei: in 1956 it was supporting as many as 2,357 peasant households, or the rural population of three parishes.

We go into Hsin Ch’ing’s office where he receives visitors, and sit round a table so that Miss T’eng can make orderly interpretations of orderly answers. Pencils are produced, and scraps
of paper; and tea in lidded china mugs. It is important to get
the scene right, for this is the way that foreigners nowadays
collect most of their information in China. Hsin Ch’ing has
certainly had other foreign visitors; but for all that he is no
polished conducting officer providing ingeniously ill-disposed
foreign writers with a tale they cannot easily twist. He is out to
give the solid facts, simply because the solid facts are what
interest and move him. He will give them, as likely as not, with
a running fire of slogans; for it is a peculiarity of China now
that everyone is liable to talk in slogans, even when he is de-
scribing the intimacies of his own life. If the foreign writer
wishes to interpret the facts in an unfavourable way then there
is nothing that Hsin Ch’ing proposes to do about it. He is very
much a peasant of Hopei, a square-browed square-shouldered
man of about forty; and he says what he wants to say, in reply
to questions, with a slow flat deliberation and a slight frown,
giving out words and sentences one by one, with pauses, as
though leaning on them with his mind as firmly as his arms are
leaning on the table.

Now the facts about Kao P’ei Tien are interesting. They
can bear some leaning on. They show what ‘organizational
changes’ may really mean in practical everyday terms.

Of peasant families in these three parishes, before the land
reform of 1949–50, about 1,700 families had some land and
about 700 had none at all. Hsin Ch’ing himself had half an
acre; and was put down, during the great classification, as a
‘poor peasant’. In Anglo-Saxon terms, he was penniless.

Yet in pre-revolutionary terms he had managed to survive
because his village lay within easy reach of the capital, and the
market was regular. Nearly all these peasants were completely
illiterate; few of their children could go to school, even for a
handful of years; and medical care did not enter their world.
As they were near the capital, though, the endless wars since
1912 had damaged them somewhat less than others; and this
they counted a sovereign blessing.

When they had divided up the land, these peasants dis-
covered two things: first, that there was not enough land to go round; and secondly that the dwarf-holder's lot was still a hard and sorry one.

Elementary forms of producer co-operation were devised and gradually improved. Advantages were seen in treating a number of small plots as one big plot. Crops could be heavier; boundary-land was saved; and the Government would show especial favour, in the way of credits and advice, to peasants who went in for co-operation: this last, of course, was part of Mr Chen's 'force of circumstance', operating in favour of constructive social change just as the old pre-revolutionary 'force of circumstance' had operated against it. For the Government, of course, most keenly wanted to weld small plots into big plots: having divided up the land of the landlords, it needed to find popular and therefore profitable ways of reversing the process. Having pulled out all the stitches, it needed to begin knitting again, but an altogether different garment. There could otherwise be no progress in the Chinese countryside.

The co-operative process flourished. By early 1955 Kao P'ei Tien co-operative numbered 680 households: it was getting over its growing pains. Of course there were many delicate problems: who was to say just how much more Eldest Chou's ox might be worth, to the co-operative, than Second Liu's? Second Liu had protested: Eldest Chou had counterprotested: relatives had swung in behind their man; and people in charge passed tricky moments. Quite a few peasants in China, during this introductory period, slaughtered their beasts for fear of losing them for nothing.

The land stayed private property. In this 'first-stage' co-operative, such as Kao P'ei Tien was in 1955, farming profits were divided not only according to the number of work-units each member was known to have contributed, but also according to the size of individual holdings. If Second Liu received less money for an ox than Eldest Chou, he might still get a bigger share of the profits, because his land holding was slightly bigger than Eldest Chou's.
Now this was a necessary stage. To begin with, nobody can run a co-operative without experience: there had to be a time of running-in, and at Kao P’ei Tien it lasted more than three years. Yet retention of individual land ownership was inconvenient and inefficient. People began to see that it caused the slightly bigger landholders to stick firmly to their boundary stones and ditches, and so cause obstruction. The people of these parishes had seen now, moreover, that they could gain something by co-operative production: they knew they had little to lose by surrendering individual titles to plots that were often very small indeed. Some were slow to understand: others needed much persuading. Here and there — though not at Kao P’ei Tien — impatient cadres simply shoved in the reluctant ones whether they liked it or not, and opened the way, of course, for a great deal of trouble later on. But majority opinion, Hsin Ch’ing said, began to move steadily towards the idea of putting all the land together, and forgetting altogether about newly acquired rights of individual ownership.

At this point another factor made itself felt. The Kao P’ei Tien parishes had several ‘rich peasant’ families; and these, in line with revised land-reform instructions, had retained or recovered their former holdings. It seems that they did well for a time; but then, with urban employment making new demands on labour from the countryside, these ‘rich peasants’ began to find it difficult and then impossible to secure the extra hands they needed. They also began to feel their social isolation. Perhaps for a time, after 1949, ‘rich peasants’ had nursed private hopes of a return to the ‘good old days’; but then, as the years went by and China began its great internal transformations, they saw that the ‘good old days’ were gone forever. Being peasants in spite of their relative ‘riches’, they were gregarious, they liked to belong, they resented exclusion from village life. Yet they were forbidden to enter the newly organized co-operatives, and were looked on with suspicion. All this worried them; and so, towards the end of 1955, the ‘rich peasants’ of Kao P’ei Tien began to ask for admission to co-
operative membership. Even if they had to lose their relatively big holdings, the loss now seemed unimportant: they could not work them properly, and yields for co-operative members were already much higher than any they could secure. Their ‘riches’ had begun to look less desirable.

Many persuasions were at work. Sons and daughters began to laugh at the old ways of doing things; and many of these sons and daughters had gone out into the world and had done great things, new things, and were filled with confidence. They had soldiered up and down China, learned to read and write, gone into the cities and worked in factories: often enough they came back as government cadres, Communist party members, co-operative book-keepers, and so on. They brought the revolution into their own families; and in ways these families could not resist.

When Kao P’ei Tien had grown, in 1956, to some 2,000 member-households they decided after long discussion to turn themselves into a ‘stage two’ co-operative: each member-household sold its landholding to the co-operative. Not to the State: as yet, the Chinese State owns little land. Co-operatives own their own land, collectively: at any rate in theory, they can sell it back to their individual members.

Peasants were now paid entirely by work-units and not at all according to the size of their original holdings. Didn’t that make for discontent among those who’d had more land than others? No, not much, Hsin Ch’ing thought: after all, most holdings were of much the same size after the land reform, and the same motives which had pushed men from individual working into ‘stage one’ would push them into ‘stage two’. Besides, he said, things weren’t standing still: yields already were three or four times as high as individual peasants had generally obtained. Why? Because larger land units meant more efficient irrigation; and co-operative working meant the use of more fertilizer (thanks to State credits) and better farming (thanks to better organized and better instructed labour).

Taxes were going down too: in 1954, he said, this co-operative
had paid the equivalent value of 323 catties in tax, but in 1955, on a much larger output, they had paid about the same.

Now Kao P’ei Tien, of course, was something of a show place. It was right out on the tip of history’s wave; and yet it was an ordinary working farm. Hsin Ch’ing showed me their clinic—a field hospital established in a couple of bungalows near the centre of the property—and I met one of its four feldshers (partly qualified doctors); and there was no doubt that they were not there for show or propaganda. But the real mark of change at Kao P’ei Tien, I thought, lay in the schools. Hsin Ch’ing said they had as many as 1,467 children at primary school (and no children over seven who were not at school); but they also had, this year, 868 children at secondary school, providing education for the 13 to 16 age-group. How many would leave school at thirteen, after the six-year primary course? Hsin Ch’ing thought, by now, not more than one in ten.

‘And soon they’ll all go from the first school to the second school. But it is still confused. There was no school here before, so some of our children are still at the first school even after they are thirteen. They have to catch up.’

He said it with solid pride. Kao P’ei Tien might be unusually successful, yet it was certainly not unique; and where Kao P’ei Tien could go others would certainly follow. And here was a rural community where nine children out of ten would have at least ten years of schooling — and that in a country not yet ten years’ distant from chaos and illiteracy. This, it seemed to me, was their really big achievement. Reorganizing the Chinese countryside so as to crystallize a relatively few large land-units out of relatively many tiny ones might open the way to better farming, mechanization, higher production. But to educate the children was an even greater act of liberation, for it would revolutionize the village from within, would close the gap, sooner or later, between the village and the town.

‘Are you pleased?’ inquired Miss T’eng.

‘You translated very nicely.’

facing, above: THE WALLS OF ANCIENT KARAKHOJA
below: THE ROCK TEMPLES OF BEZEKLIX
next page, above: PEASANT OF KARAKHOJA VILLAGE
below: TURFAN—CO-OPERATIVE PEASANTS
Miss T'eng came as near to blushing as a nice young lady from Shanghai possibly may; which is not very near.

‘No, no, with the farm, I mean?’

‘Well, what do you think?’

Miss T'eng said with careful modesty: ‘I think it is good.’ The Chinese also have a taste for understatement.

But could there be anything like Kao P'ei Tien in distant lands beyond the casual traveller's eye? Along the dusty roads we drove back to Peking and passed the ancient battlemented gate and plunged with blustering horn through crowded streets to the Pei-fang. The reception clerk beckoned to Miss T'eng. ‘There’s a message,’ she said; ‘would you please call Mr Chen?’

I called Mr Chen. ‘It is agreed,’ he said. ‘Will you come tomorrow to discuss arrangements?’

The distant lands moved nearer, swung into a sharper focus. I went upstairs and opened my Swiss-made map, its vast yellow-coloured spaces covered with cabalistic signs that referred the bankers of Zurich to mineral deposits and other useful things; and stared at it with new respect.

VI

This was the point where all previous foreign travellers to China's far north-west would have paused in the fury of departure to count their camel-loads for a last time, write farewell letters to family and friends, and fail to acquire any of the fifty things they had forgotten. They would go through agonies of doubt on the subject of guides. They would sip their tea and nervously expect disaster. And disaster would infallibly arrive.

‘On the Sunday, the day preceding our arranged departure, everything was ready. Our small trunks were packed and padlocked, and the Christians assembled to bid us adieu. On this very evening, to the infinite surprise of all of us, our courier arrived. As he advanced, his mournful countenance told us before he spoke, that his intelligence was unfavourable. “My spiritual fathers,” said he, “all is lost. You having nothing to
hope. In the Kingdom of Naiman there no longer exist any camels of the Holy Church. The Lama doubtless has been killed; and I have no doubt the Devil has had a direct hand in the matter.” Thus Father Huc, recalling his departure from Peking for Mongolia in the year 1844; and the sample is a fair one for any other of the famous travellers you care to mention.

Some, like Father Huc, found their camels mysteriously vanished. Others lost their guides on the dawn of leaving; or were faced with a demand for five times the money; or else the chosen route would be closed. For the road to Turkestan, whether by the wastes of the Gobi or through the fields of Shansi and the deserts of Kansu, had offered barriers beyond number or calculation.

All that happened to me, if I dare align myself with these avatars, was that I strolled across to the Foreign Ministry and had a talk with Mr Chen; and Mr Chen said that the aeroplane for Lanchow and Urumchi would leave on Thursday and arrive on Friday. And Urumchi is the capital of Sinkiang.

‘It has taken longer than usual,’ explained Mr Chen, ‘because this is the first time since the liberation that a solitary writer from abroad has obtained permission to travel in Sinkiang.*

‘We have sent delegations there, of course. But from the Muslim countries, you understand. Moreover, they have visited only the principal cities. But you, if you should stay there for five or six weeks, will be able to visit many other places too.’ He opened a map. ‘Now please tell me the main route you intend to follow.’

I sketched a large itinerary, and Mr Chen put red-pencil circles round the names on the map.

‘There’s one other thing,’ he said. ‘We used to send interpreters from here with foreign travellers, but we don’t do that any more. We haven’t enough. Now we have interpreters in most of the places foreigners want to see. But not in Sinkiang.’

That would be difficult, I thought. Not to know Chinese

* British correspondents of Reuters Agency and the Manchester Guardian visited Sinkiang some two or three months later.
was bad enough: not to know any of the Turkic languages of Middle Asia would be a great deal worse.

'Well,' said Mr Chen, 'we can help you there. We've taken a general decision to open Sinkiang to foreigners, and we're sending a young man from here to report on travel conditions and that kind of thing. We should like him to go with you, seeing that you are the first to go by yourself. He could help you.'

It may be that the Chinese Journalists' Association, who constantly helped me in China, had something to do with this useful suggestion. I was much relieved, for it would cut the bureaucratic difficulties of travel in Turkestan to a minimum, and the chances of Chinese interpretation would considerably improve. And that indeed is how it was to be.

I met Tse Yun next day. We became good friends; and I am greatly in his debt for patience, forbearance, knowledge, and generous hard work on my behalf. During those first few days we walked around each other in polite suspicion; and it was only after the exactions of travel in the north-west had thrown us unceremoniously together that we overcame our mutual doubts. It is not so easy for a young Chinese from Shanghai, educated at a Catholic mission school but transformed into a revolutionary student and then into a junior official of the Chinese Foreign Office, to find much community of interest and attitude with a touchy and irreverent Scotsman: and it is not so easy, as a matter of fact, for the Scotsman either. I'm not sure what he thought of me by the time of our journey's end; but I thought well of him.

Tse looks frail, but he is remarkably tough. He may be twenty-five or so; and he treats me now and then, but especially when he wants to remind me how lucky I am to be in China, rather as though I were a greybeard. I find this irritating, and retort by inviting Tse to walk the streets of some Central Asian town for an hour or so; and Tse does this, but not happily. He finds it pointless and undignified. But he is far too nice to refuse; and, gradually, these irritations wear away. He takes my
side in long interviews, probing for information, shearing through the propaganda slogans to the facts beneath. And if he sometimes found it hard to accept my right to question everyone about everything, he seldom complained, and I am certain he never misled me: or not about a thing that was important.

With that, preparations were more or less complete. I bade farewell to Dr Chen Han-seng and other friends, and they were all excited on my behalf, and pleased that I could make this splendid journey and curious to know what I should find. Mr Rewi Alley, who knows more about the north-west than any other foreigner, invited me to his room at the Peking Hotel and opened his fine collection of antiquities from beyond the Great Wall. He is a large and lovable New Zealander, bulky in sports shirt and blue shorts and sandals and thoroughly Anglo-Saxon in spite of long years in China and a scholar’s love for all things Chinese. He handed me a small bronze-green head, and then another and another. ‘That’s Scythian. And this is Greek. And this is Roman. In their own time they all came down to the Great Wall...’

In the morning we flew south-westward to Taiyuan, on the borderlands of Inner Mongolia, and onward to Sian where the Chinese, four thousand years ago, emerged into history. Now one could see in the green and yellow distance how all this land was being smoothed of the scouring lines of small-scale farming: as we flew over the plains of these central provinces — and later when we came back this way by train — one could see how the face of this countryside was growing young again. The tiny plots were vanishing; the small fields growing into big fields; the boundary lines filled in and the boundary stones lifted away. ‘This is the time’ — I should often hear it said — ‘before the tractors come.’

On Sian airfield we ate a midday meal in one of a series of
dilapidated barrack huts long since deserted but for a few maintenance people. Still on the defensive, Tse pointed out that Sian had long been north-west army headquarters: beyond it, towards the interior, the writ of the Kuomintang had seldom run with any certainty. The half-desert province of Kansu, beyond these mountains, had been warlord territory; and beyond Kansu there was the Gobi, and finally there was Sinkiang — practically an independent country in those unhappy times. But now they needed no barracks in Sian; or, if they did, then they would build new and better ones than these. . . .

After Sian we turned north to cross the mountains; and to me they were a frontier and the real beginning of our journey. From market-garden cultivation we passed quickly to a country of short steep hills; and from these we flew over moon landscapes where nothing seemed capable of life, and the hills were brown and dry and skinned of any soil they had ever had.

Tse said: ‘But they’re planting trees, look.’

And one could just make out dotted lines, even along the tops of empty hills, where young trees were newly set. Within ten years, the propaganda slogans in Peking had said, China should be ‘a waving sea of green’; and here, on the vacant frontiers of Shensi and Kansu, was some of the evidence. Propaganda slogans in China now are oddly liable to mean what they say.

Mountains to the westward began to run up into snow: beyond them, faintly seen, was the grey mist of other and yet taller mountains. These were in Chinghai. They ringed the basin of the Tsaidam, and beyond the Tsaidam, far out of sight, they would climb over the eastern ramparts of Tibet. We were far on our way.

All this is wild heroic country. Much of the greatness and the toughness of the Chinese, down the ages, must have come from dominating this western land: much of their resource and resilience must have come from surviving in it. Across all these hills the armies of the old emperors had marched since the great
expeditions of the Han Dynasty two thousand years ago; and all of them had paid their price —

Now on the hills of Chinghai
Still all ungathered the white corpses lie:
Old devils crying, 'Why am I slain?'
While new devils answer with weeping
And their voices echo in the cold grey rain. . . .

These wars had continued over the centuries until seven years ago. Only in 1949 had the Red Army driven out the last Kansu warlords of the terrible family of Ma.

Rewi had said from his own experience of Kansu in those last years of the Ma family's rule: 'After they'd lost the battle for Lanchow they fled up into the hills, to the west, towards Sining, a whole wild bunch of them. They couldn't find anything better to do than murder a lot of Mongol peasants. Mutilated them, stuffed their genitals into their mouths. All that. But Ma Pu-fang, their last warlord, he got away somehow.'

'Does anyone know where to?'

Rewi had chuckled, for international relations sometimes have their funny side, even if the fun is rather grim. 'Oh yes, he's in Cairo.' Like many of the Chinese-speaking people of Kansu, the Ma family was Muslim.

'Ma Pu-fang and Ma Chung-yin and Ma Ho-san — there were legions of them. If you do get into Sinkiang, you'll hear plenty of the Ma family. They had them up there too.'

Hours later we swooped in over bare bleak hills, cleared a long ridge, and dropped into a wide embrasure of the Yellow River. This was Lanchow.

Tall shouldered mountains close it in, but this is the true gateway to China's far north-west. Today it is also the workshop and main industrial growing-point of these remote provinces of the interior. Driven up through many big tunnels from the south, the railway reached here in 1952: weeks later Tse and I travelled home by this railway and saw what a big engineering feat it represents. When the control-works on the
Yellow River are completed, some years ahead, Lanchow will have water communications with the sea a thousand miles away. Now, in these years, they are building the foundations of a major industrial centre; and already a new city of tall buildings and smoking chimneys has begun to grow alongside the venerable temples and the timber slums of old Lanchow.

This is also a border city for Tibet and Turkestan. As we walked from the aeroplane we saw a slender young figure in a yellow silk cap and a robe of dark red cotton, with several fur-capped men standing behind him, their faces hard and curious as we walked by: a young Tibetan princeling, or perhaps a Living Buddha of the lesser sort, had come to see the aerial monsters landing and departing.

We drove into the city and stopped outside a tall and well-made building: the largest building, I should guess, in any part of inland China. Tse said modestly: ‘It is the hotel.’ He had never seen it himself, of course, but he took it carefully in his stride as though luxury hotels were an everyday affair; and I admired him for that. We checked in at the reception desk, and entered one of the new electric lifts. My room had a shower and modern plumbing and hot water; and they all worked.

‘It’s a magnificent hotel, Tse.’

‘It’s not bad.’

That night this big hotel was packed with guests, as we soon saw; and we had our rooms only because Tse had telegraphed ahead to the local Chinese Inturist agent. Apart from the two of us and an Australian colleague, Selwyn Speight of the Sydney Morning Herald, who had come up as far as this before turning south to Chungking, there were many Chinese cadres — government or party workers of one kind or another — and a great crowd of Russians.

At dinner these Russians filled a table that was thirty feet long; many had their wives with them. They were here, it seemed, for many purposes, being members of several technical missions from the Soviet Union. Some were advising on the constructional work of an oil refinery: this would take in crude
oil not only from the small oilfield of Yumen, beyond the mountains to the north, but also from the much larger oilfield of the Tsaidam, beyond the mountains to the west. Others were oilmen who were working in these fields, but returned temporarily to base at Lanchow. Others were industrial engineers of one kind or another who were advising on the new industries now being founded in Lanchow itself.

One could begin to grasp what Lanchow was intended to become. Tse commented: 'After all, it is quite a big hotel, isn't it?'

'Let us discover how many rooms it has.'

'I have,' Tse said, allowing himself a small smile of contentment, 'and it has 207 rooms.'

We went early to bed, for the Urumchi plane would leave at dawn. I splashed in a hot bath, thinking it would be my last for a long time.
CHAPTER THREE

URUMCHI

They are a very jolly people, and they tell stories and sing and dance whenever they can.

Marco Polo

I

Once we were over the southern tops of the Nan Shan, bare and sharp and sometimes faintly green, we were sailing clear of the mountains and could see, to the eastward, the beginnings of the Gobi. Beneath our moving shadow there spread a countryside that was painted with the grey and pink and yellow of sand and rock and solitary farms. Long tongues of shallow cultivation lapped into the desert. Erratic water-courses marked their way into the wilderness with shoals of pink gravel. One of these would be the legendary Etsin Gol.

White clouds floating along the western sky ceased to be clouds and became snowlit mountains. This moment of magical transformation was unforgettable. It was a turning of dream into reality, of promise into fulfilment: beyond those mountains lay at last the cities of Turkestan.

I wanted to tell Tse about all this; but Tse, who strongly disapproves of surprises, was fast asleep. So I explained my feelings to a soldier in the next seat; and the soldier explained his to me in the muscular accents of Hunan (as Tse discovered afterwards). But we understood each other very well, for that soldier was just as pleased as I was.

Landing at Sa’chow, too, we saw the Great Wall again. Sorrowfully crumbling, it traipsed through a mirage not half a mile from where we landed. In fact it runs a little farther and then peters out near Yumen, which is the Jade Gate of antiquity. When we took off again we flew out over its modest
watch towers and saw it for a few moments longer, a thin forgotten line still marching to the west.

The airport restaurant provided a meal which could honestly be called delicious, consisting of fried eggs and good bread, stewed meat and onions and potatoes, all well cooked; and green tea. The explanation of this European food is that many Russians come this way: there are usually one or two Ilyushin passenger planes standing on these north-western airfields, although the Soviet regular lines come no farther into north-western China than Urumchi. True enough, one end of the airport lavatory was labelled, in vast black letters, LADIES; but this was no doubt an odd fragment from the past rather than a sign of anything in the present.

When we were out over the desert, with the white spurs of the Nan Shan on our left and the vicious rocks of the Black Gobi for as far to the east as we could see (or rather, as far as I could see, for Tse had gone to sleep again), there lingered the memory of the Wall in these last heroic stages. This was the limit of the old Chinese Pale, a great frontier in history as well as on the map. It was here, on the timbers of the Jade Gate, that the camelmen of ancient Khotan and Kashmir, Ferghana, Bactria, and the Roman Empire had knocked for entry to the Middle Kingdom; and out through the Jade Gate, in exchange, that the traders and ambassadors had returned to Western Asia, India, and even Africa.

Its forts and resting stations have left close reminders of this varied past. When Aurel Stein came down from the north-west in 1907, and reached the last towers of this reed-cemented Wall, he turned up, 'together with small rags of coloured silk, fragments of wooden boards and the like as well as a little label-like tablet of wood, showing Chinese characters of remarkable clearness and of distinctively ancient look. There was no date, only the entry, "the clothes bag of one called Lu T’ing-shih".'

It was a time for walls. The Middle Eastern empires had been building them. Later on the Romans would also build them. And like these other walls, the Chinese Wall was the
backbone of an organized military defence. Along its whole length there were regular signalling systems in use, by smoke during the day, by fire at night; and its garrisons were an important part of the emperor's armed forces.

'There was a wooden label,' Stein records from the Jade Gate, 'stating that the box or bag to which it was once attached contained a hundred bronze arrowheads of a specified type belonging to the Hsien-ming company of the Jade Gate.' And another label, found near by, referred to 'the medicine case belonging to the Hsien-ming company'.

Three great desert roads took this traffic westward: one going by the most southerly oases of Sinkiang, and passing by way of Khotan and Yarkand into Kashmir and Bactria, and later into Afghanistan and India; the second taking the northerly route and making for Ferghana and later for Tashkent and Samarkand; and the third, much used only in the early centuries, passing through the ancient Chinese city of Lou-lan, now long vanished, and across the eastern end of the Tarim Basin to Turfan and the cities of the north.

Chinese control of these lands beyond the Gate was seldom more than indirect; often only nominal. For long periods it ceased to exist at all. Within the last hundred years or so, when knowledge of the world at large was opening up at most points of the compass, knowledge of Turkestan — whether Persian or Afghan or Russian or Chinese — dwindled to nothing. Rebellion and repression had followed hard on one another's heels; and gradually this whole vast region became an emptiness on the world's map. European travellers went to Central Asia with much the same feelings of awe and recklessness that they embarked for Central Africa. After the first world war, as one had seen, it was not only difficult to travel in Chinese Turkestan: it was often quite impossible. Even those who got there could seldom explain what they found. 'The circumstances of the present situation in the Chinese Pamirs', wrote the late Sir Eric Teichman as recently as 1936, 'are too elusive to be properly defined': which meant,
presumably, that he had failed to understand them. ‘It seems impossible’, wrote the Swedish explorer Sven Hedin a little earlier, ‘to obtain any reliable information about events in Sinkiang from places outside the frontiers of the province. Not even in China is anything definite known about what is happening there.’ As for what had happened since the Communists took over in 1949, nobody from the West had been to see.

We flew across the barren desert, bumping miserably, and hoped for a landing in Hami as soon as possible. For most of the way there was nothing but sand and rock, ‘neither birds above nor beasts below’ as the great Chinese traveller, Fa-Hsien, had said of it in A.D. 399. But then we overhauled the desert road which had long connected Sa’chow with Urumchi for occasionally desperate motorists. Along it now, making many small dark specks, I could see lorry convoys driving. Later on, when going between Turfan and Urumchi, I made two day-long counts of lorry traffic; and it seemed to me that they must be crossing the Gobi, between railhead at Sa’chow (as it then was) and Urumchi, at a weekly rate of not fewer than a thousand. The isolation of Sinkiang — of ‘China’s California’—was clearly at an end.

By the time this book appears the railway-building teams will have struggled through the dust and searing cold of the Black Gobi in wintertime as far as Hami and perhaps as far as Turfan: they were expected in Urumchi by 1958. Eventually they will link this Chinese trans-Asian line with the Turk-Sib railway in Soviet Central Asia. Rapidly the world grows smaller.

II

And the old ways vanish.

When I stayed in Hami, later on, I tried to find some trace of the caravan men who used to bring their beasts across the Mongolian Gobi on the desert road to Turkestan. Hami—Qomul of the Uighurs—had been their great destination.

‘There are no more caravans across Ninghsia,’ said Ach-
metjan in Hami, 'for they stopped ten years ago. At first, before liberation, inflation killed most of their trade. And now there are the lorries.' They were passing right outside our windows: one after another, spurting dust, their drivers glued to the rocketing wheels that took the shaking of the desert and wonderfully failed to break apart.

He added with a smile: 'As you see, I am a man of Hami. And I tell you that generations have gone by, and we have not seen a train. It was promised; but it did not come. Now we shall see one. We shall see one early next year, and it is the government of Chairman Mao that brings it.'

This Achmetjan, as he told me afterwards, is in fact not a native of Hami but of Urumchi. He has the stolid smiling ease of an Uighur landlord or wealthy trader; but he has not had an easy life, and is indeed something of a revolutionary. A cobbler of poor peasant origins, his habit of eating a square meal every day dates only from 1950, when he came to be what he still is, deputy head of the Hami local government.

On this first occasion, though, we stopped in Hami only for half an hour while the plane refuelled: no more than enough to remember the grateful line of oasis green along the desert skyline and to the north, high above it, those eastern spurs of the Tien Shan whose snows had for so long served as beacon to caravans emerging from the tortured Gobi.

Once in the air again we had the glinting front of the Karliq Tagh, last buttress of the Tien Shan, like a crescent moon across our path; but the plane turned westward, its shadow dark above the fleeting trees of Hami until the desert emptiness began again. Between the mountains and the desert, bare and harsh and without traces of humanity, the earth swung and trembled far below, and looked as mercilessly hot as its reputation said it was. For this is where the earth drops into the Turfan Depression, many hundred feet below sea level: the hottest place in China, people say, and what I afterwards experienced there makes me easily believe them.

This entry into Chinese Turkestan would be enthralling no
matter how one made it. All the old travellers who have written of their journeys over the desert road to Turkestan have spoken of the magic of these snows of the Karliq Tagh, and of high Bogdo Ola beyond them, floating cool and white as they crawled painfully from the desert. They have spoken of the sense of space and star-filled loneliness in this country; even from an aeroplane one recognizes that. And perhaps an aeroplane offers the closest grasp of what these Inner Asian spaces have meant to humanity. Flying in from the Gobi you have the notion of an absolutely unknown land beyond these piling ranges of the Tien Shan: these horizons, as you fly towards them, seem literally to open on another world.

And so, in more ways than one, they do. This gap in tall mountains — the shadow of your plane a black fly darting on the earth far below — is the eastern gate to a series of peoples whose forms of thought and art and religion cross Asia and North Africa in a wide band to the Atlantic Ocean. This is the eastern tip of the Muslim world.

The old trails took their way westward along the north and along the south of the Tien Shan; and so does the aeroplane. This time we flew beside the southern flank of the mountains; coming back again, in July, we flew along the north. It depends on the weather.

We saw kariz for the first time here. At first I took these long lines of pot-holes, marching down from the foot of the hills, for newly planted saplings; but then I saw that they usually terminated in a trench of deep green cultivation. Invented long ago in Persia, these kariz are peculiar to Middle Asia, being a device for conveying snow-water across sun-baked desert to places of regular cultivation. They are called wells: really, they are tunnels running four or five feet below the surface and cut from many bore holes six or eight feet apart. Sometimes they are hundreds of yards long; sometimes thousands of yards. Wherever they surface — unless, that is, they have dried up — they flourish into an onion bulb of lush green growth. For this desert goes always to extremes: either it will grow nothing or it
will grow everything. Later I should see how there would be three or four houses of baked earth within each bulb of cultivation, and, within the encircling wall of these houses, simple courtyards with covered stoeps where anyone might pass a lifetime half asleep. For the good life in Turkestan depends not on wealth but on water.

I began to think of Urumchi. We should be there within three hours.

III

We arrived through a flaring storm that blew like fury down the pass, and drove my neighbour from Hunan, among others, painfully to his paper bag. But this graceless arrival was no doubt how it ought to be; for of Urumchi, in history, nothing good was known.

The old empire had called it Tihwa and used it for a place of exile. They had sent all manner of people to forgotten misery in these parts: inconvenient mandarins or criminals or thugs or Christians; and it had fallen to a reputation for sorrow and degradation where cruelty would be respectable, and fear and hatred the common rules of life. The German archaeologist Von Le Coq has in one of his books, relating to a stay at Urumchi in 1904, the photograph of a Chinese execution apparatus together with its dying victim that he saw in the street: 'a cage in which a condemned man was firmly fixed between planks, and every day the footboard was moved down a little until in the end — eight days it was said to last — death occurred . . .'. Beside it in the photograph there linger — looking at the camera, not at the dying man — a listless hawker selling melons and two or three incurious passers-by. Von Le Coq was a sturdy member of the Master Race, and not given to fits of nausea: but the sight of all this, he admits, 'made a very unpleasant impression on me'.

Mr Owen Lattimore, who went through Urumchi in 1927, was not much happier. He could leave his caravanserai at
night only ‘with a servant going before me with a lantern, because that is the rule, after the city gates have been closed, and both of us provided with sticks, to fend off the packs of curs who patrol the empty streets’. He mentions the mud of the streets: it was famous throughout Central Asia. Even now I should hear the old Gobi joke that Urumchi is the only city of the desert where camels may be drowned in mud.

Everything, of course, is relative. Mr Lattimore had struggled across the Gobi from its far eastern end. After weeks on camel-back he had come down from Kuchengtse, on the northern flank of the Tien Shan, by ‘the fast cart service that carries mails under contract with the Chinese Post Office’. These carts, he recalls, are ‘an imitation of the Russian telega, are four-wheeled, have no springs, and are drawn by three ponies abreast, at a jogging trot’. Mr Lattimore’s telega must have gone at the cracking pace of a Dickensian coach after all those weeks of padding camel-back: but nowadays the bus from Kuchengtse makes twenty miles an hour, and even that seems slow.

I saw no sample of the telega in Sinkiang, not even at Ili along the Siberian frontier; but another horse-drawn cart of Russian origin, the tarantass, proved an everyday affair. It was by tarantass that Von Le Coq had come down from Semipalatinsk in 1904, looking for hidden treasure (and finding it): he well describes it as ‘two pairs of wheels connected by a number of slender springy stems of young birch wood’. Under Siberian conditions this is rather an efficient vehicle: compared with the kind of peasant carts that we had in the partisan wars of Jugoslavia, the tarantass moves on oiled springs. But it is not to be recommended for travellers without a strongly developed sense of humour: they should, moreover, have confidence in their vertebral disks.

The sad tales of Urumchi grow sadder still after Mr Lattimore’s time. For Mr Lattimore, little knowing what would come, was able to report in the relatively peaceful days of 1927 that ‘Central Asia may be a little bit woolly about the edges,
but it is not wild’. After 1929, when the great Governor Yang was gathered to his fathers in unseemly haste, Sinkiang grew wild and worse than wild. Even the sedate Sir Eric Teichman, taking a sahib’s road through Sinkiang in 1936, and mindful of diplomatic repercussions to the nth degree, felt driven to call Urumchi ‘a city of sinister repute’. He was not happy there; and this was no wonder.

IV

Even in 1956, though much of the old city had vanished beneath the demolition hammer, and good new buildings lined new asphalt highways, one could still see misery and squalor. In spite of changes which are turning it into a modern capital, there is still much of old Siberia about the place; and it lacks the stir and glitter of the Uighur cities of the southern desert. Much of it is built of clay plastered thickly on lattice frames, with an effect that reminded me oddly of the brown clay walls of Kano and the towns of the Sahara. Islam aids this impression: it is not too difficult to imagine parts of Urumchi as the sister of Timbuktoo. But then one looks upward to the snowy peaks of Bogdo Ola, and the African impression vanishes.

Tse and I were met at the airport by a colleague of Tse’s in the foreign department of the Sinkiang-Uighur autonomous government. With Mr Hung we drove to a new hotel on the southern outskirts: it was, he told us, the third hotel they had built in Urumchi since 1949, and they had opened it only three weeks earlier. Over lunch he apologized for paint-blisters in the walls: lack of experience, he said, and over-much hurry to fulfil plans on time. Like other buildings of this new Urumchi, the design is standardized and unenterprising but by no means unattractive: because Sinkiang is an earthquake area, they prefer not to build above three storeys, and so they lay out wide-winged buildings and these they plaster an agreeable pink or blue. The Urumchi Hotel, moreover, has modern plumbing, and even the hot showers will often work. It has an
excellent cook from Shanghai, and its manager, who is also *chef de protocol* of the autonomous government, is a courteous Chinese whose long residence in Saigon has given him a close understanding of the foibles of foreign customers. It is an hotel to be recommended.

In the days that followed we saw many new things in Urumchi: hospitals, theatres, university colleges, workers' flats, clubs, factories, power stations; and we met a number of the people who run them. The pace of change in Sinkiang is slower than in China proper; but it is pretty fast for all that. Yet the people in the streets were the spectacle that really drew the eye.

They made a panorama of the peoples of Inner Asia: bearded Kazakhs in leather boots and ragged blue breeches; shopkeepers in small flat-topped caps, Russian style, who might have walked straight out of old Kazan; dark Uighur girls from the oases; Kirghiz from the hills of Altai, their eyes like those of a bird of prey, clear and cold; Chinese in cotton jacket and trousers. I took to wandering through the streets and alleys before the morning's work had begun, and saw how this had been a town built for tumult and revolt. Its old dwellings turn their crude backs blindly on the street, or else confront it with iron-shuttered windows and stout timber gates. Within these gates families live in groups together, in little rooms joined to a central yard; and these, in the old days, had been miserable fortifications where they had huddled with their animals and carts and all they had. They had packed themselves close together; but at least they had enjoyed a little safety. For Urumchi had been a place of racial riot and disaster, of one rabble turned against another. The Chinese had lived within a high wall at the centre of the town; outside this wall the Uighurs and Tungans (Chinese-speaking Muslims) had lived within another wall; and beyond these concentric walls the rest of the population had fortified and barricaded itself as well as it might.

In those days Urumchi had boasted no fewer than a dozen gaols, according to Saidi Ibrahim; and I should think that Saidi
would know, for as a good Uighur nationalist he had sat in one of the gaols for quite a time before 1949, and in 1956 was deputy mayor of the city. Moreover he is not a bitter man, likely to be given to much exaggeration: he is a jolly Uighur in the late thirties, wears a black and silver bonnet pushed back above his beaming forehead, and dislikes propaganda. He used to drop in sometimes for a drink and a chat towards the end of the day. He would talk about the old days.

Urumchi remained, for me, a melancholy place. Its colours help towards that: they are gravel grey and the brown of hot dry dust, the buff of mud walls, the pink and primrose splash of new buildings here and there: small faded colours for the most part, as though the place had not as yet quite succeeded in believing in its new respectability. Perhaps it is simply that in 1956 one could all too easily imagine from its surviving squalor what the miseries of the past must have been. Soon it may be too late for that: although, as Saidi Ibrahim remarked with ceremonial modesty, 'there is still much to be done.'

But already the tarantass and the loping camel, the donkeys and the porters, the meagre ponies and the meagre riders and the whirl and scurry of dust from heels and hoofs, the animal traction of Inner Asia, are supplemented in Urumchi by sixteen Skoda buses. And far away beyond the moonlit gravel of the Urumchi river, there are the yellow lights of a new industrial settlement.

v

We came to know quite a number of people in Urumchi. They were not melancholy. 'It is a time of transition,' said Dr Aysa of the Sinkiang Institute, an arts college which, he said, would shortly grow to university status. 'We are making progress. Things change. People also change.'

This was the atmosphere of China proper, of an all-absorbing interest not in what was nor even, very much, in what is, but in what is just about to be — now, tomorrow, for you and
me, for all of us. . . . In a time of overwhelming social pre-
occupation there is less room for individual worry; or perhaps
it is simply that the individual worry becomes a social worry,
and therefore hurts less. Those who get left behind, of course,
tend to get left very far behind; and they wear a puzzled sad
expression: just as those who rush ahead too quickly, and expect
the millennium for three o’clock in the afternoon, soon rattle
their slogans like peas in a drum. One can meet both kinds.
But most of the people we got to know in Sinkiang belonged
neither to this kind nor the other; but were pushing soberly
ahead with their jobs. Later one would realize, gradually, that
in this country of ancient stagnation the forward movement was
a social movement, was a conscious shifting of whole peoples
from one stage to another. But it needed time to see that.

In those first days I noticed an insignificant man who was
much in the hotel lounge. I took him for a porter; but Tse dis-
covered that in fact he was a feldsher, a partly qualified physician
who was available for consultation by any hotel guest whose
stomach might have failed him, or was suffering a minor ail-
ment. I persuaded him to tell me his story; and it proved a
story worth hearing. But to get the flavour of it, even faintly,
you have to have some notion of Dr Abdel Kader as he really
is. In appearance he is without polish: a short slender figure in
a flat blue cap and an old suit of blue serge that is cut very
much after the Russian style; to those not used to this style his
bell-bottomed trousers would look absurd. Add to all this an
extreme modesty of manner, and his resemblance to medical
colleagues nearer home would not be obvious to any European
traveller. At first I thought that his shyness might come from
poverty: then I was humbled. After getting to know him better
I saw that Abdel Kader was unaware of his shabby clothes:
his modesty came from the fact of not being fully qualified.

Poverty is also relative. He earned the wage of a skilled in-
dustrial worker, no less and no more; and it was not much.
‘But my father never wore shoes,’ he said. ‘My father never
worked for himself.’
He had started life in the service of a Kashgar landowner, having previously managed to secure a few years at school. This landowner had paid him in kind, not in cash, and unless things had changed he would have continued in that way, he thought, until the end of his life. Then there came 1949, the year of great change, and Abdel Kader went back to school with a State bursary to help him: thence he travelled to Urumchi and studied at the Sinkiang Institute, and thence—the revolution advancing now in full flood—he went to a Chinese medical school at Sian, where he stayed for five years.

‘In 1949,’ he said, ‘they found we had only six proper doctors and ten assistants in the whole of Sinkiang.’

How did he see the future? There were, he thought, two possibilities: either to continue as an assistant doctor—and that would be no disgrace but a useful thing to do—or else win a place at the new medical college, now being established near Urumchi, and become in time a fully qualified doctor and perhaps a specialist. He would like to do the second. Would he be able? He smiled wryly, dark eyes glowing in his thin face: he was not sure. There would be a lot of competition.

He persuaded me to visit the buildings of the new medical college. It would be opened a few months later, but early students were already at work there, and resident staff were beginning to arrive, mostly from China. We drove out to its white walls on the northern side of the city.

I should think this medical college must be one of the great material achievements of Chinese Central Asia. It is a series of well-built and spaciously ranged three-storey buildings. Dr Shao Teh, its English-speaking deputy director, told me that its air-conditioned laboratories were splendidly equipped: nothing like them had been seen before this side of Sian. They would revolutionize the whole region’s approach to public health. By 1967 the college was to produce a harvest of qualified doctors, most of whom would be drawn from the non-Chinese peoples of Sinkiang. And yet this country was yesterday in the pre-medical age.
Others like Dr Abdel Kader opened windows into Inner Asia. Thanks to Dr Aysa, at the Sinkiang Institute, I was able to talk to students there; and thanks to Tse, I was able to understand them. For local interpreters failed to appear. In Peking we had told ourselves confidently that we were bound to find people who would be able to interpret into English or French; but this confidence was ill founded. There appeared instead, on our first day at Urumchi, an engaging character called Yang Shih. Mr Hung, who is a diplomat of many qualities, introduced him as ‘your interpreter’. But alas, Mr Yang’s English was no better than my Chinese, or not much, and developed an uncontrollable stutter after the first three words, and remained in this seized-up condition until, returning to Urumchi weeks later, we bade farewell to him. We grew fond of him in the end; and Tse would regularly lecture him on his failings, which were mainly on the side of omission rather than commission and could be traced, perhaps, to a certain absence of enthusiasm for anything that seemed like work. But Mr Yang would only smile as though Tse had said something exquisitely funny, and make up for his lack of English with a host of small kindnesses.

This being so, Tse had to shoulder the weary burden of long interpretation. He had not come to Sinkiang for that; but he frowned cheerfully and made a noble job of it. Most interpreters either fall silent at tricky moments, or else launch into round-about explanations: Tse did neither of these things. He developed a technique of his own, and would peer sternly through his glasses at any recalcitrant interviewee and pound the man with questions of his own. As we became gradually immersed in Sinkiang affairs we began to supplement each other’s curiosity and memory; and there were not many subjects, I think, on which he preferred to turn his back.

We covered altogether some thirteen hundred miles by road vehicle of one kind or another, as well as quite a few miles on horseback and several thousand by aeroplane. We talked to scores of people. Most of these people — whether casually met
or interviewed at length — spoke easily of the immediate past and of the present. They invariably divided their thoughts into 'after liberation' and 'before liberation': the difference between so many things, and often enough the difference between life and death. In the end I abbreviated these, in my notes, to BL and AL. But of the less recent past they spoke with difficulty or else they did not speak of it at all. Why drag that up? Sufficient that it was gone. Only when I pressed for this, and Tse had explained why a foreigner should care to know of the happenings of fifteen and twenty years earlier, would they begin to recall their past. Often enough, then, astonishing and terrible things would be said; and anyone who happened to be listening — and in Sinkiang you are seldom without an audience — would nod their heads or shake their heads, according to the condition of their own knowledge, and grow quiet with expectation. This expectation was seldom disappointed. For these are people who have not yet lost the gift of good talk; and more than once I saw, from the way that others were moved to silence or emotion, that I was losing epic turns of speech.

VI

Old Bogdo Ola, far above, shines in the summer clouds: he is the sacred mountain of the Uighurs, or so they say, and mostly hides his pinnacles in mist. Even now, when the weather is calm and warm, you cannot see them.

Brown-bodied Uighur kids are playing in the stream that flows near by, while their mothers and their handsome elder sisters squat beside the water and hammer at their weekly wash. These women are not abashed by passing strangers; and they do not wear the veil.

Long-haired Bactrian camels tread silently along the edge of the road, carrying sacks of coal for domestic use. They have come from open-cast workings beyond the town: workings that are said to contain the richest seams in all China, but await the
coming of the railway before the pick and shovel and the Bactrian camel can be displaced.

The old and the new jostle each other unceasingly.

From the windows of the Sinkiang Institute, chatting with Dr Aysa, I can see the children and the women and the camels, and beyond and far above the gleaming flanks of Bogdo Ola. On their northern side, looking away from us, they give upon the plains of Jungaria and eventually upon the mountains of the Altai and Siberai: between here and there one would have little but the dust and grit of semi-desert travel. Out of that Inner Asian emptiness, long ago, the raiding horsemen of Jinghis Khan had ridden into Europe.

Maiti was in their direct descent. I never doubted this from the moment he pranced into the room, frowned, sat down a little stiffly, and smiled with a glitter of sloe-dark eyes and brilliant teeth. Dr Aysa said: 'Now this one comes from the Altai. He's a Kazakh and his name is Maiti.'

He was tall and slender, splendidly made and balanced, very confident of himself. His eyes were not really black, but they were so dark within their outward and upward curving lids that they seemed black; and they acquired, in smiling, a glitter as of polished stone. They were also shrewd to the point of cunning: this Lochinvar, I thought, would kill or be killed in good causes or in bad, according to the way life drove him. He would be neither soft nor neutral nor afraid. Kazakh and not Cossack (a different creature altogether) he was none the less the stuff of Sholohov's heroes: with him, at any rate, the rivers of Altai would rival the Don.

His family's pastures were six days' journey from Urumchi. To reach them, he told us, he would ride in a bus for five days across the Jungarian steppe, and then would take a horse to the foothills of Altai. In winter his family would be there: in summer they might be miles away among the high pastures.

'What does he mean, take a horse?'

Dr Aysa bubbled with laughter. He himself is an Uighur from Turfan and he never takes a horse, although he may, at
home on leave, sometimes take a donkey. 'These Kazakhs have many horses. They live with horses.'

Maiti nodded. He was beginning to investigate me with much the same curiosity as I was investigating him. But he answered questions according to the rules of hospitality: that is, he answered them carefully, and his eyes glittered with a tolerant interest. There were seven in his family. They had possessed, before the liberation, fifty sheep and seven horses. Now they had sixty sheep and ten horses and one camel and two milch cows. Why this improvement? Because, said Maiti, prices had improved, taxes were lower, military service was ended.

'Land reform?'

No, of course not: no land reform in the stock-breeding areas. They were working 'in the direction of co-operatives'.

Dr Aysa said with a chuckle: 'Some of those Kazakhs, I can tell you, have thousands of head of stock'. The herds were not being pooled.

What had the liberation meant to Maiti? Security, it seemed, and education. He went into this at length. Before 1949 he had gone to a primary school whenever that was possible — mostly in the winter months when the families were gathered together in the valleys of Altai; but in 1949 he had managed to enter a junior-secondary school (13 to 16 age-group), although he himself was already sixteen. After three years there he had done well enough for his local authority to secure a place for him at the Sinkiang Institute. Next year he would complete his five-year course in mathematics, and graduate as a school-master.

'He is a typical case,' said Dr Aysa. 'He would have gone on watching the herds otherwise. Now we have just managed to catch him, and he is a clever one. You can see that. Of course, he's still behind. Lots of them are. But they are catching up. We are all catching up.'

The good Dr Aysa is a modest man who loves his work: he sees no limit to the possibilities. 'That boy, you see — he's a
member of the last generation that's partly lost. We can't catch them all, we haven't the means. But the next generation — the children who now are six and eight and ten — they'll find it different. We'll have the means for them. We'll have colleges and teachers. We'll have experience.'

This optimism is rooted in fact. Eight years before, Sinkiang had fewer than 200,000 children in primary schools, a proportion much lower than most African colonies. There were 9 secondary schools with fewer than 8,000 pupils; and no means of higher education, because the Sinkiang Institute, although founded twenty years earlier, had never aimed above the secondary-school level. This was a colonial area of great backwardness.

But now, in 1956, there were over 400,000 children in primary schools, and about 36,500 in a total of 63 secondary schools. There were 4 institutes of higher learning either founded or founding; and these, by the end of the year, would have about 3,500 students of whom most would be non-Chinese.

'So you see, we are doing something here.'

After Maiti, there came a student of a different kind, a brown-eyed dreamy-eyed peasant lad from remote Khotan, far in the west, who listened and smiled and dreamed and found it hard to put his dreaming into words. He was a good contrast to the Kazakh from Altai: here were the two extremes of these many peoples — the brilliant hard-riding herdsman from the great snow mountains of the north, and the easy-going Uighur from the oases of the desert.

Osman Türde was the son of a poor peasant, landless until 1952, who had somehow managed to get himself from Khotan to Urumchi (a fortnight's riding in a bus) and was learning the pianoforte. Whyever the pianoforte? Well, everyone had chosen an instrument and so he had chosen the piano. Everyone? Well, everyone interested in music, you understand. . . .

Dr Aysa burst out laughing. 'Why not the pianoforte,
please? Are we thought to teach only politics and politics and politics?' Dr Aysa has quite a grasp of the world situation.

Osman Türde opened another window on Turkestan. For if Maiti had behind him the ringing harness of the steppes, Osman Türde possessed in his lineage the ancient history of Khotan. Where Maiti was pale of skin and sharp of bone and feature, Osman was dark and tender, almost Indian. Through twenty-two centuries his ancestors might have seen Euthydemus the Bactrian Greek, or intermarried with the men and women of Northern India and Kashmir, or met the armies of the Han Dynasty as they came into Khotan after months and even years upon their westward-probing way. Behind Osman’s dreaming there would lie the folklore of many hundred years.

The snow and the sand of Turkestan have made two kinds of humanity. Maiti and Osman: they are startlingly different, but they share a history that is woven deep into their lives, a history they are at last beginning to remember.

VII

Three of us were strolling in the public gardens at Urumchi. This was where the celebrated Lin Tse-hsu, a century earlier, had built his palace and dug his fish pools and planted willows and flowering shrubs, and consoled himself for the exile he had earned after burning the British opium at Canton. Faced with British invasion, the imperial government had thought well to lose sight of Commissioner Lin for the time being, and had banished him in 1842 to govern Sinkiang. But after his death they had canonized him according to the saintly possibilities of Confucian belief, for he had tried to save China from the scourge of opium. The palace he built in exile, a fairy-tale building of high-peaked eaves and porcelain gods and demons, is the only building of old Urumchi with any claim to be remembered.

T’uan, a gentle Chinese who is native to the city, had shown
us round the gardens. We had inspected a revolting little zoo. We had watched a game of basket-ball. We had drunk tea. We had spoken of Lin Tse-hsu. T’uan said a little hopelessly: ‘In that pavilion there is an exhibition of modern plans’. We entered the pavilion wearily, for there is nothing more wearying for me (and I believe for Tse also, although of course I did not ask him) than an exhibition of modern plans. Within that dragon-guarded palace we stared at plans and projects until T’uan said: ‘There is also a museum of antiquities. It is upstairs.’

We went upstairs and met Usman Jan.

Later on we came to know him quite well, and he too could open a window on Inner Asia. A rubicund and smiling man, he is from Hami, the most easterly of all the Sinkiang oases and the hinge of two great communities, the Chinese and the Central Asian. We looked around Usman Jan’s little museum — ‘next year we are going to build a proper one, the plans are already approved’ — and saw his coloured reproductions of the rock-temple paintings from Kizil and Bezeklik, and his cases of porcelain from China, and his odds and ends. But mostly we listened to his story.

Such personal stories began casually, with a chance remark here and there; but little by little they would develop until everyone gathered to listen. Then there was often the feeling of a long and long-hidden history unrolled before one’s eyes; and perhaps it is always like this in times of great change. Ordinary people like Usman Jan remember they have a past and therefore a future, and they cease to be ordinary.

‘I had some schooling in my childhood,’ he said, ‘although my father was a poor peasant who worked for payment in food and not for money. But they saw that I was not stupid, and in 1941 they sent me to a teachers’ training school at Urumchi. I was eighteen then.

‘But nothing prospered, for that was the worst time of the bloody Sheng Shih-tsai. Exactly how I cannot tell, I became a
pupil in a school for training police officers.' He shrugged his shoulders and looked to see how we should take this: we should not think that he had chosen to serve the Kuomintang. We nodded tactfully.

Those were years of militant nationalism among the non-Chinese peoples of Sinkiang. Revolt was in the air. It seeped even into the police officers' school, and it reached Usman Jan. He acquired 'subversive literature'. It consisted of Soviet history magazines — 'I liked reading history' — and a pamphlet, written from a leftwing standpoint, attacking the Kuomintang.

'These things were found in my possession. So they took me and asked me whence I had them. When I would not say they beat me, made me kneel for hours on pieces of small coal, put me in cold water to the neck and that in wintertime, but they got nothing from me. So they threw me out of the prison and out of that training school, and I was free again.' After many ups and downs, he had finally come to rest in 1955 as curator of this little museum. He smiled happily: his was a story with a happy ending.

It was not much of a collection; but it was the first of its kind in Sinkiang. Usman said: 'People are collecting for us.' He showed me six silver coins. 'They were found in the ancient city of Karakhoja last year. In a box of unknown substance taken from a tomb. The peasants brought them to us.'

These dull-glowing coins lay in the palm of my hand, thin silver wafers from the past. On one side they had a wild king's head and a script I could not recognize: on the other an altar with two attendants. After returning to London I showed drawings of them to Mr John Walker at the British Museum, and Mr Walker immediately identified them as Sassanian coins of the sixth century A.D. But for Usman Jan they were still a mystery, and yet more than a mystery: they were a pointer to a long and splendid past in which he, an Uighur of Hami, could take pride. No longer a despised 'turban'd head' — the Chinese
equivalent of 'nigger' — he belonged now to a people that was also a nation. And this nation could look back on famous men and famous things.

Tse and I went down to Turfan; and glimpsed the reality that lay behind this modest but determined claim.
CHAPTER FOUR

TO THE WALLS OF KARAKHOJA

What may yet be found in China only a bold man would predict.

HERRLEE GLESSNER CREEL

I

Our host in Turfan was Niadze Mehmet, chairman of the town council, a tense and energetic Uighur who spoke Chinese and had, I believe, a strain of Tungan in his recent ancestry. We got to know him over supper in Turfan’s new municipal restaurant. Candles flickered in the covered courtyard: they softened the knife-hard lines of Niadze’s energetic profile, and blurred the gathering of white-robed men who ate at small wooden tables, and gently persuaded us that what we most wanted in the world was to go to sleep. That first night was a sleepy introduction.

We had come down by the highroad from Urumchi, through Big Wind Pass and its black-throated gorges and across the grey glacis that reaches to the small red hills and the desert sand; and for me, at least, this was stepping over the threshold of Turkestan and closing the door behind me.

All day long we had passed the trucks that link Sinkiang with China: they had swung up past us, one after another, with their backboards drumming and their dust erupting through our windows. They would make the journey from railhead across the Gobi in five days and nights, thirstily, exhaustingly: each carried an inner tube, for water, that was slung upon a cross-trees beside the cabin, and their drivers, as they went by, had upon them the remote paralysis of men who have stared ahead until nothing but the road can matter any more. These silent figures stay in my mind, their faces grey in the swirling dust,
their peaked caps like helmets: they had the touch of the true heroic about them, for each of them, on that immense road from railhead through Turfan, was driving history into Sinkiang. But now, in Niadze’s municipal restaurant, they seemed remote: even the memory of the fluttering surveyors’ flags, pinned to the rock all through the pass, and marking where next year’s railway line should go, had lost their power of connection. I felt, just then, inseparably part of Sinkiang.

Niadze was proud of his municipal restaurant; and with reason. Turfan had never seen its like before. They had built a series of little rooms round a wide courtyard, and this courtyard they had roofed high with matting so as to shield customers from the heat of the day. Its supporting pillars of trimmed poplar they had painted white and then overpainted with red and blue ornamentation. Now, in the evening, its customers were pale shadows in the light of candles and of one or two paraffin lamps. It was a gentle reassuring scene; and even the damp meat balls and the merciless boiled mutton of Turkestan took on another flavour for a time.

Niadze spoke in whispers, no doubt in honour of a foreign visitor: the first, it seemed, that anyone could remember. His thin face was a pattern of vertical lines, cut across the top by the flat blue peak of his official’s cap in a way that emphasized the self-confidence and authority he seemed to have. He reminded me of peasants I had known during the war, of obscure and modest men who had grasped authority and grown overnight into leaders of other men: a tough and incorruptible character, this Niadze, I would guess, and in Turfan, at any rate, there would be no fooling with the petty cash, no fiddling of municipal supplies. A peasant among peasants, he would speak their language, share their expectations, know their hopes and fears. He would be one of those numberless many who carried forward the Chinese revolution: another proof, if one were needed, of its deep-probing popularity. In the days that followed I came to respect this tense and modest man, and learned much from him.
He took it quite as a natural thing that one should wish to see antiquities; and he knew a little about them too. There were, he rightly said, three known places of antiquity in the neighbourhood of Turfan: one of them, Yar-koto, was distant, but the other two, Bezeklik and Karakhoja, were near by and also close together. I knew this well enough; but I listened to their names, on the tongue of this Turfanlik born and bred, with the satisfaction of a traveller who has reached at last the place where he would be. This hearing of exotic names is one of the pleasures of travel: later there was the same sense of fulfilment when we crossed a river above Kashgar, and Mamud said in his sighing voice, Kizil darya. From here to the Oxus, and beyond, the word for river would always be darya: but it is one thing to read darya on the map, and another to have the long soft vowels in one's ear.

Before going out to Bezeklik and Karakhoja we had a day of wandering in the bazaar and talking to people; and when evening came Niadze took me to see where some of the famous grapes of Turfan are grown upon a near-by hillside. We strolled among the long vines and admired the cucumbers, fat and green, that were now in season, and the small red plums they also grew. The chairman of this newly formed co-operative said that before the liberation they had seldom grown more than 150 lb. of grapes to a mou (one-sixth of an acre): now they could grow an average of 700 lb. or more. It was all a matter, he explained, of being able to use available water to the best advantage. I thought of distant Kao P'ei Tien, on the outskirts of Peking, and of its chairman Hsin Ch'ing: this bearded brown-eyed Uighur in his long white grown and little skullcap was very different from the solemnly precise Hsin Ch'ing, but the things he was telling me and the things that he and his co-operative were doing and achieving were very much alike. The everyday reality of Sinkiang can never have been so close to China proper as it is now.

Evening came in long cool twilight. Niadze and the vineyard chairman had relapsed into sleepy conversation of their
own; people were moving home to bed. Even the naked children had ceased to think me strange and possibly dangerous, and yawned in the dust near by. A woman came to me through the shadows with a capful of plums and emptied them into my hands. They spilled and the children scrambled for them lazily. I sat down on the bank and the earth smelled warm and good. I was moved with a pleasant dreamy happiness: I was here at last, and it was good to be here.

Along the edge of the hill, against a darkening sky, the vine rows climbed and fell. They too stood for history. They had come here with the Greeks, a full two and twenty centuries ago.

II

Next morning, going up to Bezeklik along the Simgin gorge, we saw our first rock temples. They were gaping holes in the cliff, fifty feet above the new trunk road to Hami. We stopped the Gaz 69 we were travelling in — it is a superior sort of jeep, Soviet made — and scrambled up to them. In one of them, a high arched cavern cut from the rock a thousand years ago, I found the little that remained of a superb fresco whose motif was none other than the vine. This grim valley, now having not so much as a blade of grass that I could see, had once been a place of pilgrimage, famous throughout Middle Asia and filled with people.

Soon after six o’clock we had taken breakfast of meat balls and bread balls beneath the tall awning of the municipal restaurant, Niadze’s pride and joy, and started on our way before the sun was warm. The whole of this tract of land, around Turfan, is well below desert level, and reflects the heat of the Central Asian sun as though it were a brazen bowl: its boiling fury is notorious in China. But Niadze affirmed that it was still rather cold in the Turfan oasis. He wore a thick jacket and a muffler and, I believe, thick underclothes; and even so I have seen him look cold in the middle of the day. ‘In August,’ he conceded, ‘it does get hot here’. Yet by noon, that May, I
would be gasping like a fish out of water. Niadze thought it rather affected of me, but was too polite to say so. Whenever I complained of the heat, he would smile and raise a thin eyebrow.

For twenty-five miles eastward from Turfan we held to the main desert road with the summits of the Tien Shan on one hand and the bubbling gravel of the desert on the other, and made a bold and swirling forty miles an hour as far as the narrow oasis of Karakhoja. Beyond this the road swings up left-handed through the Simgin eris, the valley of the Simgin river; and almost at once, high in these chickenshit hills, you begin to see the man-made caverns for which the valley is famous.

Yet it must always have been a barren sort of place. All these little foothills below the Tien Shan are bare and ochreous and extremely hot, the withered stamping ground of some monstrous brood of fowls; and even the sunbaked people of Turfan and Karakhoja call them the mountains of fire. But still you see, far above, the white meadows of the Tien Shan and perceive more easily than usual why those cool peaks are called celestial.

We were quite a party, for the people's authorities of Turfan were delighted that a foreigner should wish to visit their antiquities; and as well as Niadze there were two committee members and a girl from the Bureau of Antiquities in Urumchi, a shy Uighur woman in threadbare clothes who worked with Usman Jan and was engaged, I believe, in some long-range project for the preservation of what may still be preserved. They were proud to show off the splendours of their land: they were like decent poor people who had come into a fortune, but were determined not to let it turn their heads.

A few miles up the Simgin valley we turned off the road and bumped across a barely worn track that led up into a narrower gorge. Here we had to mend a log bridge after which we charged uphill over deep dust tracks until, some twenty minutes
later, we came within sight of a steep cliffside, and saw, in a long terrace, the temples of Bezeklik.

III

The history of this long tract of Middle Asia has vigour and importance for two reasons; and they are both exciting.

Across it, little by little, the two great civilizations of the Ancient World, Chinese and Greek, had approached each other and at last met. Out of this meeting, as well as out of their own genius, the native peoples of the country had evolved a culture of their own; this culture was like nothing else in the world.

What the Greeks had known of Middle Asia, at any rate before Alexander's march to the East, was nine parts myth. Herodotus, writing a hundred years before Alexander, has a list of peoples to the eastward: the last of these were the Hyperboreans, 'whose land comes down to the sea'; and the last but one were the one-eyed Arimaspians, who lived 'beyond the griffins who guard the gold; and perhaps the one-eyed Arimaspians were the people who lived in the oases of Sinkiang. Then Alexander of Macedon crossed the Oxus in his great thrust into Asia, and founded his city of Alexandria-the-Furthest, what is now Khojent, on the banks of the Jaxartes river. Even here he was still to the west of the Pamir; but instead of pressing farther eastward (into lands, that is, of which his Persian victims knew little or nothing) he turned south and crossed the Hindu Kush into North-western India. Yet the trade routes certainly went across the Pamir into Sinkiang even in those remote times; and perhaps Alexander sent spies and pioneers to inspect what lay beyond.

His Bactrian Greek successors certainly did. Exchanges became regular with the Further East, and Greek writers spoke now of the 'silent trade' between western merchants and eastern merchants that was done at the legendary 'Stone Tower', thought to have stood at Tashkurgan in the High Pamir.
Greek settlers from Asia Minor, and even from Greece herself, began flowing into these newly conquered lands. They brought much with them, altered much they found. Their capital in Bactria, Balkh, became ‘Queen of Cities’, ‘Paradise of the Earth’; and its buildings covered sixteen miles.

‘We have to think,’ says Tarn, ‘not of the Afghanistan of today, but of a second Babylonia; a land of irrigation canals, where the Oxus and each of its tributaries were utilized to the utmost for cultivation, where Merv was the centre of one vast garden, and where the Samarkand district . . . was such a rich complex of water courses and husbandry that its river . . . was known to the Greeks as . . . “the most precious”.’

Eastward along the golden road to Samarkand there travelled new men and new ideas, and in these cities of what would later become Turkestan they founded a Greek civilization.

The first and greatest of the Greek kings of Bactria, Euthydemus, probably crossed the Pamir early in the second century before Christ and entered the important and independent kingdom of Khotan. Whether Euthydemus possessed Khotan or merely traded with it, he certainly knew it, and through Khotan he also knew China. This way, and at about this time, nickel was brought out of China to the Mediterranean; and Bactria was the pivot of exchange.

For the Chinese, meanwhile, were pressing in from the east. Their vigorous Han Dynasty emperors united the homeland of China and pushed armies into the troubled borderlands; and in 128 B.C. their first great ambassador to the West, the notable Chang Ch’ien, came after many adventures to Ferghana on the western side of the Pamir. He followed where nameless traders had already led; but after him came the armies of the Emperor Wu-ti. By 121 B.C. these Chinese armies had established themselves as far as Lop Nor, at the eastern end of the Takla Makan desert. The little oasis kingdoms of the southern desert put themselves under Chinese imperial protection; and
in 106 B.C. regular caravans began to traverse this Central Asian road between China and the West.

And then, for more than two hundred years (and with only one important break of some thirty years after A.D. 25), there was regular if difficult communication between the world of Rome and the world of China: and it remains a grand coincidence of history that Rome and China, during those two hundred years of contact, were each in the full splendour of its age. 'The traffic', says Herrmann, 'developed incredibly fast. Every year up to twelve caravans, of which each might include 100 men and many pack animals, left the homeland' for the long journey westward through the Jade Gate and across the deserts that lay beyond.

These slow-moving caravans joined the two ends of the world together: they marked the beginnings of a unity of civilization throughout the world that would still be growing to maturity for another two thousand years. But they also brought new life and wealth to the peoples of the Turkestan oases. Chinese enterprise saw to it that these should prosper: already they had gained much through trade with the peoples of North-western India, beyond the Karakorum, and with Bactria and Ferghana beyond the Pamir, and now they would have regular contact with the Chinese too. They offered staging posts along these great 'Silk Roads' between East and West, and they must have given shelter to a wonderful chaos and confusion of tongues and travellers: the German archaeological expeditions after 1902 found documents in no fewer than seventeen different languages and twenty-four different scripts.

Chinese influence became paramount. 'Colonies of military cultivators [says the Hou Han-shu, written in Han times] were established in that fruitful country. Along the great roads, and at determined distances, resthouses were set up for the changing of horses and the refreshment of couriers. In every season there passed bearers of urgent messages and interpreters from this part or that part.
Those who came for trade, foreigners or not, struck daily on the gates that these might be opened to them.

These oasis peoples had already ceased to be primitive. When the Chinese came with their thirst for information and their habit of precise reporting they found — say the Han annals of 30 B.C. — that the oasis of Kucha had as many as 21,000 men capable of bearing arms: even the smallest of these ‘kingdoms’, Wen-su (Uch-Turfan today) had 1,500 possible soldiers, while Khotan, the most important of them, is recorded in A.D. 100 as having 30,000 men who could be called to war. Behind these figures lay wealth and substance.

There survives from this period the poem of a daughter of a Han emperor who was married to one of these remote kings:

To the world’s end I was married,
   My lord is the King of Wu-sun:
To his strange tents I was carried,
   With fleece their walls are hung . . .

She had ‘mutton for food, and the milk of mares’; and she was not content. The diet of Wu-sun, which became Ili in the country of the Kazakhs, has not altered to this day; and nor have their ‘fleece-hung’ tents.

By the third century A.D. Chinese influence waned with the decline of the Han empire: this became, in southern Turkestan, the period of Kushan influence exercised from the Indian side of the Karakorum. Already these oases had a culture of rare complexity and unusually broad range: now it was widened again. For Buddhism came northward over the mountains out of India, and won the oasis kings and their peoples before moving on to China. The imperial couriers might fail: the traders and the priests still toiled along the desert roads. In this way, as archaeologists would find some two thousand years later, the Greco-Buddhist art of the Hindu Kush, of Gandhara, passed through Central Asia into China.
Out of the desert sand above a long abandoned oasis, east of Khotan, Aurel Stein picked up a seal fifty years ago. It is a seal with two faces: on one face it bears an unmistakable Greek head, perhaps of Pallas Athene, and on the other a well-stamped Chinese character. But the document it sheltered was written neither in Greek nor Chinese, nor yet in Latin nor Persian, but in Kharoshthi, script of the Kushan rulers of Northern India. Here, in unique juxtaposition, the leading cultures of the ancient world came briefly together.

Although these links were soon broken by upheavals in west and east, the oasis peoples of Eastern Turkestan continued to evolve their own peculiar hothouse culture. They had practised irrigation from time immemorial: it was the condition of their presence here at all. They had absorbed successive waves of nomad invaders from the north and east, and last of all the war-like Tochari, fleeing after 178 B.C. from their lands in Kansu. Now they settled down to exploit all these contributory riches; and for several hundred years after the period of east–west contact there was sheltered here a wealthy and fantastic theocratic feudalism. It is from this time that the great rock monasteries date: the temples with their brilliant frescoes and their secular extravagance.

When the Chinese again re-established themselves in Eastern Turkestan, under the great T’ang emperors of the seventh century, new peoples were already pressing out of the wilderness into the ‘earthly heaven’ of these envied oases. Kashgar and Kucha may seem bare enough now: to the nomads of those early centuries they stood for everything that was glamorous and lush. And the latest and most powerful of these nomad peoples, as the T’ang generals found, were a Turkic people from the Mongolian steppe who would call themselves, a little later on, Uighurs.

These Uighurs were a military people, but receptive of new
ideas. Like the Tochari long before them they knew a good thing when they saw it; they took to settled life and established their overlordship in most of the Turkestan oases. Nobody knows how many they were; but they were enough to stamp their ways and their language on the peoples whom they found. From the fifth or sixth centuries onwards, the culture of Eastern Turkestan is primarily Uighur.

They found a strong Buddhism and a numerous priesthood. The great Chinese traveller, Hsuan Tsang, who travelled this way early in the seventh century, said that there were tens of monasteries and a thousand monks in Aqsu alone: the king and his councillors met twice a month but discussed what they meant to do, before they did it, with the heads of the monasteries. 'The people', comments Hsuan Tsang, 'in general are cunning and greedy, loans are often transacted between father and son. Virtues are not treasured but wealth is worshipped.' Fa-Hsien, passing through three centuries earlier, had come to much the same unkind conclusion.

What this lavishly decadent feudalism could really mean was displayed for later generations in the famous rock temples of Kizil and Qumtara, above the Kucha oasis in the foothills of the Tien Shan. Here, beside the smooth Greekish Buddhas and the vineleaves and the twirling ornamentation, arrogant and shining with their wealth, were paintings of knights and princes and sumptuous women: the men with thin curling moustaches in the Sassanian style, and the women with long gowns and wimples and fine jewellery about their wrists and arms.

'At first sight [writes Le Coq of the "knights' fresco" in the temples above Kucha] the benefactors' pictures remind most vividly of pictorial representations in Gothic mortuary chapels. The men stand with legs far apart, balancing themselves on the tips of their toes, in their long coats made of brocade or wonderfully embroidered, with a three-cornered cape. They wear the knights' belt of metal disks and, hanging from this, a long straight sword with a handle
in the form of a cross, and a rounded or flat pommel amazingly like the European swords of the Carlovingian or early Gothic period.

'Near the knights stand the ladies, all in tight bodices cut low in front, with bell sleeves and a little bell-trimming on the pointed front of the bodice. They wear long skirts with trains, and their bearing recalls strongly that affected position with shoulders drawn back, and body forced forward, that may so often be seen in European paintings from Holbein to van Dyck.'

Such was fashion in Eastern Turkestan some thirteen hundred years ago.

One need not take the European echoes too seriously: Le Coq could never really believe that a good thing might originate anywhere than in Europe. What is certain is that these Uighur knights and ladies took the measure of their manners and their dress from Sassanian neighbours to the west.

And yet these rock temples were not Persian. They were Chinese and Indian and Sassanian and Uighur in a special synthesis of their own. They were Buddhist, but they were also Manichaean and Nestorian. And they spoke of heaven and earth in many different ways. Beside the knights and ladies and the Buddhas and the Boddhisattvas one may enjoy the pleasant dreams of monks who longed for lotus pools and ladies of their own. Having none, they drew and painted them. In these remote and solitary temples of the Tien Shan the carnal damsels with their breasts as big as footballs, their nipples a mere milkless point and their bellies opulent and round, still dance in pencil nudity. Or so they would, if only old Le Coq had let them be.

There remained, I knew, little of all this splendour in the many temples of Bezeklik. But it was said that something re-
mained; and we climbed down from the dusty cliff-top, high above the gorge of the torrent that runs beneath the monastery terrace, with a warm anticipation of seeing it.

Niadze said: ‘It’s this way’, for he had been here before; and went slithering into the shin-keep dust of the sloping cliffside. After ten or fifteen feet of this we came to rest on a wide shelf; and along this shelf, curving inward over a couple of hundred yards, were the cave-mouth openings of the temples of Bezeklik. Five yards away the cliff dropped another hundred feet or so to the bed of the gorge.

No doubt other travellers have been here since Le Coq quit Turfan in 1905; but I know of no more recent description of the temples. They are several hundred years later than the best of those at Kizil, above the Kucha oasis; dating from the ninth and tenth centuries they show that Chinese influence, strong after a long period of T’ang imperialism, was dominant here. They must once have been a marvellous sight: even the little that remains from archaeological theft, administrative theft, ordinary theft, and natural disaster (for this is an earthquake region), shows you the glimmer of brilliant Buddhist frescoes while you walk from temple of temple along this astonishing cliffside terrace; and the shadow of faded blues and greens and golds within the ragged entrance halls.

Their position is authentic ‘Shangri La’. Le Coq says that he reached them in 1904 ‘by an eagle’s path’ and that they were hidden from view by ‘specially built walls’ — now quite vanished — so that I imagine he came along the bed of the torrent and climbed the cliff to reach them. Having done that he found himself in a world of murals depicting Indians, Syrians, Turks, Tocharis, Chinese, Uighurs, that fairly took his breath away; and he forthwith set about carving them out of their plaster beds and preparing them for transport to Berlin. Nobody hindered him nor raised objection; and he himself was the last man to worry about the morals of removing them. He gave seasonal employment, as it happened, to quite a few people in Karakhoja and Turfan. Now it is sad and sickening
to see where the murals that still remain are mutilated by those
great excisions: sadder still to reflect that they went to Europe
and were there assailed far more explosively than by any
possible earthquake in the Simgin gorge.

'Stolen', Niadze said. He said it wherever we came across a
large and painful excision; and he said it often. 'Stolen', re-
peated the girl from the Bureau of Antiquities. And 'Stolen'
added the driver of the Gaz 69. It was quite a refrain; and I
felt vicariously ashamed. But Niadze, perhaps to make it a
little better for me, said that the Kuomintang had also taken a
hand in this looting.

They felt aggrieved; and they were right. When I got back
to London and was looking again at the Stein collection in the
British Museum — tucked away in a corner with little room to
explain or reveal its unique value — I wondered how long it
might be before Europe would be asked to disgorge some of
these treasures and send them back to the peoples whose pro-
erty, in the eye of history, they really are. Meanwhile, the
poverty of means of the British Museum is a national scandal.
But I failed to inform Niadze of this; I think it would have hurt
his feelings. It would certainly have hurt mine.

These temple paintings show that Eastern Turkestan was by
no means, in those early years, the benighted place it would
become. The oases were larger than in modern times; the
irrigation more efficient; the peasants more widely spread and
perhaps a little better off. Yet the few Chinese records that
remain show this Uighur feudalism, at any rate up to the tenth
century, as a society ruled by a princely caste in partnership
with a numerous priesthood, beneath whose double burden
these peasants of the Turkestan oases appear to have endured
much the same poverty and ill-rewarded toil they continued
to endure through all the centuries until now.

Buddhism, coming over the passes from India, had long settled
on this country with the same despoiling hand that Lamaism
would later rivet on Mongolia and Tibet. What this must have
meant in everyday life is shown with startling directness in some
of the documents that Aurel Stein turned up at Dandan Uiliq near Khotan. Two of these, with dates corresponding to A.D. 782 (or about the same time as Hsuan Tsang’s no less damning memoir), ‘are bonds for small loans specified in copper cash or grain issued on interest to different borrowers by one Chin-ying, who is designated as a priest of the Hu-kuo monastery. As security for these loans the borrowers, whose names and ages are appended together with those of certain relatives as sureties (mother and sister, wife and daughter), pledge the whole of their household goods and cattle irrespective of any valuation’. The monks, in other words, financed their monasteries and their superior way of life by usury and extortion.

Only a revolutionary desire for an end to priestly servitude can explain how Islam could spread so rapidly through these ancient Buddhist lands. Before its fiery prophets and their puritanical promise of freedom, driving over the western mountains in the tenth century, the monks and their usury would vanish in a handful of years. Yet the temples were not destroyed. They remained with their frescoes, even after the monks were gone, as gleaming witness to a strange glory.

Islam, in its own time, fitted well enough into Uighur feudalism. It failed to change the relationship of landowner and peasant; and the servitude revealed so clearly in the T’ang Dynasty bonds of Dandan Uiliq was to be renewed, as chakar labour, in the centuries that followed. And chakar labour would not end until 1950.

Beyond the terraces of Bezeklik we could see a screen of poplar trees, sheltering the little village of Murtuk where Le Coq had made his headquarters for a time; but the rising sun pressed hard on us, so we climbed the cliff again and mounted our Gaz 69 and returned down the Simgin gorge to Karakhoja. Even a thousand years ago it can have taken those well-fed monks only two or three hours by donkey: they were not so ascetically shuttered from the world as later generations might
think. For Karakhoja then was one of the great cities of Central Asia.

VI

It is a dilapidated ruin now, its high walls and many houses long since blurred and rubbed away by erosive wind and sand, but showing still an outline of magnificence and dignity. We reached its walls through the little Karakhoja oasis, shady and stream-fed and pleasant after the grilling heat of the Simgin rocks, with strolling girls aflame in red and green and purple cottons, and marvellously handsome children playing in the dust, and families traipsing homeward with a single donkey; and came abruptly to its high archway gate. Here the walls are still twenty-five feet high or more, and as you go through that archway you see the vaguely retained shadow of a city. In reality there is nothing here and nobody, but for a single farm in the brown wilderness where a patch of rice lies green and fresh; yet for a moment as you enter there is the illusion of seeing a past that is still alive. The illusion vanishes: the sun and the sand devour it. This was Karakhoja; now it belongs to the desert.

Karakhoja and Qomul, which the Chinese call Hami, were the twin capitals of the early Uighur princes. These were the first earthly heavens they came to on their journey out of the savage lands to north and east. From these they impressed their mark on history — in its way a rather grand and splendid mark; and pushed westward to Kucha and Aqsu and Kashgar and the oases that lie beneath the Karakorum and the Kun Lun Shan. Later on, in the thirteenth century, the generals of the Great Khan came down with irresistible cavalry out of Mongolia (whence long before the Uighurs themselves had come, and before the Uighurs the almost legendary Tochar people), and made an end of their pride and substance. Turned from the martial rigours of their once nomadic life, the Uighurs proved easy game.
Through centuries after that this land endured the small vicissitudes of Central Asia. It was too wide and far away to suffer except briefly a close imperial control from China, whether Mongol or Ming or Manchu; but it was also too remote to feel much modernizing influence. It missed the great achievements of China. Its Buddhist glories came to an end, but nothing replaced them: Eastern Turkestan produced none of those Islamic masters who raised the shrines and towered domes of Merv and Isfahan and Samarkand.

Its oases dwindled; and probably its population also. Those who were established in the great desert lost heart against the sand and withdrew from their pioneering clumps of green. Nothing, for example, remains of the great administrative city of Lop, not even as much as remains of Karakhoja. Yet the city of Lop had served under the Han emperors as an administrative centre of importance: placed near the shifting and shallow Lop marshes into which the Tarim flows, at a crossroads in the desert between the northern and the north-western roads to the west, Lop had long endured. It was already a thousand years old when Marco Polo passed through in 1280 or so; and Marco says of it that ‘Lop is a great city at the gates of the great desert. . . . Those who pass the desert rest in Lop for a week to refresh themselves and their beasts: there they take victuals for a month for themselves and their beasts’. But Lop has vanished from the map.

Qomul, or Hami, had better fortune. Although it has nothing great to show, its importance has survived as a staging post on the road from China to Sinkiang. The Polos, or at any rate Marco, seem not to have passed through Qomul, but all three of them saw much of Sinkiang in the closing years of the thirteenth century, and they saw it as a prosperous and contented place.

Even then, though, the levelling effect of Islam was little more than a memory. Kashgar, Marco writes, ‘has many fine gardens and vineyards and possessions, and many merchants who travel the whole world, and also many poor people who
eat badly and drink badly'. But poverty seems not to have destroyed their happy and hospitable nature, any more than it would later on; and in evidence of this Marco tells a naughty tale of the merry wives of Qomul whose husbands are 'very glad' when any stranger comes, and 'tell their wives to serve him in all his needs; and the husband goes out and stays somewhere else for two or three days, and the stranger remains with the wife, and does with her what he will, just as if she were his own wife, and is much comforted. And the women are fine and merry and much taken with this custom.' But Marco Polo, for once, was telling this on hearsay.

It was not until the nineteenth century, during the Manchu Dynasty, that Chinese reasserted control over Sinkiang. They found it difficult. Fighting the T'aipings at home, they also had to fight a great 'Muslim revolt' — nowadays we should call it a nationalist revolt — in the Kashgar region of Sinkiang. For a time the Chinese lost control of Kashgaria, and the British, probing from India, had some hope of making its prince, a man from Andijan called Yakub Beg, into their 'protected person': and thus achieve in Sinkiang what they would later achieve in Tibet, and make another buffer between Russia and India. British arms were sent up to Yakub Beg across the Kashmiri and the Pamir passes; but they were too few and too late, and Yakub Beg succumbed in 1877 to a punitive Manchu army. Britain's potential 'Central Asian protectorate' was reduced, in the years that followed, to a consulate-general at Kashgar.

Having regained control the Manchus held it more or less firmly, ruling 'indirectly' through local potentates of their own choosing and supporting, but with a Chinese colonial service to supervise these locals, until the republican revolution of 1911. That year was a turning point for the whole of China. The old order disappeared: a new order failed to crystallize, and there began the long and bloody period of the warlord wars. What all this meant to Sinkiang is briefly if luridly revealed in Le Coq's memoirs of his fourth expedition. Whereas in the old days of the Manchus, he says, he had met with order and quiet
in the land, now there was chaos, revolution by 'the lowest elements’, anarchy, murder, Russian invasion (hundreds of Tsarist soldiers marching down through the Terek Pass), and, generally, the misery of a dubious future. He had many troubles; found ‘uneducated persons in position of trust’ formerly held by ‘solid officials’; and concluded that the good old days were over—a conclusion that was only too pointfully impressed on him, no doubt, when he went back to Europe and arrived in time for the first world war.

Yet in Sinkiang, after 1911, events in fact would take an unexpected course. With the collapse of the Manchu empire ‘indirect rule’ should have collapsed as well, and Sinkiang nationalism reasserted itself; as it happened, though, Chinese ‘indirect rule’ continued through most of the warlord period thanks to the remarkable achievement of an imperial governor called Yang Tseng-hsin.

In 1928 this Governor Yang was assassinated; but already his tight control had weakened. Uighur and Kazakh nationalism had awakened under Yang’s autocratic stimulus, and the misgovernment of Yang’s successor quickly brought it into the open. In 1931 there began at Hami a big Uighur revolt that was to signal nearly twenty years of repression and renewed uprising. After 1931 there was no more peace in Sinkiang; and for good measure there now appeared the frightful sons of Ma with their bandit armies out of Kansu. And then came 1949, and peace at last.

I reflected on these things while climbing about the ruined city of Karakhoja and taking photographs. After all these centuries of Uighur eclipse the wheel had come full circle: the people who had built this place, and then had lived unknown beside its ruins for so long, were now once more emerging into history. Forgotten for half a millennium they would at last rejoin the rank of nations.

It was getting on for noon. Niadze and his colleagues of the people’s committee of Turfan had grown a little restless: that is, they had retired to the shelter of a wall and gone to sleep, this
being their tactful way of announcing that it was high time to be gone. So we retraced our steps through the enchanted squalor of Karakhoja village, drank lemonade which Niadze had thoughtfully tucked into the back of our Gaz 69, and mounting our desert vehicle chased mirage after mirage back across the gravel plain to Turfan.
CHAPTER FIVE

THE YEARS BETWEEN

We asked the doctor: 'Can anything be done?'
He said: 'In China? No.'

Egon Erwin Kisch (1932)

I

That afternoon we slept longer than usual, or Tse and I did, and, after being about our several occupations under a declining sun, forgathered with Niadze and his friends at their evening meal. They were already at table and entered upon the first stage of eating — of manda gosh and shashlik, sweet dumplings and slips of grilled mutton on thick black skewers, and tea — that comes before the quivering white-boiled mutton clumps which make the principal food of Sinkiang.

They welcomed us with a small solemnity of rising and sitting down again, for there is no lack of manners in Turfan; and Niadze shouted for the waiter, and the waiter popped his head out of the oven-lit kitchen and then came dashing forth with a plate of yataza, glistening bread rolls served up soft and hot, for a preliminary to the first stage of eating.

The company had several men who were travelling to Luktshin where the famous Hami melons mostly grow; but it was all masculine. Turfan has yet to cross the Rubicon of allowing women into public company, though even that no longer seems impossible. Next to Niadze at an adjoining table I noticed a man whom I had several times seen about the oasis: he carried a good deal of authority, I thought, but nobody had explained his function. He was the sort of shadowy figure of whom, in revolutionary times, one may possibly expect the worst; and his appearance seemed only to confirm this.

He sat at table with muscular arms spread before him, his
shoulders bowed, his head huge and square-browed and topped with a white cap much too small for it, and chewed away at his manda gosh and talked a great deal, but listened to Niadze and others even across his own talking, it seemed to me, and generally impressed upon everyone the weight and vigour of his being there amongst us. In his already tremendous neck a slight goitre spread a mass of twisted flesh beneath his rolling chin, and added to a monstrous appearance; but then one became aware, in all that piglike fleshiness, of his eyes being small and glittering and prudent.

I asked Niadze who this man might be and what he did. And when Niadze gave me his reply I saw again that everything really was different from before. To be in Central Asia now was to know the small beginnings of a new society: here, unlike China proper, it was not the organizational changes that would rivet your attention so much as the changes in people. Hesitant changes often enough: as with the group of cobblers whom we had met that afternoon, their cobbling co-operative no more than a month old, their doubts not yet resolved, their courage still much needed: but changes like nothing they had known before.

These people had endured much evil. Turfan alone had laboured with the birth of half a dozen rebellions in the past quarter century or so. Year in and year out cavalry had scurried up the dusty streets after one set of fugitives or another; and corpses of all possible opinions had dragged in the guttering drains.

Now they said that they had bid farewell to that world of swaggering chaos, and all these people and their small authorities were evidence of this: their co-operatives and their committees and their municipal enterprises. Yet to grasp this reality seemed far from easy, perhaps because it is always difficult to believe what is positively new. I sat and listened, understanding little or nothing, and meeting now and then the narrow elephant’s eye of the giant next door; and grappled with the problem. Here, reclining in the light of paraffin lamps,
their shadows high upon the pale walls, were the survivors, the victors, the lucky ones. What kind of people could they be?

II

'That man,' said Niadze of the giant next door, 'is the Water Delegate. His name is Abdulissiz. He is a man of Qomul but here a long time. He was a poor peasant.'

'What does he do?'

Niadze raised thin eyebrows and patiently smiled: after all, he too was at grips with a new reality — the meeting with someone from beyond the world of irrigation who would not know at once wherein lay the virtue and the value of a Water Delegate.

'He has charge of water distribution. Of opening the ditches, and closing them according to the quantities of water.'

With that we were deep into the mechanics of this revolution. For in the old days this all-important function had fallen to an official called a mirab: he it was who did the bidding of the powers that be in the matter of water distribution.

'Yes,' said Niadze, 'there are still mirabs, but not here. In Turfan we never had one. We always had a Water Delegate.'

'Then the difference?'

Niadze answered in his high-pitched whisper: 'There is a saying. Where the power comes from decides where the water goes. Before the liberation this place was governed by two men of the Kuomintang, a trader and a landlord. But now we have people's government here.

'We have 70,000 people in Turfan and they elect an assembly. They are divided into ninety cantons, and each of these elects one representative, so there is a representative in the assembly for every 800 people.

'Now this assembly meets three times a year, perhaps for five days or for seven days each time, but every two years it elects a governing committee of thirteen. All these men of the governing committee are paid except two: the one who is the chairman of the agricultural supply-and-marketing co-operative,
and the one who speaks for the Kazakhs who keep their herds in the Tien Shan near by and share our government.

‘And that man there’ — Niadze pointed a sharp public finger at the giant next door, while the giant grinned capaciously and was otherwise unmoved — ‘is the Water Delegate.’

This democracy would not satisfy others elsewhere: it was a democracy still in its rough and revolutionary stage, and had yet to show whether it could broaden into tolerance once its revolutionary objectives were secured. Could it give opportunities for individual disagreement? The question was largely hypothetical. For the moment it was the organization of a popular will behind well-agreed directives, with a single party, the Chinese Communist Party, having powerful control: as such, it was well adjusted to the drive for change that animated such men as Niadze; and it remains to be shown that any other system could have done the job, or even begun to do the job. Later on, no doubt, the narrowness that helped its driving force would irk and chafe: now it was incalculably more democratic than anything these people had known before.

For if Turfanliks had endured long evil years, they had lately travelled far towards another future. To the outside world they had barely existed before: their deserts and their mountains had been known and marvelled at and sometimes travelled in, but they themselves had scarcely won a mention in the books. Now they had changed that: now they would matter, they knew they would matter. Their mountains and their deserts were nothing beside them now. And perhaps that is another reason why I remember with such fondness their cool eating house in hot Turfan; for I had come here because I thought that people could after all change their circumstances, and that circumstances could and would change people in their turn; and there was no despair that could not be cured. And here one saw that it really could be so.

Between the chronic Inner Asian chaos of the past, and this drive for change and renovation that now gave power to Niadze and the Water Delegate, and to all the other Niadzes and
Water Delegates of Sinkiang, lay a story that was surely worth the telling. What had happened in the years between?

III

A volley of revolver bullets struck the great Governor Yang at a public dinner in 1928; and an imperial epoch died with him.

The Manchu emperors, before Yang's governorship began in 1911, had been content to reassert Chinese authority over this most distant border land. They taxed the border peoples lightly, and rode them on an easy rein. But the revolution of 1911 put an end to these accustomed ways.

When Yang became governor, in that same revolutionary year, he faced an immediate financial crisis. The old imperial subsidy — justified always by the strategic need of holding Sinkiang — was abruptly ended: Sinkiang henceforth would have to live off its own fat, and this would be difficult because Sinkiang was a province notoriously lean. It was Yang's imperial achievement that he overcame this crisis and evolved new ways of administration in a time of endless trouble. A thin dry figure of the middle height, thoughtful and reticent beyond the ordinary, skilful in argument, seeing two sides of every question and sometimes three, Yang gradually imposed himself and his respect for discipline — his Chinese will to endure and achieve — through years of war and misery in the world outside.

He took everything into his own hands, and ruled in a manner all his own. A story tells of his wandering in the streets of Tihwa and one day seeing a soldier stealing boots from a shop. 'That will do,' Yang said after watching the soldier take fourteen pairs, drew a revolver and shot him.

Little by little he removed Sinkiang from all but nominal loyalty to a China now more and more riven by the warlord wars. He would let in nobody across the borders of whom he did not personally approve, and let out nobody of whom he
disapproved. He issued his own currency and made his own trade agreement with the emergent Soviet State next door. He was driven to accepting the telegraph; but the key to the telegraph office, at Tihwa, he kept in his own pocket, and opened the door in the morning himself and locked it again at night. Informative telegrams he kept to himself; inconvenient ones he simply destroyed. His archives were in his own meticulous mind; and even his closest subordinates could seldom follow his trend of thought.

From his Manchu predecessors he inherited the doctrine of indirect rule through local chiefs and potentates — he himself has been amban at Aqsu in the closing years of the empire; but produced it to its full and logical extension. He clipped the wings of the Uighur and Kazakh notables, undermined their authority and made them closely subject to himself. The people had to pay more taxes; but it was the native chiefs and notables who continued to collect them, and who took, on the way, a larger cut from much larger proceeds, and thus were reasonably content.

Though at the price of a steady impoverishment of most of the people, the system worked. Yang was not loved; but he was respected. And in the sixteenth year of his rule he could go so far as to formulate the principles of his ‘Dual Mandate’ in a scroll that was hung from the gate of his yamen at Tihwa: its words ring formidably even now, when all that is quite passed away.

‘The Republic’, he said, and the year was 1926, ‘is raw with youth. The wars of the Five Kingdoms, the battles of the Seven Heroes, they fight them over again. But what care we how they fight?

‘For I have made an Earthly Paradise in a remote region. ‘The Muslims of the south, the Nomads of the north — I will rule them to live contentedly in the old ways.’

Two years later a subordinate shot him down and this ‘Dual Mandate’ vanished in revolt and war. Like other earthly heavens, the illusion had depended on not killing its father.
Once Yang was dead, Sinkiang became a corner in hell; and so it continued for a long time.

A terrible irony governed the manner of his death. Twelve years earlier a number of Yang's officials had wanted to join in revolt against Yuan Shih-kai's attempt to displace the new republic by a monarchy. Yang would have none of this: Sinkiang was to remain aloof from all the quarrels of China. He thought that these Yunnanese officials meant to kill him, and took steps to come beforehand with them. The steps were peculiar.

Of the plot to murder him he heard, it seems, from an aide-de-camp whom he had formerly sacked for dishonesty. Yang acted upon this information, but not quite as one would have thought. The first thing he did was to call in witnesses, rebuke the aide-de-camp for spreading harmful rumours, and forthwith have him shot in the yard outside. The witnesses walked out past the corpse and went, as Yang hoped, to reassure the plotters that all was well. Next he called the plotters together, welcomed them warmly, and explained what he had done to the aide-de-camp. 'He wished to tell me that you, my friends, were in secret my enemies. See for yourselves in what terms I have answered him. Rest assured that I trust you utterly. Return now to your posts and continue loyally with your work.'

In this jolly atmosphere Yang then invited all the families of the plotters to stay as guests in his yamen; and declared a feast in honour of a visiting inspector of education from Peking.

'When the cups had been filled a few times [says Wu Ai-chen, a Chinese writer who had the story from an eye-witness], the Governor suddenly rose and left the hall. This action aroused no suspicion since it was known that Yang cared little for wine. But in a few minutes he returned, followed by a soldier who held concealed behind his back a long curved sword. The Governor paused behind the seat of Hsai Ting, one of the principal malcontents. Then in a cold, even casual voice, speaking typical Yunnanese dialect, he said: “Behead Hsai Ting!”
'The knife flashed, and Hsai Ting fell dead, his blood spouting upon the robes of those who sat at table with him. 'All cowered in horror, none daring to move; but in calm tones the Governor reassured them. 'This has nothing to do with you. Come, more wine for my guests!' 'When the cups were refilled the Governor again left the chamber, but almost immediately returned, a second soldier at his side. Proceeding round the table they halted at the chair of one Li Yin, and once again the astounded guests heard the dread command. . . .'

Whereupon the great Governor Yang, having killed his enemies and reduced everyone else to a gibbering fear, resumed his seat and called for wine and 'made a hearty meal, finishing his two bowls of rice as usual'. Yet with the growing power of the Kuomintang in China proper, Yang seems to have recognized that the days of his autocracy were numbered. He placed enormous sums of money in British and American banks, sent his family to Manila, and prepared for a safe retirement. In this last he failed. Twelve years after the bloody banquet in Tihwa another was prepared. Wu Ai-chen again tells the story from an eye-witness.

'Suddenly Chang, the Dean of the school [where the banquet was being held], entered with a new bottle of wine which he set down upon the table with such vigour that all eyes were turned towards him, pained by such rough manners in the presence of the Governor. 'At that moment Fan asked: "Are the other wines all ready?" to which the Dean replied: "All is prepared." Fan then raised his cup towards the Soviet Consul-General to drink his health, and as their cups met, shots rang out simultaneously, all aimed at the Governor. Seven bullets in all were fired, and all reached their mark. Yang, mortally wounded, but superb in death, glared an angry
defiance at his foes. "Who dares do this?" he questioned in the loud voice which had commanded instant obedience for so many years. Then he fell slowly forward, his last glance resting upon the face of the trusted Yen [who was Wu's informant] . . .

'When they saw what had happened the high officials stampeded for the door. The Russian Consul and his wife took refuge in the lavatory. Lieutenant Yu was shot, and Yen, who was wounded in the shoulder, only escaped by feigning death. As he lay beneath the overturned tables Yen saw Fan standing over the sorely wounded but still breathing Governor, revolver in hand. Two further shots completed the crime."

Yang's successor, Chin Shu-jen, executed the murderers but muddled everything else. A keen office man, handy with the files, he knew the rules but did not understand them. Yang had assured Chinese authority in Sinkiang by 'squaring' the Uighur and Kazakh notables: Chin tampered with this delicate adjustment of authority.

In 1930 the hereditary prince of Qomul died. Chin was after a bigger share of the taxes and turned the new prince into a mere 'adviser'. Land taxes collected in the oasis would be paid into Chin's treasury and not to the prince. Uighur officials were ousted; Chinese moved in. Taking their cue from the rest of China, the notables of Qomul raised the standard of revolt. Many peasants followed them, and there opened a new chapter in the long and twisted story of Uighur reassertion.

Parent of revolts, this Qomul rising had many consequences and most of them were bloody. One of them, not much noticed at the time but bitterly remembered afterwards, was the sending of two Uighur notables from Qomul — that is, from Hami — to fellow-Muslims in Kansu across the Gobi. Would the great warlord family of Ma come to the aid of Islam in Sinkiang?

Now the names of these two delegates were Yolbaz Khan and Hodja Niaz; and the name of the warlord whom they met, and
whose help they eventually secured, was Ma Chung-yin. These names would long reverberate in Sinkiang.

And at much the same time, but without announcement, there arrived in Sinkiang a little group of Chinese Communists, the first of their kind: one of them was Chen Tao-shin and another was Mao Tse-min, brother of Mao Tse-tung. These names too, though in a different way, would also be remembered. One may see their graves, and those of others of their slender and heroic band, in Urumchi today.

‘The situation in Sinkiang at the present time’, observed a British writer in 1933, ‘is very obscure.’ This was putting it mildly: the situation was chaotic. Old Governor Yang might have regained control: his successor never came within reach of it. That careful compiler of administrative archives, Governor Chin, carried on as though a little well-planned murder could do the trick. But the fires of popular revolt were alight by now; and only genius, and perhaps not even genius, could have put them out.

Everyone took to arms who could, and when arms were lacking men put together the nearest imitation they could make — perhaps it would serve in the dark. A British traveller coming down from Kashmir in the spring of 1933 found troops of the Khotan amirs ‘guarding the exit to the plains, armed only with wooden rifles and a hunting golden eagle’.10

The Uighur nationalists who had made the Hami revolt of 1931 were soon at odds with the Kansu Muslims — Chinese-speaking Muslims called Tungans — who had meanwhile ridden into Sinkiang in the wake of Ma Chung-yin and other scions of the Ma family. Against the Tungans — and seeing that the revolt among their peasants was taking a radical turn — these Uighur notables closed their ranks with the Chinese administration and its small army. Fighting engulfed the country. When the Swedish missionary Ambolt passed through
Khotan in that same bloody springtime of 1933 he found that it 'bore clear evidence of the battles that had recently raged there. In a wide belt running through the town all the houses were in ruins. They had sprayed paraffin from the town wall over the house roofs during the fighting and set light to it.' To Ambolt Governor Chin had said, lamenting his wretchedness, that 'at Barkul, Hami, and even Lop Nor, the soldiers stand as thick as trees in a wood, and even the song of the birds and the soughing of the wind is enough to alarm them and incite them to acts of violence'. Yang's imperial order had vanished.

But the Tungans were the main trouble. Relatively few in number they were strong in organization; they understood their own kind of war, and they were good at it. Of their leaders the most notorious was the monstrously maladjusted youngster called Ma Chung-yin: said to have been a colonel in the Kuomintang army at the age of sixteen, he rapidly bullied and shot his way into warlord status and was given command of an 'army' by Chiang Kai-shek in exchange for pledging loyalty against the Communists. In 1931, at the invitation of Yolbaz Khan and Hodja Niaz, he moved up into Sinkiang.

This neurotic youth seems to have mixed moments of great foresight and even statesmanlike daring with personal courage and a sick love of cruelty. Rewi Alley, who knew him in Kansu in the old days, once said to me: 'He was a silly boy. He went mad. He murdered everyone.' For the accounts of him show that other circumstances might have produced, in Ma Chung-yin, a useful person of quite unusual scope. As it was he would be sobbing at the sight of a surgical operation in one moment, and seeing himself as another Alexander in the next; and between the two he would have ordered a massacre.

Tse and I began to catch up with first-hand memories of him when we reached the southern oases, for it was in Kashgar that Ma Chung-yin, and in Yarkand that his brother Ma Ho-san, brought their Sinkiang careers to an end, and fled.

They had a good run for their money before that. Unlike these Tungans, though, the Uighur notables were sometimes
moved by a desire for more than loot. Men like Hodja Niaz might be minor bandits: others, like Sabit Da Mullah of Kashgar, were ‘pan-Turanians’ who dreamed of some kind of pan-Turkic federation in Central Asia that should be based on a vaguely conceived notion of Turkic nationality — an idea then growing popular, incidentally, among conservative nationalists as far west as Turkey.

In 1933, at all events, the ‘Republic of Eastern Turkestan’ was proclaimed in Kashgar, its flag displaying a crescent moon and star on a white background, and its ideas, such as they were, showing how strongly the tradition of Yakub Beg and an independent Kashgaria still glowed after sixty years. Emissaries were sent across the mountains to the king of Afghanistan, demanding arms for fellow-Muslims in revolt, and ‘citizenship’ offered to a handful of Ottoman Turks whom Mustafa Kemal had driven out of Turkey and who were thought to have helped Kashgar to ‘independence’.

Already ‘king of Khotan’ (by a recent ‘election’), Sabit Da Mullah became the moving force in this new ‘Kashgaria’ and dispatched an envoy to India — no less a potentate than his ‘first assistant to the Minister of War’ — so as to impress on the British (as Yakub Beg had done before him) the possible value to them of a new buffer state in Middle Asia.

All this came to nothing. Sabit Da Mullah and the Tungans fell out. And in March 1934 there came Ma Ching-yin, flying from defeat farther east. Hodja Niaz took to his heels; the ‘king of Khotan’ was killed in the fighting; and Ma Chung-yin ran riot.

‘As soon as they arrived in Kashgar,’ writes a British eyewitness of the arrival of Ma’s cohort, ‘all the troops went round the city at the double, shouting their war-cry, a truly awe-inspiring sound.’ After they had cleared out Sabit Da Mullah and his friends, ‘the order was given for a general slaughter, and on this day and the next day, in a house-to-house visitation, some 2,000 or 3,000 persons were slain, mostly with swords so as to save ammunition. Many of those killed
were unarmed old men, as well as women and children.’ The British Consulate-General came under fire, and the wife of this eye-witness, Mrs Thomson Glover, was wounded in the lung.

Yet British imperial hopes of finding in the Tungans a possible successor to Yakub Beg and the unfortunate Sabit Da Mullah, and thus a ‘client state’ to the north of the Karakorum, appear to have persisted for a time. Colonel Thomson Glover, a British agent then in Kashgar, felt bound to emphasize that the Tungans, compared with some others in that part of the world, ‘were easier for a Western mind to understand. They asked us to get footballs for them and to order tennis rackets from India’. They were, he thought, ‘impulsive, generous and cruel, but excellent fighters’. It reads oddly now.

To the local inhabitants all this seemed rather different. My friend Dr Tadeyev Habibullah, for example, was a youth in Kashgar at the time: he told me that Ma’s brief reign was one of terror for them all. He remembers it as the darkest of many dark days. But it was also clear from what Habibullah said that the rebellious peasants of the Sinkiang oases — the men who followed Hodja Niaz and Sabit Da Mullah and their like — really believed that they were fighting, or watching, a war for Uighur independence. ‘It was’, he said, ‘partly a war about religion. But mostly it was a peasant revolt. They wanted to get rid of their oppressors, the landlords and their Chinese partners’.

Only ten years later would these Uighur peasants find leaders who were not only for Uighur reassertion, but also for revolution.

That time was not yet, and meanwhile the actors changed. Ma Chung-yin fled with a handful of friends, in 1934, into the Soviet Union, although nobody has ever been able to explain why he took this unlikely route: he and the Soviet authorities would appear to have had good reason to distrust each other. Habibullah thinks it was simply that Ma lost his head, and took the nearest way out: others say he was tricked. In any case he disappeared for good. His younger and no less ferocious
brother, Ma Ho-san, hung on to the Khotan and Yarkand oases until as late as 1937 and then fled up through the southern passes into India; and with that the Tungan wars were over.

By 1934 new names were on the scene. There was ushered in the brief period of Sheng Shih-Tsai; and Sheng, after a fair beginning, was to prove the bloodiest of them all.

v

Weeks after leaving Turfan, Tse and I were far into the Tien Shan beyond Ili on the frontiers of Kazakhstan. Riding one day from Balak-Su, we turned off the road towards a stud farm celebrated among Kazakhs of the Ili region.

Abdul Rachman welcomed us, a stocky Kazakh with tough shoulders and a laughing face and the understanding of horses stamped into all his movements.

We already knew each other and Abdul Rachman said: 'We are killing a sheep.'

'No, don't think of it. Thank you, but we haven't time.'

'It is already killed. We saw you coming.'

Soon the quivering white fat would be set before us; and there was nothing to do but accept. Kazakh hospitality is a part of everyday life.

Abdul Rachman spoke of the progress of his breeding stock: in five years he had increased his herds from 1000 to 4000 horses and cattle, taking no account of many sold to Kazakh herdsmen in the meantime.

His voice came crisply on the clear mountain air, vigorously, optimistically. From where we stood the scene was magnificent, for the home farm with its trim new buildings lies upon the green rim of summer pastures, while the grey and white cliffs of the Tien Shan climb at its back for many thousand feet; and across the wide basin before it — softly green from rain and glittering with summer streams and bearing great herds of cattle and horses, dwindling far away, and punctuated here and there with Kazakh tents that seem like small white mushrooms
in the prairie — there float the snows of Khan Tengri, highest of all the peaks of the Tien Shan.

‘How far is the Soviet frontier?’

‘It is half a day’s riding with a good horse.’

From here the ice peaks march westward along the frontier for several hundred miles: even in Central Asian terms, these pastures are exceedingly remote.

We strolled across the fine fresh grass.

Beyond Abdul Rachman’s new buildings I noticed a squalid line of huts or stables that suggested an earlier occupation. A few were inhabited by pigs and chickens, but most were derelict under roofs tufted with grass and weed, their windows blank, their doors opening on misery.

‘What are those?’

Abdul Rachman did not know; or perhaps he did not care to say. ‘They were there when I came in 1950. The farm was founded under Sheng Shih-tsai.’ This reticence was a familiar difficulty: nobody in Sinkiang would see much point in raking up the past.

But an old man trudging beside us broke suddenly into a flood of talk; and I saw from their faces that the talk was interesting. ‘He says,’ Tse explained, ‘that those huts were a concentration camp. Sheng sent here the wives and children of political prisoners.’

Riding back to Balak-Su, we could turn and still make out the pale low line of those hovels under the majestic cliffs above. To the wretched families forced into them twenty years earlier, and less, life must have seemed entirely hopeless. They must have hated these grasslands and tall stone peaks. This was an exile without mercy.

But Sheng had begun well. There is an early picture of him, in one of Sven Hedin’s books, that shows a serious waxen face, a small well-cut moustache, solemn eyes: altogether an impression of a decent Chinese soldier who is trying — as Sheng was — to bring order out of chaos. And to begin with, like some other Chinese nationalist generals of that time, he worked hard
and fought hard, gathering his power the difficult way. It was
Sheng who held Tihwa for the Chinese after the Hami revolt,
and Sheng who outmarched and outfought the Tungan cavalry
of Ma Chung-yin, and Sheng who gradually got the upper hand
and restored peace in Sinkiang. There was little in those early
months after 1934 to suggest the horrors that would come.

Full power was his in 1933: the luckless Governor Chin dis-
appeared from the scene, and Sheng, though formally no more
than Tupan, or military commander, became the absolute ruler
of Sinkiang. His problem, essentially, was to combine the
maintenance of Chinese rule with concessions to growing
nationalism among the non-Chinese peoples of the country, and
primarily among the Uighurs and Kazakhs. Sheng understood
this and forthwith proclaimed an ‘eight-point policy’ that
promised equality among Sinkiang nationalities, religious free-
dom, financial aid for the peasants, more education, and
several administrative reforms. A little later he followed this
with a more elaborate statement of ‘six great policies’: these
included a strong declaration of anti-imperialism (against the
British as well as the Japanese), improved relations with the
Soviet Union, peace, reconstruction, and national equality.

These liberating ideas flourished briefly; but not without
effect. Between 1933 and 1936 the number of school children
is said to have grown from 3,000 to 150,000; more than 300
non-Chinese youths were sent to the Soviet Union to study
medicine, veterinary science, engineering, and agriculture; and
Soviet technicians came to Sinkiang. Newspapers began to be
published in some of the minority languages: powerfully aided
by a small group of Chinese Communists now working more or
less openly in Sinkiang, ‘cultural associations’ of the Uighur
and other minorities began to revive their literature and their
national consciousness; and these associations, later on, would
play a major part in revolt against the Kuomintang.

To this ‘progressive period’, as everyone calls it nowadays,
the key lay in Sheng’s reliance on Soviet help. The few Chinese
troops he had — and the few others he could rely on, White
Russians for the most part — could not be reinforced from China proper. By now the Japanese were deep into China; and the Chinese rulers of Sinkiang would have to fish for themselves. It needed no great wisdom on Sheng’s part to see that there was only one direction where fishing promised any good; and that was in the direction of the Soviet Union. In 1934 the Soviet authorities — no doubt anxious for peace along their frontiers — had lent him the support of a few bombing planes in his war against the Tungans, and these planes appear to have turned the scale: the Tungans fled westward to Kashgar, whence, as we have seen, Ma himself took refuge in Russia and his ‘armies’ melted away.

The Russians then went further. They granted Sheng’s request for a loan worth fifteen million gold roubles.

‘Funds from the Soviet loans [writes Professor Owen Lattimore] were used to build more motor roads, and trucks in use increased from about 20 in 1933 to 400 in 1938, and eventually to 3,000 in 1941. In the same period, 1,350 miles of telephone lines were installed. By 1939, there were some 20 factories in the province, and over 400 tons of Soviet machinery had gone into the construction of a refinery at an oilfield north-west of Urumchi.’

British observers, whether from brief journeys across Sinkiang or from listening posts in India and China, reported ‘Soviet penetration and domination of Sinkiang’. It became fashionable to speak of ‘Soviet imperialism in Central Asia’, just as twenty-five years later, after the Chinese revolution, it would become fashionable to accuse the Chinese Communists of an imperialism not previously attributed, oddly enough, to the Kuomintang.

What in fact the Russians now did in Sinkiang followed much the same line as their actions in neighbouring Mongolia.

‘In Outer Mongolia [commented Professor Lattimore in 1940], Soviet policy has indisputably used the power thus
accruing to it [from growth of trade and economic help] in the interest of the Mongol peoples as a whole.

'Political changes inherent in the condition of Outer Mongolia itself and the structure of its society began the overthrow of the princes and high lamas who ruled the country; economic changes, assisted by Soviet policy, have confirmed these changes. As a result, the Kalkha Mongols now have, under the Mongolian People's Republic, the most popular and representative government they have ever had and a rising standard of living shared equally throughout the country.' 13

Nothing so fortunate could be achieved in Sinkiang; yet Soviet policy was not imperialist here, any more than it was in Outer Mongolia. Its trade with Sinkiang, true enough, followed the usual colonial pattern of an export of finished goods against an import of raw materials. But Soviet policy at that time reversed the colonial trend of prices: as early as 1923 a conference of National Commissariats of Foreign Trade had declared for a policy of 'establishing lower prices for our manufactures and goods destined for foreign countries'; and it became for some years a regular Soviet practice in trading with Sinkiang to buy dear and sell cheap, a premium of as much as twenty per cent being regularly granted in barter deals that involved an exchange of Sinkiang raw materials and Soviet manufactures.14

All this helped Sheng in his early efforts at restoring a measure of economic welfare. In 1936 Sir Eric Teichman could find Soviet products 'at every turn throughout our stay in Sinkiang' and thought that Sinkiang must surely become Russian. Yet by 1945 trade with the Soviet Union had been altogether stopped by Sheng and the Kuomintang: Soviet doctors, engineers, technicians who had come to Sinkiang had all returned to their own country; Soviet-worked oil wells to the north of Urumchi had been capped and closed and the machinery removed; and the country was as far from being
Soviet as could well be imagined. Even in 1956, with financial and technical aid flowing in great volume from the Soviet Union to China, I saw practically no sign of the old influence of the 'thirties.

VI

Sheng rode the tiger of progressive change for three or four years, and then lost his nerve; or rather, being a skilled opportunist, he thought the time had come to put the tiger behind bars again.

Even while taking Soviet help and employing Chinese Communist advisers and administrators — he made the brother of Mao Tse-tung his Minister of Finance, and Mao Tse-min carried through fiscal and monetary reforms that are still remembered in Sinkiang — Sheng began to reverse engines. He feared that Uighur nationalism would do to him what it had done to Governor Chin; and by now, too, he suffered from the typical dictator's complex of acute persecution mania.

People in Sinkiang today believe that about 100,000 men and women went into prison during Sheng's seven years of terror, and they say that few of these came out again. From gaols Sheng quickly passed to firing squads. He beheaded the 'cultural associations' and imprisoned or shot many of those who had helped to promote them. He set up concentration camps. He caused people to be flayed alive on the mere suspicion of plotting against him. And he murdered many of the Communist advisers whom he himself had invited to Sinkiang.

The terror worsened after the great Soviet defeats of 1941, for Sheng grew convinced that the Nazis — and hence the Japanese — would certainly win the war. Being Manchurian he was not for compromise with the Japanese, so he renewed long-severed links with the Kuomintang and sent emissaries to Chungking (where the Nationalist Government was now installed) offering friendship. The Kuomintang gratefully elected him to its national executive, and prepared to move in on him.
Sheng swung mercilessly against his Soviet connections, severed them, and redoubled the terror. Fearing daily for his life, morbidly suspicious, never separated from a revolver or his bodyguards, he seems to have decided at about this time that he might as well go while the going was good. Like others before him, he had gathered a vast personal fortune at the expense of the Sinkiang exchequer; a good deal of this he had salted away in places outside Sinkiang that seemed relatively safe, and the rest of it he had kept in bars of gold.

Before that, though, he had his moment of doubt. By now the Soviet armies were storming westward again. Sheng began arresting officials sent up from Chungking and it is even said that he went so far as to ask Stalin to incorporate Sinkiang in the Soviet Union. Then Chungking sent up General Chu Shao-ling who managed to persuade Sheng that discretion was after all the better part of valour; and Sheng went down to Chungking by plane, slipped a colossal *douceur* to the Kuomintang, and was given the sinecure of Minister of Forests. Later on he moved himself and his wealth to Taiwan; and afterwards he died there, lamented by none.

Yet Sheng's departure intensified the terror in Sinkiang. For the Kuomintang clique who followed Sheng into power here piled on the taxes, redoubled the extortions, multiplied the injustices. Whatever government remained gave way to anarchy where every official grabbed everything he could, hoping his luck would hold for as long as it was necessary to collect the swag and get safely away with it. I have talked of this period to Sinkiang people of many opinions: even allowing for political bias, it seems that the time of Kuomintang rule was felt to be even worse than the time of Sheng Shih-tsai.

Sides were taken then for revolution and counter-revolution. The Kuomintang after Sheng's going found easy partners among the 'bogs and bais' of the Uighur oases — landowners and traders for whom social change was the worst enemy — and among some of the wealthier Kazakh chieftains of the north. Yolbaz Khan, for instance — the same man who had led the
Hami revolt of 1931— took service now under the Kuomintang, and proved a bloody ruler of his native oasis.

Yet just as the privileged minority turned for shelter and protection to the armies of the Kuomintang, so the poor majority turned towards revolution. Much had changed since the confused rebellions of the 'thirties. A popular nationalism had grown apace. The handful of Chinese Communists in Sinkiang had not worked in vain: they had opened minds to new ideas, taught the need to act as well as talk, and doubtless they had made some converts.

Less than a month after Sheng's departure there erupted in the northern hills a revolt that would become famous throughout Middle Asia; and this time the men and women who made it would break from their obscure provincialism and carry it from the snow slopes of the Altai to the far western peaks of the Tien Shan. This time it would be revolutionary as well as nationalist.

Its story is a living part of Sinkiang today. Time and again we found ourselves referred to it. And in pursuit of men and women who could speak of it from their own experience we pushed into the broad pastures of the Tien Shan and laboured through sand-deep oases south of Kashgar. We interviewed men in Urumchi and Ili, and Turfan and Yarkand and the cities of the south, who at first were astonished that travellers could care about their past, and want to know their story; and then, warming to a favourite theme, launched into it with the zest and fluency of men for whom the spoken word, and not the written word, is the natural way of telling and remembering. And Tse and I, entranced, listened and furiously wrote.
CHAPTER SIX

RED TARTARY

When I think of the past that we have known, I weep for it.

Yusuf Khan of Kuldja

I

In the quick thunder of cavalry skirmish and squalor of ambush without mercy and in partisan wildness and in Kuomintang horror, in cruelty and counter-cruelty, this revolt of the Three Regions had the grandeur and misery of a true war of liberation. So much soon became clear; but the story remained difficult to put together.

Many had seen their fragment of the fighting, but seen it as a whole; and often enough these wholes would not fit easily into one another; and certainly some things eluded us altogether. It was all set, too, on an epic plane: not simply because these people are fine and fluent talkers but also because of the kind of life they knew and the way they saw it. Revolt and war were part of their legend: physical courage a virtue prized very high. For me, listening to these stories, there were many reminders of Serbia during the partisan wars: just as Serbian peasants called a brave man junak, hero, and meant it in a literal and marvellous sense, so would these people call their brave men bator, and mean by it the same superb quality of courage and warlike cunning.

‘Abdul Reni bator, yes I followed him,’ said Hali Abak on one occasion, but reverently. ‘He taught me what I knew at the beginning. He was not an army leader: no, but he was a hero.’

Or else, it seemed, one would glimpse repeatedly the hard-riding stuff and fabric of Sholohov’s tales of revolution and counter-revolution on the banks of the Don. The people who live

120
above the head-waters of the Irtysh and the Yenisei are not Don Cossacks, nor any kind of Cossacks, but they have the same qualities, I would guess, and pretty much the same values. They conducted their revolt in the Three Regions of Ili and Tachen and Altai with the same simplicity of purpose and crudity of method. They were men of much the same simplicity of mind.

Many told us of their part in it; but Yusuf Khan gave us its beginning. We met him, towards the end of our stay in Sinkiang, on the first floor of the new government offices at Ili, where he occupies a responsible post in the Ili-Kazakh autonomous government; and Yusuf Khan, when he learned of my interest in the revolt, invited us to dinner.

At fifty-eight he considers himself an old man, for it seems that this is part of Kazakh modesty; but in fact he is strong and spry like a giant in the prime of life. His handshake is as quenching as you might expect in a son of nomad ancestors who has spent more hours in the saddle than most of us have spent in bed. His colouring is that of stained but highly polished oak, his eyes are dark and handsome, and his expression is benevolent but stern. Even when indoors he follows Kazakh custom in wearing on his sparse grey hair a cap of plum-coloured velvet that is stitched with gold and silver ornament.

He began formally. For years, he said, they had endured the misery and oppression of Sheng Shih-tsai. Then, in the autumn of 1944, Sheng went away and there followed him the Kuomintang; and the Kuomintang would not be better but worse. ‘The people of all our nationalities’, said Yusuf Khan in his hard old voice, ‘would not endure it. They would not put up with any more. . . .

‘When you are as old as I am,’ he said, smiling a little in self-mockery, ‘it is not easy to think that death can stand higher than life. No no, it is not easy.’ And he threw out enormous hands and stared round at us and laughed ponderously at himself; and his eyes of dark blue stone glimmered with his memories. ‘Well, but I did think so, and many thought so. We
could not endure our lives. We were ready to fight.’ How much and how well they had fought was seen in the sequel, for this haphazard Kazakh cavalry had swept before it an army many times their number, had overridden machine guns and field artillery, had driven far to the south.

‘And now I sit here, an old man in a young country. And I am at peace when I think of that.’

II

Even as early as the autumn of the year before, in 1943, a few brave souls had pulled their rifles out of the thatch and gone up into the hills. Ideas, after all, are no respecters of frontiers; and the three northern regions of Sinkiang marched with the frontiers of Soviet Central Asia, and many people went back and forth. The armies of the Kuomintang might more or less easily dominate the Uighur oases, but they reached with difficulty into the mountains of the north, and then, as often as not, only with the trembling arm of native mercenaries.

But the few brave ones of 1943, for all the encouragement of Soviet victories in the west and Chinese Communist successes in the east, were only a portent of what was coming: it needed the events of 1944 to drive men through their hesitation.

Yusuf Khan had needed no driving. A minor tax official at Nelke, some eighty miles east of Ili city, he knew the misery of the times because he dealt in it. He was forty-six in 1944, and had thought his active days were over; but when it came to the point he found himself among the first who stormed the police post at Nelke and afterwards the gendarmerie post, and rode in triumph through the shin-deep mud, that wild October, waving captured rifles to the credit of revolt.

Nelke was the sign that people waited for. ‘We had no programme. We wanted only to be rid of the Kuomintang. But others thought as we did, and all took courage.’

News travelled on Kazakh ponies. Small partisan groups joined into loose military formations: leaders emerged: new
ideas were in the air. On November 12th the city of Ili was taken after three days' fighting with Kuomintang troops bottled inside it: some of these got away to the south, but others surrendered with their arms. Peasants came in with their knives and ketmans, sharp hoe-like spades, and the outline of an army began to shape itself. Outlying garrisons were reduced or driven out. Within three months the whole region of Ili was in rebel hands.

Of this fighting in the mountains of Tien Shan we heard from Dr Mussojan.

III

While Mussojan was speaking of this we were with him in his yurt at Balak-Su, in upland pastures a hundred miles into the Tien Shan west of Ili city. Through the open door of the yurt we could glimpse Khan Tengri and his neighbouring peaks as they moved above us in the summer clouds. The wife of Mussojan brought tea and dried melon seeds: apart from looking after their children she also worked as a medical orderly in Dr Mussojan's field hospital. Like him she was dark and good looking; and, like him, much of an independent mind. They were very well together; and everyone liked them.

Mussojan himself is an attractive laughing Kazakh of absolutely bull-headed determination: he could not otherwise have come to be a doctor through the years of terror. 'We Kazakhs of the Tien Shan,' he said, 'suffered much from Sheng. We all hated him. My brother-in-law was murdered by him in 1938. But perhaps we hated the Kuomintang still more.'

When news of the insurrection in the villages round Ili city reached them, they were more than ready to join it. 'I joined on November 19th, a few days after we knew of the taking of Ili city. Then I picked out the best of the horses we had in our family and rode for the rendezvous — most of us joined like that. They made me a partisan commander.'

He pointed toward tooth-edged peaks that were white across the horizon. 'Our local Kuomintang tried to get away to Aqsu
and south Sinkiang through the Shah T'eh pass. Twenty-one of them, from the district magistrate to the policemen and a handful of soldiers.

'Ve knew the country better than they did. We sent thirty men after them, but only four had rifles. These men got ahead of them, riding hard, and stopped them in the neck of the pass where the path goes over a wooden bridge, and took them all.

'After that we carried the revolt right through our Kazakh country to the north of the Tien Shan passes.

'That was winter, and a hard time. Those of us who came through it were as lean as wolves. Then many went down into the plains and joined the Three Regions army there.'

IV

In the plains they found newly formed regiments of this Three Regions army — Kazakh cavalry and Uighur infantry for the most part, but poorly armed and worse equipped — standing on the Manass river in the Jungarian steppe between Ili and Urumchi. These may have numbered, early in 1945, as many as 40,000 men; the men I talked to said that they received no arms or equipment from across the Soviet border, although, of course, Kuomintang propaganda was soon claiming that they had.

How otherwise explain, in Chungking, the tearing success of this revolt? Kuomintang reinforcements from China proper, supposedly good troops brought up under General Hu Tsung-nan, had failed to drive the rebels from their hold on the Manass river. Although the Kuomintang may have had about 100,000 troops in Sinkiang by now, stalemate ensued; and for a time both sides sat upon their positions and awaited what should happen next.

What did these rebels want by now? Here one could mark the difference in maturity from earlier revolts against Chinese domination: they wanted self-government for Sinkiang but they also wanted social change. To that end they had set up in Ili
city a government whose number and composition seem to have varied according to circumstance. Hali Abak, deputy secretary-general of the Sinkiang-Uighur autonomous government in 1956 and a rebel from the beginning, told me that its largest membership was forty-three, but fell sometimes to as few as twenty-five. Men would come and go because there was need to carry revolutionary ideas to other parts of Sinkiang; and there were casualties.

As the revolt proceeded its originally nationalist bias seems to have leaned steadily towards a social revolutionary bias; although the full story of these complicated years is far from clear. Its government originally had a president and two vice-presidents: an Uzbek called Ali Khan Türe, an Uighur called Hakim Beg, and a Kazakh called Abulkhair Türe. When I asked Hali Abak what had become of Ali Khan Türe, he said that he thought that he had died in 1947; but in a later conversation he added that Ali Khan, 'having fallen sick and because he had relatives in Uzbekistan, went there for medical care; and some say he is still there'. I do not know what became of Hakim Beg; but Abulkhair Türe, the Kazakh, was one of those who signed the abortive treaty with the Kuomintang in 1946: and when I was in Ili they told me he was still living there, though now past eighty.

This Hali Abak was also a man to remember, a hard and perhaps implacable man in his early forties whose initially grim suspicion that I must have unconfessed reasons for asking questions about the time before 1949—the time for which there were no easy signposts to point what one should say—broke down only after much conversation. Once he got going, though, he sometimes forgot his textbook phrases and gave us vivid pictures of those tortured years. Now and then at our meetings, as though struck by something he had said himself, he would open wide his cold brown eyes and pause, and stare at me eagerly; and then, as though recalling that the thing was past and done, go on with his story again. In the end he came even to the point of talking about himself.
‘I was a student. . . . I listened to Abdul Reni bator and I went to fight at Ili. . . . We had few arms, but we were not defeated. . . .’

I do not know at what point Hali Abak became a revolutionary: I should think at the time he listened to Abdul Reni. But after the front was stabilized along the Manass the Three Regions government — as it was now called — assigned him to the Department of Public Security, no doubt a grim enough assignment in those years; and later on, as he told me, he went into the Altai where, in 1953, he became deputy governor as well as a leading Communist official.

‘At the beginning,’ he said, ‘we proclaimed in Ili an Eastern Turkestan Republic’ — another separatist successor, that is, to the ‘Republic of Kashgar’ of ten years earlier — ‘but after the peace treaty with the Kuomintang of June 1946 we dropped that title and we buried our separatism.’

Peace with the Kuomintang, or at least a truce, was reached with great difficulty. Far away in Chungking, the Nationalist Government (then negotiating with the Communists in China proper) had recognized the need to negotiate with the Sinkiang rebels as soon as General Hu had failed to push them from the Manass river; but the gap between thought and action remained wide.

Local obstruction by Kuomintang nominees in Urumchi might have killed all chance of negotiation: but the speed and violence of the revolt were too much for them. They could count on increasing support from the ‘begs and bais’ — even from those who still nursed private hopes of running a separatist Sinkiang in their own interests — but by now the peasants of the oases were also joining the war. By the last months of 1945 partisan formations, perhaps helped from Tadjikistan and perhaps not, had appeared in the far western mountains; the revolutionary movement swept doggedly forward.16

The Kuomintang sent up a special commissioner with orders to make peace on the best terms he could. Negotiations began in September 1945 between the Three Regions government
and this special commissioner, General Chang Chih-chung; and were eventually, though briefly, successful. General Chang himself was by no means an extremist—he was still an army commander in 1956—but his instructions and his colleagues combined to make life difficult for him. Yet peace was signed in June 1946; by General Chang on one side, and by three revolutionary leaders, Akhmedjan Kasim, Abulkhair Türe, and Rakhimjan Klojaev, on the other. Essentially, this treaty established minority rights such as Sheng had promised in 1933, and had partially conceded until 1937; and it also provided that the Sinkiang provincial government and assembly should be composed both of Kuomintang nominees and of nominees of the Three Regions.

Yet these agreements were never honoured by the Kuomintang. A few political prisoners were released; others were held fast in defiance of the treaty, and it was not long before men were being re-arrested. Beyond the neighbourhood of Urumchi, where the Three Regions government (thanks to its troops along the Manass river) still had influence on the Kuomintang, there were appalling reprisals against those who had taken up arms. In a last frantic blood bath the Kuomintang tried wildly to save itself.

V

Even in 1956, travelling through the far western oases below the mountain frontiers of Kashmir and Afghanistan, we came upon quick memories of all this.

I remember a day on the road from Yarkand when we had paused in the noontime heat and found shelter beneath wayside trees. We asked a handful of peasants, reclining beneath these trees, where we were. They said it was Kizil and there were nine hundred families; but who were we? Ah, then we should take tea with them; we should honour their house.

We followed a vigorous old woman who carried a bowl of
yoghurt through the outer gate of a high roughstone wall and into the house-place within a second wall; and were joined by her husband and two younger sons, or perhaps grandsons. Our driver sat on his heels in the shadow; Mamud and Tse and I were given rugs on the sheltered veranda. Beyond the low western wall we could see the first ranges of the Pamir and beyond them the peaks over Tashkurgan that hang above the frontier of Tadjikistan.

After a while the old woman came with bowls of tea and watched us with the satisfaction of the naturally hospitable: her face was bronzed and beautiful within a pale blue scarf and once she must have been strikingly handsome. Her fresh white teeth were those of a girl's, and when she walked she had the grace of a dancer.

She and her husband answered our questions. No, they had received nothing during the land reform: they were middle peasants, almost in the category of rich peasants. . . . Yes, they had joined the co-operative movement, everyone in the oasis had joined it. . . . Of seven sons three were working and two were at school, and one of these would now go to a secondary school. . . .

Our talk languished in that noonday courtyard. Only when I asked who had controlled the water, before liberation, did they perk up a little. Two men had controlled it, they said smilingly: one in Yarkand and one in Yengihissar, landlords both, but now they had a mirab appointed by their own committee. . . . No, there was not enough water, but now it was divided fairly, whereas before the two landlords had taken nearly all of it. . . . Clearly it was a long settled question: one of the sons, bored with our talk, got up to slip away.

Then I said: 'Was any man from here in the revolt?'

When they understood that question — through Tse and Mamud — they came at once to life. The husband grinned and looked at us keenly; the boy turned back again and sat down; the old woman's face glittered with a sudden excitement: they talked vigorously to Mamud. 'They say,' he
said, ‘that many went, that every family of Kizil sent a man to fight, that thirty from here were killed in the revolt, fighting as partisans’.

It was the old woman, now, who spoke for them. Some brave ones, it came out, had organized the young men of Kizil and the young men had gone up there — she nodded towards the mountains high above the low western wall — and had joined with the young men of Tashkurgan and had formed partisan bands. Many had fought for two or three years. All the country round Yarkand and Kizil and Yengihissar had known them. (In fact, as other records show, these partisan bands were active all round the great western curve of irrigation, from Khotan in the south to Aqsu and Karashahr in the north.16)

After the peace with the Kuomintang — she meant the short-lived treaty of 1946 — some of the young men had dared to come back. Among them were three of their leaders from Kizil and these the Kuomintang, in spite of the peace, had arrested and shot. Afterwards I learned the names of these three obscure heroes from Mehmeti Min, secretary of the Kashgar local government: they were Hasan Hadje, Savet Küre, and Ashim. In being shot they were luckier than some others whom the Kuomintang laid hands on at that time. At Aqsu, according to Mehmeti Min, they took Lutpila Motalip, another Uighur leader, and murdered him most brutally together with many others. At Kashgar they took Abdurrahman Eminov and buried alive several score of his active followers. In the area of Tashkurgan they beheaded twelve rebels, including one of their leaders, a Tadjik called Guljaman. . . .

VI

But all these and many other murders availed them nothing. For the truth by this time was that the Kuomintang were facing in Sinkiang a coherent and determined revolt which had realized, at long last, an effective unity among all these Sinkiang peoples. Although Communist leadership grew strong in
the revolt it none the less seems to have united men and women from all social classes except the landlords and traders of the big oases and some of the wealthier stockbreeders: in this the Communists here seem to have shown the same unifying skill as in China proper.

Uighur and Kazakh, Tatar and Uzbek, Tadjik and Kirghiz: they were all involved, and their leaders seem already to have seen their future as an integral part of revolutionary China, for little is found after 1946 of their original separatism. The separatist cause in Sinkiang, always a volatile and doubtful quantity, seems to have remained after that with none but a handful of notables who wished to separate Sinkiang not so much from China as from revolutionary China; and this handful, with Masud Sabri and Yolbaz Khan and Uzman and a few others, disappears quickly after 1949.

What the majority wanted was being said with increasing vigour in 1946 and 1947 even though the truce was badly ruptured. ‘In this province,’ declared Akhmedjan Kasim, foremost of the revolutionary leaders, in February 1947, ‘it is impossible to keep the peace by repression, bribery, betrayal, and fraud.’ They wanted decent government. They wanted equality of rights, civil liberties, social and economic advancement. ‘The enemies of our people’, said Akhmedjan in that memorable speech, ‘are not the people of China, but those few among them who are for government by repression, for imperialism, for the denial of people’s rights.’

These were not mere words. When Akhmedjan spoke of ‘people’s rights’ he had an understanding audience. For at that very moment, as everyone knew, the prisons of south Sinkiang were crammed with men whose crimes, precisely, were the wanting of ‘people’s rights’.

‘The expression “Eastern Turkestan”,’ Akhmedjan went on, ‘does not mean that we advocate an independent Eastern Turkestan. It means solely that the people have finished with the former policy of oppression and do not want it to continue. . . . The problem of our day is to make sure both of unity
among the nationalities and of democracy in Sinkiang." It was a very up-to-date pronouncement.

The Kuomintang clique in Urumchi, aping its superiors elsewhere, stuck to the last to their doctrine of racial superiority. None of them put it more clearly than an historian called Li Tung-fang, writing in Chungking in 1945, who explained that the Uighurs were descended from the Huns (the Hsiung-nu), that the Huns were in turn descended from the ancient Chinese, and there was thus no real difference in 'nationality' between Uighurs and Chinese. He was spelling out in greater detail the Chinese racialism set forth a little later by Chiang Kai-shek in his book, *China's Destiny*, where all the peoples of China were described as belonging to a single 'Chunghua (Chinese) nation'. But the days of the Kuomintang were numbered.

By September 1949 divisions of the People's Liberation Army, having occupied Kansu, were ready to cross the Gobi and, if necessary, fight their way into Sinkiang until they could join with their allies of the Three Regions army. No fighting proved necessary. The Kuomintang provincial commander in Urumchi, General T'ao Shih-yueh, broadcast an appeal for 'peaceful liberation', and others followed him in declaring their readiness to serve under the Communists.

A few hesitated; a handful said no. When I was in Hami a man from Barkul told me that the local Kuomintang garrison had refused to follow General T'ao's orders to 'change over': some of these troops rioted on September 28th, three days after T'ao's broadcast, and burnt shops in protest — he showed me what he said were ruins from the burning — but this local Kuomintang resistance disappeared when it became known that the revolutionary authorities had appointed the pro-Kuomintang Yolbaz Khan as administrative chief of the Hami region. What old Yolbaz then did with that authority was to be another story.

Within a few days advanced units of the People's Liberation Army had arrived in Urumchi to meet a strong detachment from the Three Regions army, commanded by a Tatar called
Marhop; and a joint victory parade was held in Urumchi. At the same time two regiments of the Three Regions army, under an Uighur called Imenov, pushed southward through the Tien Shan by forced marches and entered Kashgar without opposition.

Thus the Chinese revolution flooded into Sinkiang not on the bayonets of an invading army but as part of the task of making peace. It came in not as a foreign product, possibly hostile, certainly difficult to adapt, but as the reinforcement of a strong popular movement already in existence. It found a revolutionary-nationalist movement in which Communist influence was paramount but not exclusive. And it also found, in the Three Regions government and its army, and in the prisons that were now flung open, many people of the country whose lives had long prepared them for responsibility in carrying through great social change.

In all this, it would seem, Sinkiang offered the Chinese Communist party much easier problems than Tibet would offer a little later on; for in Tibet the Chinese revolution would find no native movement of revolt, nor any clear alliance except by gingerly compromise with quasi-feudal monks and feudal lords. This infinitely more complex and populous Sinkiang (having perhaps five times the population of Tibet) would take to the Chinese revolution with simplicity and belief: beyond the ramparts of the Kun Lun Shan, by contrast, the Chinese would meet with fear and suspicion. Tibet had changed little in structure since the reforming days of Tsong-kapa in the fourteenth century: Sinkiang, for bitter years, had thundered with the toil of revolution.

Yet almost at once the Sinkiang revolution lost four of its leaders. Akhmedjan Kasim and Abdul Kerim for the Uighurs, General Skah Beg for the Kirghiz, and General Dalelehan for the Kazakhs — these last being generals of the Three Regions army, not of the People’s Liberation Army — took off by plane for Peking to celebrate the founding of the new People’s Republic, and were killed when their plane crashed into a Man-
Another delegation was hastily got together under the leadership of Saifuddin, an Uighur pro-Communist who was eventually to become chairman of the Sinkiang autonomous government in 1955; but the loss of four tried leaders and especially of Akhmedjan, evidently a man of rare wisdom and maturity, must have been a sore blow.

Most of the Kuomintang officials carried on. Burhan, a wealthy Tatar trader who had occupied a carefully moderate position between conservative nationalism and support of the Kuomintang, took over chairmanship of the provincial government and would later become a deputy prime minister of the central government in Peking. General T’ao ceased to command the Sinkiang garrisons, but stayed as second in command of the Sinkiang military region, a position he still held when I was there in 1956. Most of the Kuomintang provincial troops, as well as the Three Regions army, were progressively incorporated into the People’s Liberation Army or else sent home. With one small but interesting exception, there was peace in the land.

VII

The exception was brief but colourful.

When Yolbaz Khan, the ‘Tiger Lord’ who was now around his seventieth year and duly set in his opinions, accepted nomination from the revolutionary authorities as administrative head of the Hami region, in September 1949, he was not won over. He had long served the Kuomintang, and had much on his conscience. Many hated him for his betrayal of the earlier revolt of 1931. Lastly — and it was this that seems to have urged him into armed resistance — he evidently believed that miraculous help from America might somehow still rescue the Kuomintang, or perhaps enable such men as himself to achieve in Sinkiang the same ‘independence’ as Chiang Kai-shek had just achieved in the island of Taiwan.

In February or March 1950, at all events, Yolbaz with a
small group of Kuomintang soldiers rode out of Hami into the Tien Shan, crossed to their northern flank, and later rendez-vous’d at Barkul with another counter-revolutionary leader of like opinions, a Kazakh whose name was Uzman. These two notables, Uighur and Kazakh, began trying to collect men.

There are varying accounts of Uzman. The late Ian Morris, a correspondent of The Times who was in Urumchi as late as August 1949, went up to Uzman’s yurts in the foothills of Bogdo Ola, to the north-east of Urumchi, and described him later as having ‘a large powerful face, long black moustaches and beard, a prominent nose, rather light brownish eyes, an arrogant mouth’; remarked that he had at the time, or was said to have, about seven hundred men; and added that his claims to power and glory should not perhaps be taken as gospel truth.18

Hali Abak, who had fought against him, put it more bluntly. ‘Uzman was not a civilized man,’ he said. ‘He was a brigand without principle or political understanding; and he was also a tool of the Kuomintang.’

My own impression is that Uzman resembled some of those Serbian chetnik commanders whose love of power and loot, during the second world war, betrayed them without much difficulty into collusion with the German or Italian armies in Jugoslavia. They too were strong-drinking and strong-swearing characters, firm planted on the peasant earth (although Uzman, of course, was not a peasant), good with horses and good with men, collecting easily a band of reckless followers, promising them everything, giving them a little now and then; and leading them, infallibly, to perdition. They could not understand the revolutionary ideas that shook their country; they felt themselves carried away, as their leader Drazha Mihajlovich (a man of better stamp than they) had said before his execution, by ‘the wind of the world’; and there was no place for them any longer. In a world of serious change, Uzman and company were without employment.

The point is worth making because there was some attempt,
later on, to present Uzman as ‘an ally of the West’ and a genuine Sinkiang separatist. He was neither, of course, in any serious or consequential sense. But the point is also worth making because with the passing of Uzman there also passed the time of all the other Uzmans, of all those boot-and-saddle heroes of Middle Asia who had swept through history, with whips cracking on the wind and the clatter of horses, ever since the Mongol hordes first cantered into Europe.

His career had been typical of all those other nationalists who dithered during the second world war, in occupied countries, between hatred of the invader and an even greater hatred of a revolution they could not understand. Uzman himself began by throwing in his lot with the revolt of the Three Regions: through the bloody cavalry skirmishes of 1944 and 1945 he had justified his title of bator. But then the revolt proved too much for him, and altogether a stiff and responsible affair; Uzman changed sides, and joined the Kuomintang against the rebels. He secured control of the Altai hills; but then, after many vicissitudes, was chased out by the Three Regions army — according to Hali Abak, who was in command of that Three Regions force — after fighting which lasted from September 19th to October 19th, 1947.

Uzman fled south across the Jungarian steppe and took up headquarters under Kuomintang protection in the hills near Urumchi, where Ian Morrison and two American companions would find him nearly two years later.

Even after the peaceful change-over in Sinkiang of September 1949, Uzman continued his resistance: perhaps from belief that the revolution would never tolerate him after all the blood that was shed, and perhaps from other reasons too. Earlier on, at the beginning of the American airlift to Chung-king, the United States air force had established weather stations in useful places. One of these was at Sa’chow, at the western end of the Wall, and the man in charge of it was a sergeant of marines called Douglas Mackiernan. Now in 1949 this Mackiernan was at Urumchi as an American vice-consul;
and it is generally asserted there (though I was never offered any proof) that Mackiernan fed Uzman with money and promises, and possibly with arms. It is certainly true that the unfortunate Mackiernan took to his heels just before Uzman's second revolt, at the time of the peaceful change-over in Sinkiang, fled south into the Tibetan mountains, and was there murdered out of hand by Tibetans who 'did not know who he was'. A little later the revolutionary authorities in Urumchi arrested the then British consul, a former missionary called Fox Holmes, declared they had found dynamite in his cellar and circumstantial evidence of links with Uzman, and expelled him from the country. Thus ended the consular outpost that Sir George MacCartney had established for Britain in China's far north-west some sixty years before.

Whatever promises Uzman may or may not have had, or believed he had had, he almost at once declared war on the new regime in Sinkiang, and gave a good deal of trouble all through that first winter of 1949–50. By the spring he had linked up with Yolbaz, coming up from Hami, and added a few more men to his own lean and desperate band. But now the snow was melting in the passes; and within weeks the revolutionary army, operating from Urumchi and Hami, had caught and smashed them. Even so, some hundred of these Kazakhs, including women and children, got away south across the desert to the hills of the Altyn Tagh; and it was from there they set out on their long march through Tibet and Kashmir that brought them finally to Turkey, where they now are. Uzman and Yolbaz and a few more got raggedly away across the desert by another route, fleeing to the neighbourhood of Tunhuang, the site of the Thousand-Buddha Caves. Not far from here Uzman himself was taken in battle; he was then brought back to Urumchi and executed. Yolbaz, for all his advanced years (and he must have been a remarkably tough old man), seems to have got clean away to Lhasa; thereafter he disappears without trace.

Of the last of these Kazakhs in Uzman's following I caught
a glimpse, by hearsay, from Rewi Alley who had chanced to be at Tunhuang, looking at the famous murals with Dr Joseph Needham, when some of them had come in from their flight across the desert. 'I remember they came up to us and began arguing the toss, among themselves, whether or not they wouldn't kill us. A fearsome lot, they were. Some of them wore brass buttons in their hats to mark the number of people they had killed. And they killed right and left: men, women, and children — it was all the same to them so far as I could see.

'We came on a case that was right in their line. They'd left behind a lad who was one of their number, because they thought he was dying. Luckily for him, an old Mongol woman took him in and saved his life. In return he shot her as soon as he was well, stole the little money that she had, went off to a neighbouring farm and shot the peasant and his wife and stole their horse, and rode after the rest of the band.'

But in Sinkiang, at long last, there was peace. It was narrowly in time. For this was a country, by now, that was dying of its wounds.

VIII

Many told me this; but it was Dr Tadeyev Habibullah, in Yarkand, who really brought it home to me.

Habibullah is a slender Uighur of middle age: he wears the traditional black and silver bonnet, and his thin-boned face, a little quarried with the smallpox of childhood, has the colour and texture of a crinkled olive. He has the eyes of one who has stared on horrors for too long; and his voice is sad and tired. None of this melancholy is unexpected. To become a doctor had required a superhuman effort: to survive as one had required another. I doubt if Habibullah, whom I came to know and value as a friend, has ever had time to draw breath and enjoy his own achievement.

He was born on the far side of the mountains, in Soviet Kirghizstan; but his father, being a native of Sinkiang, had
returned with the family in 1932. Soon afterward a handful of Soviet medical workers had come to Kashgar, and young Habibullah, who knew a little Russian, had decided to study as a pharmacist. Through the years of peasant revolt and Tungan terror and Chinese counter-terror, Habibullah had somehow managed to complete his studies: then, in 1936, Soviet doctors had arrived for duty at the Kashgar general hospital and encouraged him to stay on and qualify as a feldsher, an assistant-doctor. These Soviet doctors were obliged to leave Sinkiang after Sheng Shih-tsai had ‘made his turn’; but they did not leave until June 1944. ‘After they left, Habibullah said, ‘Kashgar had only two Chinese and one Uighur doctor, as well as a few of us still training as assistants.’ The Kashgar oasis, it may be said, has about one million inhabitants.

‘What was worse, we had no medical supplies. Sheng stopped importing them from the Soviet Union, and the Kuomintang who took over from Sheng would send none from China.

‘In November 1943 there was a typhus outbreak in Yengihissar. By February there were more than six hundred deaths, I went there myself. . . . There was nothing I could do but count the dead and dying. . . .’

We drank tea and took notes. Habibullah watched me with sad eyes. Through an opened window in that sleepy hour there echoed down a call for prayer: if I bent forward I could look up to a distant crow’s nest where the ahun stood, mounted on a platform of high poles beyond the poplars of Yarkand public gardens. He called in a perfunctory way, for Islam in Sinkiang sits easily on peoples’ ways: perhaps everything in Sinkiang had been perfunctory.

Habibullah was saying: ‘We had always had epidemics. But these new epidemics were added to a terrible poverty. Theft and corruption were also a disease by now, for everyone with power took all the wealth he could.’

What had peace found to save in Yarkand?

‘I came down here myself from Kashgar,’ Habibullah said,
'just before the liberation. That was because the Kuomintang, here in south Sinkiang, had already collapsed: we were getting things in hand a little. I was appointed director of Yarkand hospital. By then, you see,' he added, as though wishing to make it clear that he would claim nothing for himself, 'I had about ten years of practical experience. I was strong on the practical side.

'I knew it would be difficult. I came down on horseback through Yengihissar and Kizil, along the road you have travelled yourself, and the country was dead — even to me who knew it well. Those lords of the oases were barricaded in their farms — they knew what was coming. The people knew it too, but they were still afraid.'

He paused and stared out of the window; then began again. 'I went straight to the hospital. Since the Soviet doctors had left Yarkand in 1943, the hospital had fallen to the charge of two assistant-doctors. I didn't expect to find they had done much work.

'Those two Uighurs — I had known them. They had been honest men. But they had lost heart. So many had lost heart. One of them was drunk when I got here. He was sitting on a bed in the dispensary — I don't think the hospital beds had been used for months, or not for medical purposes — and crying to himself. I think he'd been drunk for a long time. I didn't find the other at all. Not at first. Then I discovered he'd gone off with a girl who'd been a patient: he'd seduced her, raped her some said, and then just gone off and lived with her.

'I cleared up the mess as well as I could, but it was slow. Those two doctors talked to me, too. I ought to have been angry with them, but I wasn't. They told me they'd gone on working decently for as long as the drugs lasted. But when there were no more drugs they began to lose heart. Nobody ever came near them: there wasn't any medical service in Sinkiang, you see, there wasn't anyone to take an interest in them, to make them feel useful.

'And the drugs! I didn't find a single one you could use for
the ordinary run of cases. But there were stocks of about forty drugs for rare things — they hadn’t been touched for years.’

One could guess at the relief of Habibullah’s coming; for he would have had, as well as a certain grim determination, the gift of being able to forgive. He would have taken things into his own capable and modest hands, and people would have known they could trust him.

‘We stopped the gambling and the drinking. We straightened things out. New medical workers came down from Kashgar and supplies and instruments.’

Habibullah wanted me to report some progress in the years after that. ‘Now we have eight fully qualified doctors in the Yarkand oasis,’ he said. ‘They include two surgeons, three physicians, one paediatrician, one ear-nose-throat specialist, one gynaecologist. We also have six assistant-doctors. We have no more fear of epidemics; and we have a new hospital.’ He showed me the old hospital and the new hospital: the one was a filthy old barn, mud-plastered, windowless — and the other a decent building of many windows and good equipment with some sixty in-patients, completed in 1953. Habibullah even smiled at this point. He said: ‘You see, we have made some progress.’

He also said unusual things. They slipped from him like sad wisdom; and they were part of his gift for forgiveness, but also more than that. They had nothing of disillusionment, for the disillusioned do not really forgive: they merely tolerate or turn away. They are disillusioned because they cannot forgive; they are not strong enough to forgive. Habibullah had neither tolerated nor turned away; in spite of living through a time of bestiality and massacre and rape and sawn-off limbs and burial alive, he had gone on believing in the possible decency of people.

He once looked at me curiously and said: ‘Do you really understand what it means when people have hope? When they have it for the first time? When they have it like money in their fingers, like water in their fields?’
CHAPTER SEVEN

KASHGAR

You now who listen
To the legend of the Chalk Circle, Recognize the verdict
Of the wise, That whatever is in question
Shall belong to those for whom it is good, so
Children to the motherly, that they should thrive
And cars to good drivers, that they be driven well
And the valley to those who irrigate, to make it fruitful

BERTOLT BRECHT

FROM Urumchi we flew to Kashgar, a thousand miles to the westward. Otherwise a week’s journey by country bus, the plane makes it twice a week each way, in six hours, allowing for brief stops at the oasis towns of Kucha and Aqsu.

Unnervingly enough, our plane flew south through the Tien Shan between green mountain slopes that were often higher than its wingtips on either side. Two or three army officers, some officials, a few peasants completed our company. Nearly everyone unfastened a bed roll and stretched out on the floor: plane travel was a new experience, and not agreeable.

In Kashgar we spent our days in arduous inquiry. We really worked hard. We looked into education and religion and co-operative farming and a great deal else beside.

But we also idled through many hours in mingling with the crowds. Kashgar is a city of crowds. It is the real capital of the Uighur people and on market days, especially, a dizzy spectacle of Middle Asian commerce. Its shops and stalls are much as you find them in any other bazaar of the Takla Makan, little else than shallow cupboards dug into thick street walls behind which innumerable dwellings are concealed; but they are more
confident and various and busier, for this is the largest bazaar of Eastern Turkestan.

Here you see coppersmiths and tinsmiths, jewellers and workers in filigree and silver and gold, makers of musical instruments, their products in polished rows above their heads in the dusty workshop — onion-bulbed fiddles whose shape and sound have barely changed in two thousand years — and a host of hatters, for nobody in Kashgar will move, if they can help it, without an embroidered bonnet or a skullcap stitched with gold or silver thread or purple flowers.

An odd thing is that there is no jade in Kashgar, although the jade quarries of Khotan are only four hundred miles away, which is almost next door in Chinese terms. Nor could I afterwards find any jade in Yarkand, closer still to Khotan: these old handicrafts had died away, people said, and for worked jade one must go to the Jade Market in Peking (where, of course, one finds a great deal of it, and much of it excellent). But it is possible that jade was never worked here.

Peasants bring in things that people need. They bring in boulders of rock salt, pepper grey, that are roped to the backs of small donkeys; lumps of ice kept over from the winter; little cones of soap shining primrose yellow in the sunlight; legs and loins and bowels of sheep and oxen, and possibly of other animals as well; lengths of leather, flayed skins, died strips of hide; firelighter shavings, rolls of cotton, padded overcoats, high boots of scarlet and vermilion leather, hats and shoes; wooden bolts for doors and stables; horseshoes and toe-caps in grey iron, finely hammered by a man who has set up his forge in the street, and has a little boy to pump the bellows; booming cattle with long useless horns; cups for tea and teapots. A tremendous busyness in tiny matters fills the place.

There is poverty; but less, it seems, than a few years ago. A Kashgar trader in cotton goods, a man of average commercial position called Nusret Memeti, told me how he and all his fellow-traders had lately gone into the co-operative movement or else into trading partnership with the State. He said that his
capital had been valued by himself, but checked by his neighbours, at 17,000 yuan (perhaps £2,500 at the current rate of exchange). This he had made over to the State at a low annual interest (since increased, however, to five per cent) and a monthly wage of 90 yuan, which is not at all a bad wage at Kashgar rates. Even before the interest rise of 1956, he had 100 yuan a month, or about £15, and in Kashgar one could live on that without hardship. We went down to the cattle market and were told that a young bullock sold at 25 to 30 yuan, a fat sheep at 20 yuan, a goat at 13, a donkey at as low as 7. A good horse might cost 150. Housing is primitive, but obviously cheap. Nusret’s main point, though, was that he had much greater security than before: trade was expanding, but even if it weren’t he would still get his weekly wage. I think that is a pretty general feeling among all these traders in China who have lately gone into partnership with the State. On the government side, of course, it means that China is a good step nearer to a socialist economy.

Within the city — the Kashgar oasis itself is nearly a hundred miles wide — people live in rooms round veranda-ed courtyards which in turn open off covered alleyways that wind and twist, so that all this living space behind the thick street walls is really a confusion of dwellings, and you cannot possibly hope to find your way without a guide. This manner of life has compensations, for it makes for privacy and coolness in the unrelenting heat, and it keeps out some of the swirling dust of the Takla Makan that is otherwise a plague in Kashgar. Only once or twice during our stay did the dust blow clear and let us see how high and close the white slopes of the Pamir really are.

I doubt if there is any better place to see the ways of Inner Asia. Especially we grew attached to a narrow teahouse perched above the market square: Tse and I and Mamud, an expansive Uighur from Aqsu who was attached to us as guide and general comforter and friend (attached by the city administration, that is, at the request of the Kashgar branch of the Association of Journalists), would forgather there towards
noon, and Mamud would explain what I told him I had seen, and dilate upon the general excellence of life. He is a man of generous build and nature, and has a true Uighur feeling for enjoyment. Later he travelled with us to Yarkand, and later again he took us into the Pamir; we came to know him well, and esteem him as a good companion.

This Kashgar chai hana was another witness to the unity of Islamic culture. A casual open-fronted affair with tables and chairs in the dust of the street and others in the heat and smoke beside its wood-fired oven, it was crowded early and late with peasants and traders in long cotton shirts and sheepskin bonnets or embroidered caps and with a great deal of time on their hands, for the shift and hurry of the modern world have yet to strike Kashgar; although the thin end of the wedge, in the shape of a few Czechoslovak buses, is already here. Upstairs there were two small rooms with carpets and elbow-tables. Outside these ran a slender balcony, and across its palings we could gaze down upon the strolling and the gaping and the gossiping, and the women in black veils and the children hawking matches and the priests at the doors of the distant mosque across the square. One could have shish kebab on long skewers and yoghurt and dried melon seeds, and tea.

But only half a year earlier I had stayed with Berber friends in the Middle Atlas of Morocco, almost within smell of the Atlantic Ocean: there the old ways still hold, and one of them is a fondness for sitting in just such teahouses as this one in Kashgar. There, true enough, one drank mint tea or coffee; here one could drink Chinese tea or hot water, for no coffee is to be found in Turkestan. Yet in this Kashgar chai hana I really understood for the first time how the Arab travellers of the great days of Islam could move from end to end of their wide world, and always feel at home.

‘Kappi hana yok,’ confirmed Mamud of the lack of coffee houses in Sinkiang. But, he added happily, ‘chai hana ba.’

Among all these crowds there were no armed men nor soldiers of any kind but for a single sentry on duty outside the
office of the city government. Even on market days I counted only a handful of policemen; and these were all local coppers—unarmed—whose homes, I was told, were in the Kashgar oasis, for police recruitment is strictly local nowadays. Gone are the days of rule by a Chinese colonial service and Chinese garrisons. The only other arm of the law that I remember seeing in Kashgar—a somewhat unofficial one—was an ancient haji in a flapping white gown with a great red band on his arm, heavily inscribed in Arabic script such as the Uighurs use, who stood at a crossroad near the cattle market and launched himself against trotting donkeys and lurching cattle with hoarse cries of discouragement and terror, and flapped his arms in mock dismay. I saw the old garrison barracks, and they were empty but for a handful of depot troops; and there were no new barracks. The city walls were pulled down in 1950: only a few segments remain, standing like abandoned hulks, where men had built houses against them and their removal would be inconvenient.

II

The public monuments are not much. On the recommendation of Abdul Rachman Haji, an imam of the great mosque whose acquaintance I made by chance and whom I later visited in his own house, I went to see the shrine of Sidi Djellal ed-din Bardat, but it proved a sorry spectacle and the door was shut upon a ruined interior. A bat flew out as I was peering in, circled wildly and scattered into a ragged hole above the door. Yet much of the green and blue tiling of the façade and dome may still be seen: enough to suggest it must once have made a fine effect of beauty and magnificence, and a link with those great shrines and monuments whose pictures Robert Byron took in Afghanistan and Persia twenty-five years ago. According to Rachman Haji this shrine of Sidi Djellal was built about a hundred years ago for a conqueror from Turfan; but we never got this very clear, and perhaps it is not true.
The Government is now giving money for repair and maintenance of mosques, Kashgar having no fewer than 120 of them but lowly affairs for the most part; and the great mosque was in scaffolding while I was there. Beyond the shrine of Sidi Djellal and reaching in a wide sweep round it, other shrines in a ruined graveyard were also under repair: one could pick one's way among these crumbling sand-red graves and find old walls that were newly pointed with cement.

Rachman Haji, who is eminent in Kashgar church affairs—and whom I had met not by official arrangement but through his daughter, a pupil of a grown-ups' 'reading and writing' school—told me that most of the imams and ahuns had been against the new Government, himself included; but the new Government, much to their surprise, had neither molested them nor prevented them from proclaiming the Faith: on the contrary, he said, things were better than before. How much he really meant by this last remark might be hard to know: he is an old bearded imam of Kashgar and no doubt deep in his heart he has no love for new ways.

But he may have meant a good deal by it. He told me that upon the pilgrimage, forty years ago, he had seen many countries and many wars, many great wars; and now in his old age he was glad there was peace in the land of Kashgar. The Chinese had oppressed Islam in the past; now, he said, they oppressed it no longer. And then, he said, he now agreed that his daughter should learn to read and write (she had, as a matter of fact, already done so in secret without his consent); because the world was changing and the past was gone.

For the moment they are building the necessities in Kashgar and leaving the rest untouched: no doubt it will be many years before the city loses its poverty and dust, but also its antiquated charm. Among these necessities they have built is a large and well-appointed hospital whose Uighur director told me they had already vaccinated some 580,000 persons in the Kashgar oasis against smallpox and 48,000 against cholera and typhus: he thought that the previously common scourge of smallpox
was now reduced to five per cent of its before-liberation incidence. Cholera and typhus had practically disappeared.

There is also a new and rather splendid government guest-house where Tse and I, thanks to the editor of the local newspaper (a man, however, with whom we could make no progress: he was the only speechless Uighur we met), stayed in comfort; and near by there is a new open-air theatre where we watched one evening a performance of the Kashgar city dance ensemble, a very gay and Uighur affair. They were good enough to stage a few dances the following afternoon so that I could take photographs; and in this way we met the fabulous Kembernissa, star of Sinkiang and quintessential beauty of the land. Our speechless newspaper editor brought her along to supper afterwards, which shows that even the most careful of cadres can be human. She had very little to say, it proved; but then you cannot have everything in this world.

Another place of comfort and enjoyment was the public bath-house, also built lately and frequented, so far as I could tell, only by Chinese, for regular bathing is not yet an Uighur fashion. Whenever we could, Tse and I liked to end our dusty day in its cool concrete chambers and drink tea afterwards in its lofty hall. There one could sit, the tea being on the house, while people chatted in the lamp-lit shadows and sloe-eyed Chinese girls combed their glossy hair and sometimes hummed a song or two, until one by one we were overcome with love of sleep, and yawned, and drowsily went off to bed.

III

We set out southward for Yarkand in the dawn hours of a cool and limpid morning. For once in a way the dust haze had vanished, and the high white shoulders of the Pamir were clear and gleaming over pale green fields and poplar crests. They rise abruptly from the floor of the Takla Makan and their flanks seem covered with snow almost from the beginning of their climb, although this, in fact, is an illusion. We had them
in luminous procession nearly all the way to Yarkand, where the road bends eastward into the desert and you see them no longer.

In serene morning light we passed the pale rivers of Kashgar and their lush meadows: they glittered with a fresh brilliance in that delicious air, and nothing yet was blurred with the sun, nor thirsty, bedraggled, in decay. It is only then perhaps, and just before nightfall, that these modest towns and gardens can pretend romance. But at these magical hours even the braying of an ass becomes poetic: even the stink of camel dung, smouldering on someone’s fire, holds vague guarantee of happiness to come. The moment may be short; it has made a power of literature.

You can nowadays motor the one hundred and thirty miles to Yarkand in five or six hours: we took longer because we lingered at small oases on the way. Beyond Yarkand they reckon another day and a half to Khotan; and beyond Khotan the road is said to be in reasonable condition as far as Cherchen. Beyond Khotan, moreover, a new road from Keriya is being pushed southward through the Kun Lun Shan to Gartok in south-western Tibet, so that soon enough you will be able to motor, if you are lucky, from Kashgar to Lhasa, and thus back to Peking by the great new highway that crosses the mountains of western Szechuan.

Along this southern road through Yarkand one may see and hear, perhaps better than anywhere else, what Chinese colonial rule had long meant to Sinkiang. The latter-day colonialism of the Kuomintang was only, it is true, a bitter end to centuries of neglect; but it gave the added twist of pain that turned poverty into squalor. Always threatening, the desert crowded farther into this narrow belt of cultivation. Here you see this in dramatic immediacy, for a little to the east, sometimes no more than a few hundred yards away, the dust-plumed desert ‘breakers’ seem always gathering to run upon this slender beach of green that lies between them and the hills.

Ancient Sinkiang had a much wider belt of cultivation. Some
writers have guessed at a change of climate that made the old settlements untenable; but the deciding factor seems to have been a change of political circumstance. Aurel Stein gave some proofs of this half a century ago. In great pioneering marches he uncovered the ruins of many ancient settlements, east of this southward-bending highroad, that the sands of the desert had long since covered. He showed that the ruins of Niya — far into the desert now — were abandoned towards the end of the third century A.D.: the many hundred writings that he found there had lain untouched beneath the dry preserving sand. It was here at Niya, in seals recovered by Stein, that Pallas Athene was portrayed side by side with Chinese characters, while the documents they sealed were addressed to the Kushan maharajas who ruled in Northern India beyond the Karakorum. Niya had been no miserable outpost in the desert but a place of temples, monks, soldiers, administrators, traders, and travellers from east and west and south.

Niya had not been alone. Not far off, and still far beyond the present line of cultivation, the ancient settlement of Dandan Uiliq offered Stein another picture of a lost prosperity. He struggled into Dandan Uiliq at the rate of about ten miles a day across choking sand from the Yurungkash river of Khotan; but when he got there, and his diggers had turned away some tons of sand, he was rewarded with the sight of frescoes that were still preserved in brilliant colours and that no one else had seen for perhaps a thousand years.

Here in what is now a wilderness he found the portrait of a figure ‘clad in a coat of mail reaching below the knees and elaborately decorated’, wearing ‘wide top boots of leather’ — very much after the style of those ‘Carlovingian warriors’ whom Le Coq and others would later find at Kizil in the north — and, almost next to it in that dry forgotten place where nothing lives, another fresco of ‘a woman bathing in a square tank of water, enclosed by a tesselated pavement and filled with floating lotuses. The figure is nude except for a large red head-dress resembling an Indian pagri and profuse ornaments round the
neck, arms and wrists, and is drawn with remarkable verve. . . .
Fourfold strings of small bells are shown hanging around the hips, just as seen in representations of dancing girls in early Hindu sculpture, while, curiously enough, an elaborate vine-leaf appears where post-classical convention would place its figleaf. . . .’

Still farther into the desert, Stein marked the ruined fort and caravanserai of Karadong, lying almost in the middle of the Takla Makan on the old course of the long-dry Keriya river, and suggesting that a regular trade route had once passed this way: and indeed the Chinese Buddhist traveller, Fa-hsien, seems to have taken this trans-desert route from Karashahr to Khotan in the first years of the fifth century. The date of the fort, Stein believed, went back earlier than the fourth century A.D.; and was probably abandoned before Dandan Uiliq, which seems to have had people until the eighth century. Natural changes in water distribution may have played some part in drying up the Keriya; but political and social changes played even more.

‘The crumbling ruins of the deserted village homesteads which I saw there,’ says Stein of Dandan Uiliq, ‘and the miles of once cultivated ground which the desert sand is now slowly over-running, but on which the lines of empty canals, irrigation embankments and etc., can still be made out, were the best illustration of the process by which the lands of Dandan Uiliq became finally merged in the desert.’ It was not the water that failed, but human means to use it.

To see that process one need not go as far as Dandan Uiliq; the Yarkand highway shows it well enough. Here one is driving now across the desert and now across the sown, with the two in endless competition; and the peasants who occupy this front-line of cultivation have always in their eyes, as they straighten their backs from the toil of their ketman, the long low line of dunes crouching at the desert’s edge and seeming to move in even as one looks at them, with the sand blowing from their crests like banners in the wind. They are of no size, these dunes,
but they make an effect of quelling fear and they conceal behind their crests an ocean of moving sand.

Even half a century ago, before the desolation of these latter years, Stein notes of the Khotan oasis that:

'The abundant supply of water which the river carried down during the spring and summer months might bring fertility to large tracts now covered by low dunes. But here, as elsewhere along the southern edge of the great Turkestan desert, there is no surplus of population available for such extended cultivation, nor an administration capable of undertaking fresh irrigation works on a large scale.'

The same thought occurs to him when writing of his march to Niya.

'No doubt in ancient times' [he says], 'irrigation was carried all along the streams which cut into the desert area, and by a careful storage of their waters probably much ground beyond, that now seems irretrievably lost to the moving sands, was secured for cultivation.'

And he concludes:

'A strong and capable administration might any day take up the old struggle with the desert and successfully push forward the borders of human habitation. . . . But whence is that impulse to come?'

He had pushed through many stiff-locked doors to the ancient past of Turkestan, and with surprising result: but the immediate future, barely fifty years ahead but inconceivable then, would in its way be even more surprising. For within fifty years of the writing of those words the impulse would be clear and confident, and the watered fields of Eastern Turkestan would once again spread down the grey-glint river beds, long since dry, into this 'dead heart of Asia'.
The inheritor of all this old glory and decline was easily found. He came in answer to Mamud's shout and peered beyond his roughstone lintel and, seeing strangers, came forth to greet us.

We had stopped our Polish motor-car at my suggestion in the slender midst of a small oasis south of Yengihissar and got out and gone along the irrigation dikes for a few hundred yards. Beyond a line of willows we found the first likely homestead. Mamud gave a tremendous shout, a most terrifying bellow; whereupon this bearded peasant at once appeared, and was smiling now as though he had looked for us these many days. There is much to be said for the Muslim habit of hospitality.

Mamud began to explain who I was and who Tse was and who he himself was, and that we had questions. The peasant made no difficulty about that; and I am bound to say that few peasants I met in Sinkiang were reluctant to answer questions: if they did not always tell all the truth I think they sometimes did, and often most of it.

This peasant had a good look at us while Mamud was explaining, and we at him. He was tall and strongly built beyond the average, and perhaps in his early sixties. He wore a sheepskin bonnet with the wool turned inward — though the heat was stifling by now — and a long off-white cotton robe belted with a leather thong, and his feet were bare and brown and tough as horn. His ragged black beard was turning grey and his hollowed face had all the leathery hardness and long-underfedness of his people, but his eyes were quick and twinkling and oddly youthful.

He gave Mamud a pleasant answer, and led us through his outer yard into the house-place behind an inner wall. By now his wife and a daughter and a son had come to greet us. We passed through a low doorway into the windowless interior of his one-roomed cottage. Though as bare of possessions as all these peasant interiors in Sinkiang, it was surprisingly clean and
neat, with a carpet on the slightly raised part of the floor and other rugs and carpets rolled up for night-time use. Water pots, slender necked, stood in the corner. These few furnishings would not have changed in shape and texture through many centuries.

I noticed a tambourine hanging on the wall.

Mamud translated: ‘This man says that he used to take the tambourine and dance and sing when there was no other work and the children were hungry.’ They were sitting with us now, watching narrowly the effect of Mamud’s translation, nodding their heads, smiling with hospitable goodwill. In a slow and rather ceremonial way their story came out. It was a simple story, but marvellously to the point.

Until a few years ago this man had owned half an acre of irrigable land: irrigable, but seldom irrigated. Here, he said, the problem of living had not been shortage of land so much as shortage of water. You could be lucky, sometimes in the spring when high spates descended from the mountains — they seemed high and close above us here — and be sure of having a share of it. But usually you would not get a share: usually you had little water, and you had it irregularly, so that even your small holding was too much for it.

Most of the peasants in this small oasis, he said, had endured the same plight: few had owned no land at all, but very few had had land and water. Why was that? Because for all his lifetime, he said, Suleiman Ayip and after Suleiman his son Yusuf had held all the power; and they had used their power to make sure of watering their own lands and the lands of a favoured few who had served them and always sided with them. So the water had not gone to those who would best use it, and most needed it; but to those who claimed to own it. (Under the old customary doctrine of mawat, landowners in Sinkiang had generally claimed the ownership not only of canals they caused to be dug, but also of the water flowing in these canals.)

Mamud continued: ‘He says that he would not work for Yusuf, whom he hated. His children hungered because Yusuf
and his favourites took the water. He begged with a tambourine.'

They all smiled whenever it was question of the tambourine, and nodded vigorously and laughed, and seemed to think it a high old joke. It was, I think, their way of settling with their pride.

And if he had worked for Yusuf the landowner?

'Then he would have fallen chakar.'

This word chakar is still evocative in Sinkiang, a word so full of misery and hunger that no one speaks it lightly.

For this had been a much decayed feudalism; of rights without responsibilities. Here as elsewhere, peasants had fallen into their landlord's debt and then had worked for wages in kind that were mere subsistence and often less than that. But once in debt you most surely stayed in debt, for a lifetime, for several generations from father to son, for ever: the landlord saw to that. From year to year you worked for nothing — for no money except perhaps a few coins at festival time, and for little food. This had been a barely disguised peonage, and of ancient origins.

This man had contrived to avoid chakar: he had remained on his own, and somehow had survived. His family had gone hungrier than the rest: but then they were all so hungry that perhaps it made little difference. The years passed and the oppression grew worse: around us, as they spoke of this, their watching faces grew expressionless and solemn. 'And then,' Mamud translated, 'he says that when things were at the worst, and there seemed no way to go on living, the revolution came and the Communists came, and now it is a different life.'

By how much different? In the land reform of 1952 (later than in China proper), this man had received ten mou of land to set alongside the three he already had; but it helped him little enough, and it was still a bad living. Good to have the land — there was no mistaking the satisfaction in his voice, the glint of understanding in their eyes, when he told of this; but it
failed to solve the problem of survival. Much more, he said, was the new controlling of the water: now they had their own committee to decide the shares, and the Government, he said, had much increased the supply by digging a canal through the middle of the oasis. (The point here, of course, being that the Government was not claiming _mavat_ on this water—ownership of the water by right of having dug the canal—but was providing a free supply.)

Then in 1953 he had taken his thirteen _mou_ of land into a stage-one co-operative. Now they were talking of turning this into a stage-two co-operative. Did he like this idea? 'He says that his son,' Mamud came back on this, 'is secretary of their co-operative.' Already this co-operative embraced most of the families in the oasis: it was part of their lives, it was their own thing. And one saw, listening to this, that it might also be a part of their self-respect: it could mark not only a chance of material improvement but one of their own ways of closing a door upon the past.

I noticed a slender pile of books on a shelf nailed to the wall. They followed my eyes, and the peasant said that three of his younger children were at school: his son, the co-operative secretary, had already taught himself to read and write. None of his elder children had gone to school: he and his wife were still illiterate. Still? Well, they were thinking of going to spare-time studies; but so far there had been no spare time. Besides, there were the children; and the children were learning. His eyes lifted to the little pile of books and briefly rested there. All over China, in these years, there are parents for whom children are pioneers before their very eyes—enchanted eyes, sometimes distrustful eyes—of an absolutely different future. Revolution may have humbled the mighty and exalted them of low degree: now and then, upon occasions like this, one may see how it has also restored—and this in spite of bureaucratic fools, for China has her share of these, and no doubt a quota of knaves as well—a pathway to the joy of living.

We bade farewell to this family on whom we had certainly
come by chance and each shook hands formally, as due ac-
quaintance should. The peasant came as far as his roughstone
lintel and Mamud translated: 'He says that we are friends now,
the people of China and those who are not the people of China.
He wishes you a good life.'
'Tell him, please, that I wish him the same, him and all his
family.'

V

It is even possible, in Sinkiang today, to measure these
matters in a statistical way.

Serfdom had long existed here, as the Dandan Uiliq records
show. Manchu writers of the eighteenth century describe it as
a stable part of the daily scene. Later years brought no re-
mission; if anything, they brought worse exactions. The irri-
gated areas dwindled; the population fell away; serfdom
merged into slavery. Chang Chih-yi, a Chinese writer who
carried out investigations in these southern oases in 1949, under
the aegis of the Academia Sinica, came upon a landlord in the
Kucha oasis with over two hundred households of chakars; and
from these he was somehow taking not only labour but rent as
well. 20 The case was typical enough.

This Inner Asian feudalism was dependent on civil power
and water rights, even more than land, being concentrated in
the hands of a relatively small number of landlords; and to
break this strait-jacket it was necessary to break the landlords.
Yet land reform was not embarked on at once. By the end of
1952 it was complete throughout China except for the minority
regions; but 'as to whether land should be distributed in
minority nationality areas', Mao Tse-tung told a Tibetan dele-
gation towards the end of 1952, 'that is for the minorities them-
selves to decide. It is as yet premature to speak of distribution
of the land in Tibet.' For Tibet, this was still the position in
1957; but in Sinkiang the reform was long since over. Accord-
ing to Abdul Ismail, an Uighur who used to be a 'middle
peasant’ and is now deputy director of the Department of Agriculture of the Sinkiang-Uighur autonomous government, at Urumchi, the general work of ‘land reform’ — and I put it in inverted commas because this was as much a reform of water holding as of land holding — began in the autumn of 1952 and took about twelve months.

Only the peasants of the oases were affected; for there is no land-holding system — or none of any importance — among the stockbreeders of the hills and mountains. But these agricultural areas, Abdul Ismail said, included some 57 out of the 80 hsien (administrative districts) of Sinkiang; and these 57 hsien had a population of about 3,600,000 people with an irrigated area (though partly in disuse) of about 23 million mou, or just under 4 million acres. Other official figures gave a total irrigated area for the all-time-low of 1949 as being 18,900,000 mou, or just over 3 million acres, so that it appears some progress was made in restoring the economy even before land reform.

Holdings were astonishingly small. Chang Chih-yi quotes the case of two villages of the Khotan oasis in 1944 where the smallest ‘farm’ measured 1.03 acres and the largest 18 acres — others, as my own experience showed, had been even smaller. ‘Rich peasants’ in these two villages had average holdings of 11.1 acres, ‘middle peasants’ of 5.7 acres, and ‘poor peasants’ of 2.8 acres: all this was farming on a handkerchief. Water distribution gave the same sad tale. In another village Chang Chih-yi found that 17 per cent of the peasants had no water rights at all, and three-quarters of the peasants had only half the water rights. My own impression is that by 1949 things had often grown much worse than this.

In making the land reform, how had they classified the ‘five village categories’ — landlords, rich peasants, middle peasants, poor peasants, wage workers?

In a small dry voice, over cups of tea, Abdul Ismail produced dramatic figures.

They had conducted a land survey. That is to say, peasant associations under Communist Party guidance, and helped by
men experienced with land reform in other parts of China, had conducted it. They had found out what families owned what land, in itself a revolutionary procedure where any form of statistical judgment must have come as surprisingly as the internal combustion engine to Victorian England. And they had classified families according to the size of their holdings, but also according to their manner of life.

Thus a man who owned land and employed others to work it would fall infallibly into the landlord category; while a man who worked his own land but employed others to help him work it would probably be a rich peasant, but might also be a middle peasant. Classification was flexible. Generally, though, a family with more than 39 mou for each of its members would be counted a landlord family; a family with 39 to 20 mou for each member would be a rich peasant family; a family with 19 to 8 mou would be a middle peasant family; one with 7 to 3 mou would be a poor peasant family; and one with less than 3 would be a wage worker family.

And the result? Landlord families were shown by this survey to compose 2.17 per cent of the oasis population and to hold 21 per cent of the land; rich peasants were 1.15 per cent of the population with 7 per cent of the land; middle peasants were 28 per cent with 37 per cent of the land; poor peasants were 40 per cent with 17 per cent of the land; and wage workers were 20 per cent with 2.18 per cent of the land. So that the poorest three-fifths of the rural population had possessed only one-fifth of the land.

The land reform itself was evidently carried out much as in China proper, by the peasants themselves, with the majority taking decisions — this majority, of course, being wage workers and poor peasants with the gradual and growing adherence of middle peasants, giving an early majority of perhaps three-quarters of the rural population and later of nine-tenths of it and more. Just over one-fifth of the 23 million mou, or about 700,000 acres, were confiscated and shared among peasants.

Broadly speaking, 88 per cent of the peasants received some
land, most of it going to the 60 per cent of poor and landless peasants. Those landlords not considered by their former serfs and fellow villagers as ‘despots’ were allowed to remain in their villages, lost all their land, but were then given a small plot on the same basis of calculation as a landless worker. Although they suffered an abrupt and painful fall in their standard of living, they were not condemned to starvation. The ‘despots’ were either killed or imprisoned, though not their families: they numbered, according to Abdul Ismail, fewer than one per cent of all the Sinkiang landlords. ‘Rich peasants’ were allowed to keep all the land they were actually tilling, whether by their own work or the work of hired hands: they also kept their houses and their farming implements; and their main loss was in power and influence.

Peasant associations increasingly ran the villages instead of landlords and landlords’ men. Out of these associations a pattern of self-government began to grow: water rights, above all, were their concern. Literacy, education, public health became matters of everyday interest. So of all this complex of social change in Eastern Turkestan one could say, and perhaps with little exaggeration, that it was the most significant of historical times; for it made the first complete and irreversible break in a continuity of servitude that went back into the mists of the ancient world. What the soldiers of Euthydemus of Bactria had found in Khotan twenty-two centuries ago, after all, had already held in its master-serf relationships the seed of all those miseries of which Tadeyev Habibullah and others so eloquently speak today.

Within a few years it may be difficult to trace the movement of these obscure yet potent changes that hold within themselves so much of the essence of emergent Asia. But for a little while yet, in Sinkiang, one may still see how a people in great subjection can begin to turn itself, can be helped to turn itself, into a people of self-respecting individuals. What will be found to have happened here, I think, when all the propaganda has been bellowed from one side and all the counter-propaganda from
the other, is a most remarkable piece of social engineering. And only if one sees it at something like its true value will one understand, no doubt, what beckons to the peoples of Asia in these present times.

As I wandered through Sinkiang in those summer weeks I saw that I was luckier than I had known; and that I was watching what few enough from the world outside had ever seen or could have seen — the inner growth and transformation of a backward people, the intimate mechanics of ‘de-colonial’ change. Statistics help, of course; but not much, for they omit the moral factor. And the moral factor in this emergent Asia is not a small one. It is not what men are, but what they wish to become, what they newly believe they can become, that will count in times like these. Given this certainty, it had seemed to me that the Chinese revolution in all its complexity and light and shade would be measured in the long run not by yardsticks of productions, by poods and roubles and percentages, but by its simple affirmation of possibility and hope by its bold improbable statement, flung into an eastern world in torment and despair, that man is also good by nature. And in Sinkiang, time and again, it seemed to me that this was right.

I first became sure of this in Turfan. I need to go back to a blazing hot day, near the desert rim of the Turfan oasis where the sand overlaps the sheltering poplars and the crumbling walls of mud, and turns the day into a crucible.
CHAPTER EIGHT

OASES OF THE SOUTH

*The Peasant:* But this valley has always belonged to us.

*The Soldier:* What does 'always' mean? Nothing belongs to anyone for always. When thou wast young thou didst not even belong to thyself, but to Prince Kazbeki.

BERTOLT BRECHT

I was sitting in a sweat towards midday, putting questions to a man who was repairing a *kariz* and getting small change for my labour. It is not for nothing that Turfan is claimed to be the hottest place on earth: even this solid native seemed to feel the heat. He said little to my questions. This made things worse.

'Not very talkative, is he?'

'No,' said Tse moderately.

The peasant wore a big red metal badge on the front of his gown and so was probably a *cadre*. I said: 'He obviously ought to know.'

'Well, he doesn’t seem to.'

'I’ll bet it’s because he won’t say.'

Tse took off his glasses and wiped them. He is patient at such moments. He said: ‘Whyever shouldn’t he say?’

I grumbled: *cadres* could be like that, they’d pass you on to the next man higher up and so *ad infinitum*, rather than soil their brightly polished slogans with the mud and dust of situations as they really were.

Tse looked at me in mild reproach. He said: ‘I don’t remember that happening to us.’

Nor, to be honest after the event, do I; or not often. But I
I said: ‘Well, it’s the sort of thing that could happen, couldn’t it? I mean, it’s happening now.’

Tse continued to wipe his glasses. Past us there rolled a Turfan taxi with four mediaeval dames fanning themselves therein — a donkey-drawn cart rumbling on two wheels and covered by an awning four-poster bedwise — and left us to bite the suffocating dust. Not even the cool interest of those wimpled women in their blue and saffron gowns was any comfort. It is at moments such as this that the itinerant reporter loses heart, and wonders whether his journey is not a vast mistake.

The gloomy cadre went on pottering about the mouth of the underground aqueduct, prodding with his ketman while I prodded with my questions. In 1945 it was estimated that Turfan had 370 of these *kariz*, and that each of them would irrigate an average of seventy-six acres. They are expensive to dig: even fifty years ago Aurel Stein thought that a long Turfan *kariz*, coming over the gravel plain from the foot of the mountains for a mile or so, might cost £300; so it was no wonder that *kariz* digging had become big business in those days and had stayed it, I suppose, right up until a few years ago. These long water-tunnels were usually dug by *chakar* serfs — that is, for next to no cost in labour — while the landlord or trader who financed their digging and equipment would automatically own by right of *mavat* the mountain water that passed through them, and would sell it at a handsome price. Profits were fat.

‘Well, try him again,’ I said to Tse. ‘Ask him whether there were any *chakars* here.’

The word *chakar*, as I have said, has magic properties in Sinkiang; it is a sort of open sesame. Having stone walled all this time, our muscled friend of middle years and ponderous silence now turned to us with a new interest, straightened his back and put down his *ketman*, and made it generally clear that conversation might after all be worth his while.

His name, he told us, was Roadze Türde and he had always lived in his native place. The big red metal badge that he wore had been given to those who attended a conference for ‘model
workers’ at Urumchi in the previous winter. And this particular kariz was one of several that had belonged to an important landlord called Ablez; and chakars had dug it for Ablez.

‘Where is that landlord now, that Ablez?’

It was not a popular question. No authority in China, however lowly, enjoys being asked what they have done with landlords and such; and Roadze Türde was also an authority, although only to the extent (as he told us later) of being the deputy secretary of a cotton-growing co-operative. This diffidence may come from suspicion and from fear of giving a handle to hostile propaganda; but also, I believe, from an aversion to unpleasantness — and hence its memory — that the Chinese have in larger measure than less civilized people. Still, one usually gets an answer in the end, if only through barbarian insistence. Ablez, I learned, was one of the one per cent of ‘despots’: Ablez was in gaol.

‘Not only because he lived on the backs of the poor,’ explained Tse, having greatly listened to Roadze Türde who was now in full flood, ‘but because he was violent and dangerous.’

‘He said that chakars had dug this kariz. Ask him how many?’

Roadze did not know how many: but the way people had lived in this part of Turfan, he said, could be seen from the fact that nine-tenths of the members of their newly formed cotton co-operative had been poor peasants or landless workers. Many of these had passed long years in chakar labour.

‘Did he, too?’

No, his own category had been middle peasant: he’d had altogether 28 mou of fairly good land: not enough to need others to work it for him, but much more than a poor peasant would have had.

‘Can he tell us of a neighbour who did work chakar?’

Yes, he could, do that easily.

‘Can he take us to him?’

Why not? There was Ayip, for example, an old man who looked after the horses of the co-operative. He’d spent most of his life in chakar.
The *kariz* was abandoned in deference to our search for truth; and we strolled down a dusty track between narrow fields of wheat.

On the way we passed the homestead of Roadze’s cotton co-operative, a couple of highroofed sheds with a yard half-roofed for the parking of farm machinery. We turned in through the yard and I saw that the dozen machines parked there — sowers and cultivators, mainly — were of Soviet manufacture. Roadze commented: in 1954 the co-operative had numbered only twenty-four families, now it numbered 204.

We found the object of our quest in a walled garden, tending orange trees, an old nut-brown peasant who must have been a little boy when Le Coq was collecting songs here fifty years ago. He was shy with us to begin with, and the shadow of the old regime seemed to lie on his frail shoulders. He tugged a little at the half-moon of beard that circled his chin and looked at us in turn, and listened to Roadze, who explained; and gave me, when he understood, a glance that was mingled between the long habit of skin-saving abasement and the much shorter habit of standing on his own dignity and saying what he thought. Later, when he had gained confidence, he became a different personality; he became a poet and a splendid talker, a mine of information on the immediate and the distant past, even a mainspring from whose memory, by anyone who had time and knowledge of the Turfan dialect, whole volumes of folklore could be written. It was a fruitful end to the barren way we had begun.

We followed this old man, whose name was Ayip, out of his sheltered orchard and mounted the steps of a house of two large rooms: one of these rooms, he said, was his and his family’s, while the other was occupied by one of the sons of Ablez and his family. With no ill feeling? Well, perhaps there had been: not any more, though. Everything had gone so far. They were thinking of letting the son to Ablez bring his small portion of land into the co-operative next year.

Ayip’s wife came out with housewifely apprehension, was
reassured, and welcomed us in. We sat down on Ayip's carpets. Ayip and his wife also sat down; and two small girls crept in behind them and snuggled into the corner, giggling a little but also listening. It was all very relaxed but for a ceremonial formality that is inseparable from hospitality in Sinkiang, as in any Muslim country where manners of hospitality are of high social value: but there was neither nervousness nor evasion, nor the deep suspicion for strangers and non-peasants that peasants often have. We came, after all, with Roadze; and that was our passport. I was reminded again of wartime Serbia: then I had gone from village to village, fed and sheltered and often hidden at short notice, because I was accepted as one of them and because the Jugoslav war was a peasant war, intimately a peasant affair, and above all a matter of peasant loyalties; and it was not much different here with this revolution. The peasants, mainly, had made it; the peasants, mainly, were building on it.

A pause ensued while tea was made and extra cups borrowed from next door. The room was large and roomy as peasant quarters go, and had clearly served a landlordly purpose in years gone by. Ayip's household goods were not many. Towards one wall stood a pile of quilts and blankets, and there the family, unrolling these, would sleep beside each other. A fly-blown poster of Stalin with the name in Chinese characters (sometimes, in these peasant houses, one may still see posters of Lenin and Stalin with the names in Russian, torn fragments of Inner Asian history) hung askew on the wall across from me. Alongside and depicting the physiology of childbirth were pinned three fresh posters whose coloured and practically photographic detail showed six stages of foetus growth within a red and pink womb, and a number of variants of delivery from normal to 'breach birth' and 'frontal'. One might speculate a good deal on what these simple scientific posters must have meant to Ayip and his wife and daughters: they were, one would guess, a positive trumpet blast for emancipation.

Ayip's wife brought the tea and cups and set them before us.
She must once have been a good-looking woman: even now, when she and her sister who now came in (or was it a cousin, or simply a friend?) returned to their places on the carpet and lifted their brilliant skirts and showed, as custom may, their handsome calves and knee-length bloomers, and settled themselves with a nodding and a smiling and a general murmuration, they were not to be overlooked. The women here are not at all downcast, as Marco Polo noted all those centuries ago; and Ayip’s wife could also have listened to the song of Alma Khan amid the poplar walks and quiet streams of Karakhoja:

When I put my hand to her bosom
She casts up her eyes:
When I touch her breast
Alma Khan pretends she is afraid:
She takes her knife, her long sharp knife,
And stabs at me:
What is she, this Alma Khan?
Her mouth is like a thimble, her waist is like a spindle,
Her eyes are like the Morning Star:
Alma Khan, O Alma Khan!
Why are you such a bitch? 22

Ayip, moreover, could have sung it; and others too. For this old man possessed the gift of tongues.

On the subject of the landlord Ablez, he talked at length. ‘Stop him now,’ I said to Tse, ‘we’ll never get it otherwise.’

But Tse said: ‘No, no, he talks so wonderfully, can’t you see?’

Of course we never got the full quality of it, but we got a little. His father, he said, had worked for Ablez all his life and could never fill his stomach. He himself had worked for Ablez for forty-four years and could never fill his stomach either. To acquire one thing he had gone without the other: to buy a jacket he had gone without a shirt, to own a carpet he had gone without a quilt, to shorten his children’s hunger he had lengthened his own, to enjoy love he had endured hate. . . . He spoke of these things like an Old Testament prophet: as the
prophet Amos had spoken against those who sold the righteous for silver and the needy for a pair of shoes, and made ‘the ephah great and the shekel small’, but his eyes twinkled with the warmth of what he said, and the women purred and laughed their agreement, and the little girls crossed their arms over their coloured jackets and hugged their little bosoms with excitement.

In itself the story was simple, even commonplace. Ayip’s grandfather had not worked chakar but held his own good piece of land. Then in the early years of Ayip’s father the water situation had changed: Ayip’s father could secure water for his 60 mou of land only by will of the Ablez family, and accordingly had fallen into debt. This debt began small but grew great; and was self-multiplying. Water was sold to Ayip’s father at rates in kind that ensured the debt would be always larger than before; and in Turfan, it seems, you need water inundation of your land as many as three times a year for wheat and four times a year for cotton — and it almost never rains.

Soon Ayip’s father could secure water for his land only by surrendering to his landlord the whole of the crops he grew, and receiving in return enough food to live on, but only just enough, and a little ‘gift’ of money now and then. Gradually the whole of the 60 mou was ‘sold’ to Ablez, and Ayip’s father sank from being a once prosperous peasant to a landless chakar. Ayip was born into this peonage and stayed in it, working for his keep — ‘scraps from the master’s table’, is exactly what Ayip said on this — until he was past fifty, and the revolution came. ‘And then we saw money for the first time. And it was like flowers.’

At the end of 1952 the landlord Ablez was arrested and his land confiscated by the big reform. Some months later the peasant Ayip found himself in possession of 18 mou (three acres) of irrigated land, as well as an orchard and half a landlord’s dwelling, together with a horse and cart and quilts to sleep under and blankets to sleep on; and, precious addition, a free quota of water with which to inundate his land. It was wealth as well as freedom; and to Ayip, talking of it four years later, it still seemed so.
In 1955 the next and more difficult advance was made. People began taking their land into a stage-one co-operative, and Ayip followed suit, being advised that this would be good for him by the same people who had made the land reform possible. And one good, he said, did follow another. In that year of 1955 he had received as his share the equivalent in kind (mostly in wheat) of all his year's expense, and had put 500 yuan (about £80) into his co-operative savings account. By the middle of 1956, he said, he thought he would have added another 200 yuan to his savings. And in this year, furthermore, he would sell his twenty-seven sheep to the co-operative: people were doing that too.

But where could you have sheep in Turfan? Not in Turfan, he said, they were pastured out with Kazakh stockmen in the nearby Tien Shan: that was an arrangement the landlords had always had, and now they carried it on, and next year the co-operative would also carry it on.

Midday was past before Ayip ended his story, and it was a struggle now to stay awake. The tea was drunk; the old man sat across the room and watched the effect of his words with a distant curiosity, twiddling an old sandal in his brown hands; the women were silent. It was time to be gone. For the story of the chakars had ended; and the story of the co-operatives had begun.

That evening was the one I passed with Niadze in the vineyards called Bostan on the slopes of the Tien Shan, the 'sheltering grove' on the last foothills above the red desert, and listened to the beginning of the story of the co-operatives. Sunset bathed the circle of listening faces, the face of the speaker and of those who listened so that he spoke it right, peasant after peasant in a circle of glowing faces, while the cool of the evening rescued us from heat and kindled again the magic of this country.

The long vineyards poured over the hilltop, and beyond them the edge of the mountains was black in the sunset; and the sons of the sons of men who had grown grapes here for twenty centuries and more, for all the centuries since grapes first came
here in the wake of Alexander's news, told the history of their times.

But it was not until we got to Yarkand, far round the rim of the southern desert, that the full scope of this story was revealed. Dividing up the land was one thing: putting it together again was quite another.

II

The scene was not much different, although the heat was less oppressive. You do not see the mountains from Yarkand oasis as you do from Turfan; but they are only a little way beyond the flat horizon and they climb into the roof of the world. Straggling poplars and narrow ditches point and cut a pale green landscape puffed with dust. Animals are thirsty; they hang their heads in a near-by orchard.

The men were a circle of bearded faces, bronzed and serious, long-gowned rustics from a Bible setting. An especially lean peasant, taller and more vigorous than the four others but hard and cramped as they, was their spokesman: with strong yellow teeth he chewed melon seeds and spoke in words set weightily beside each other.

They had laid red and purple Khotan carpets under a walnut tree beside a high banqueting hall open on all four sides (once the hall of Said Mehmet, they said, lord of this side Yarkand), and we sat a little above the level of the homestead yard. Beyond this hall a road that was ankle deep in fine white dust trailed off beneath poplars on its way to the city: we had found the place with difficulty and in the end only because a cadre from the local government had motored out behind us. This Rapijan, a square young man with the familiar black and silver bonnet of Uighur custom, was a member of the agricultural department of the Yarkand government. He sat near by, listening and saying nothing. After all, he was listening to his elders.

We had seen one or two things they thought well of. We had
looked at some wheat, poor enough in European terms but much better, they asserted, than they had grown before; we had inspected their cattle, and it was clear they were not yet accustomed to looking after numerous beasts, for the condition of these was far from good; and we had seen their silkworms. An extraordinary sight, this last: millions of pale worms munching vine leaves on trays in a dim quiet shed, the whisper of it like a soft wind in dry grass. Some of the silk would go to handloom weavers in Yarkand and some would go to China proper — to ‘the interior’ as Tse always called it, oddly reversing geography. It was satisfying to see these silkworms on the far western frontier of China, for the old silk roads had passed this way in centuries long forgotten.

How had they lived, these peasants?

‘We divided the land in 1952.’

At first they were slow at talking: they looked at me with stolid measuring eyes, indifferently, distantly. Perhaps something had jerked them back into memory of the past. Then their lean chairman screwed up his face until the ugly lines in it were scars, sucked on his yellow teeth, lent forward over tucked-in legs, and began the story.

‘When we divided the land, people said it was enough. To have food in our bellies, they said: that is what they wanted. Everyone wanted that.’

One had heard it time and again: people had wanted no more than to slip the debts and taxes off their back, to work a little, to be left alone. ‘That was a time,’ someone had said a day or so before, meaning the time of 1949, ‘of people come from great discouragement.’ They had revolted against landlordism: they had not especially revolted for anyone or anything, except perhaps a quiet life.

‘The Government sent people to say we could grow more and live better.’ He said ‘the Government’ but possibly he meant the Communist party: the two, in any case, were much the same thing. ‘Most people wouldn’t listen, they didn’t believe it, they didn’t believe anything. Why should they have?’ Ma-
mud’s translation was quiet and calm but the fire of this scrawny peasant, for whom the last few years were the end of one world and the beginning of another, was little by little galvanizing the whole group.

Was it surprising? Before 1949 they had suffered five years of looting from the Kuomintang and before that five years of Sheng’s autocracy and before that five years of Tungan wars with Ma Ho-san, a brilliant young murderer, right on their backs: before all that, moreover, innumerable years of semi-slavery and stagnation. ‘My grandfather lived to be a hundred and five, and he never worked for himself. My father lived to be eighty-five, but he never worked for any but Said Mehmet and the father of Said Mehmet . . .’ The story of chakar here was no different from anywhere else.

‘People wanted to be left alone.’

One caught a glimpse, now and then, of the all-consuming patience of those early Communist cadres, talking and waiting, listening and waiting, returning again and again, arguing, persuading, nagging, never admitting defeat.

‘There are hundreds of families in this hsiang. Two or three of us could see that dividing the land was not enough. You couldn’t stop there. So in 1951 we got a Mutual Aid team going — we helped each other on our bits of land. That was before we had the land reform. Then in 1952 we had grown to no more than nine families. And in 1953 we had grown to no more than twelve families. . . .’

Mamud turned to me, putting in his own explanation. ‘He means that people couldn’t be bothered. They didn’t believe in anything better.’

Even so, there had come a change in 1954. By this time the land was divided and landlordism manifestly gone for good: the new Government was just as obviously here for good. Inflation had ended. Trade was picking up. Five years of peace had made their effect. Five years of peace — but also five years of continuous agitation by government and party organizations that were daily growing stronger: these had also had their effect.
Now, tentatively, these organizations began to apply pressure towards the ending of peasant isolation, towards early steps for a complete co-operative reorganization of land holding and rural labour. Credits were made available so that peasants could buy seed and tools and stock; State trading organizations began to offer steady markets and steady prices and an initial trickle of consumer goods. Those peasants who should now work the land together, it was argued, would certainly work it better.

‘A few thought this was right. So in 1954 we turned our Mutual Aid team into a stage-one co-operative, and we got fifteen families to join us. We put our land together but we didn’t sell it to the co-operative.

‘By the end of the year we could prove our crops were better than before. By the end of 1955 we had eighty families in our co-operative. We had nine horses and twenty-seven cows. We were getting much more food off our land than in years gone by.’

Had people believed that?

No, not at first. But the crops had changed their minds. ‘They couldn’t do as well themselves, they had to admit that.’ On this these peasants gave me some interesting figures: they said, for instance, that before the land reform the average wheat yield for rich peasants had been around 120 lb. to the mou, while poor peasants and middle peasants would reckon on less than this, and landlords would reckon on less still — another sign of the complete decadence of the chakar system. By 1955, they said, the general average yield had improved to more than 160 lb. among those working in one form or another of co-operation here. But only those obtaining more than an average of 180 lb. a mou would pay taxes: 4 per cent to 230 lb., and 5 per cent thereafter.

Hadn’t people disliked the idea of selling their land to a co-operative?

Yes, they had. ‘But he says,’ Mamud translated, ‘that it is much more difficult to go from a Mutual Aid team to a stage-one co-operative than from a stage-one co-operative to a stage-
two co-operative. He says they only needed twenty days to arrange everything for going over to a stage-two co-operative.'

They prospered, and the organizational pressure was slightly increased. Then early in 1956 the peasants themselves — and this, so far as I can tell, applies to most of China — began to move on their own. Early in 1956, Rapijan put in, there was peasant talk of putting many small co-operatives together into much bigger co-operatives. Here on this side of Yarkand they had then had twelve co-operatives of the 'stage-one' type: in February all these had decided to go in together and to form a single large co-operative of the stage-two type (in which peasants surrender their individual title to land). In all this, of course, one should have in mind the steady single-minded pressure of the Communist Party: towards fewer co-operatives, but larger and with more numerous membership.

Mamud said: 'They say now that they have 688 families in this co-operative working 9,600 mou of irrigated land and another 1,000 mou of semi-desert land they've cleared, and are taking water to. They have 195 milch cows and 145 sheep, apart from what the people have of their own.'

Of their own?

The lean-faced peasant answered this: 'In 1951 I had nothing. Now I have bought twenty-five sheep and eight cows and one horse and two donkeys. And I have taken one horse and one cow into the co-operative.'

That seemed a lot of private property for a stage-two co-operative.

They said, through Mamud: 'No, why not? The co-operative will have all the stock it needs. And we have each agreed to given 8 lb. of maize so that a man shall keep our stock, and we have cleared ground in the desert and we are building ditches to take water to that land. The dung of those animals we shall give to the co-operative.'

They had added silkworms; they were growing cotton for the first time; their wheat and maize yields were considerably heavier than before.
Was everyone included?

No, evidently not. There were about 300 people who could not be brought in or were unwilling to join. These 300 were all who remained from those now living on the land of this big stage-two co-operative but not members of it; and so 'the Government' (the Yarkand local authorities, this time) had given them 2,000 mou of semi-desert land and helped them to clear and water it; and now they were growing crops of maize and water melons there.

And what were they worried about now?

They were not prepared to say they were worried about anything. There is a limit, after all, to confidence; and perhaps they were genuinely puzzled. Mamud repeated the question, and they looked from one to the other. Finally a man on the left, a stout round-shouldered peasant wearing an ancient skull-cap and a sort of black cotton galibiye, gave Mamud an answer. ‘He says that they have solved, so to say, the problems of living. He says they are not worried about anything, but now it’s a question of living better. He says they’re thinking about tractors.’

What tractors?

The fiery chairman caught this one in his stride. Next year they would have tractors here. Now they were preparing the ground.

And this was the climax of our meeting. For what they were really doing, it came out, was to obliterate the old marks of boundary and individual ownership. They took me through some of their fields and showed me how they were pulling down walls, filling in unnecessary ditches, lifting old stone markers so that Hasan’s plot was lost in Mehmet’s, and Mehmet’s lost in Abdul’s, and Abdul’s was a wide field owned by them all in common.

The time had undoubtedly its own greatness for them, this year before the tractors came. It was the point of no return. It was a large moment in their lives.
It was not reached easily.

Over supper that evening I raised some of these questions with one of the cadres, whether of the new administration or of the Communist Party (or of both), who have done the human engineering in this process of change. I never learned his name, but I believe he is the deputy head of the Financial Department of Yarkand; like many Chinese working in these border lands, he had turned his hand to many things.

This man was worth study in his own right. For it is cadres such as he—government or party workers—who have come out of ‘the interior’ in their hundreds and thousands these last few years so as to ensure that Sinkiang becomes fully involved in the transformations of the rest of China. They are the full tide flowing after that trickle of pioneers who took service under Sheng Shih-tsai twenty years ago, and mostly died for a cause that was not yet won. Their duty is to carry the burden and responsibility of government while training local people who shall gradually displace them: to work themselves out of a job, that is, as soon as possible.

‘We have to be the planks of a bridge,’ one of these cadres said to me, a little primly perhaps but with meaning, ‘across which knowledge can pass from those with more to those with less.’

My companion at supper talked reflectively. His long thin face and tired eyes stamped him as an intellectual; but I do not know that he was anything of the kind. He had the Chinese gift of combining seriousness with laughter, dignity with lazing in a long chair at the day’s end, humility of expression with a certain harsh directness of thought; and it was hard to say exactly where his background would lie. He was a patient and likeable companion, picking fastidiously with chopsticks at shreds of imported bamboo and hunks of Uighur mutton; and yet he was as stretched to his duty and devotion as a monk. Watching him and listening, and feeling this discipline and
self-denial, it was possible to imagine something to the impact such men must have had upon the people of this slaughtered land, and to guess why people should accept them.

I said it was hard to see how so many peasants could have gone willingly, and so quickly, into co-operative ownership.

He gave me a long considering look: perhaps he was even a little sorry for anyone who should expect to understand, within the compass of a few words, what labours of what countless people had gone to this improbable result. But he would respect the question: as much as to the need to act, it seems, Chinese Communist training gives importance to the need to understand. These cadres are expected to pass many weeks in watching and considering before they reach a big decision: when the decision is reached, though, they are expected to act on it without further hesitation. This is one aspect of what Mao Tse-tung has called 'the unity of theory and practice'; and therein lies a good deal of the strength of revolution here.

'All that,' he said, 'has been a delicate task. Much work, much persuasion, many mistakes.'

'Peasants have a traditional love of owning land. They do not like to give it up. They fear for their security. Yet we have found that where a few peasants pool their land and make a success of it — and do better than before, for that is the test of success — then others will follow.

'There are organizational difficulties. For instance, charging wrong prices for the stock and tools that peasants sell into their co-operative. Wrong prices hit back at you not once but fifty times.'

'But they are not the worst. The worst has been the condition of the country. The discouragement. It was hard to stimulate their productive initiative. So many had lost hope.

'For years they had suffered badly. They had little knowledge of farming. They sowed haphazardly by hand, knew little of fertilizers, had forgotten even how best to use the water they could get.'

He puffed at his cigarette. 'We did some silly things. Per-
haps you will smile at them. We brought in a lot of ploughs and sowers and offered them at prices that were certainly cheap. But the prices were still too high for Sinkiang. The peasants couldn’t pay them. They went on working with their ketman. We should have known.’

He relaxed again as though allowing himself a certain tolerance, a certain measure of achievement. ‘Yet we can claim to have solved the biggest problems. You’ve seen — things are moving at last. Productive initiative is waking up: the peasants are beginning to see it’s possible to produce more food, and worth producing more food. They’re beginning to think about their own difficulties objectively — looking at their difficulties, that is, with an eye to overcoming them. Not just hopelessly putting up with things as they did before. Now they’re going into the co-operatives, and the co-operatives will awaken them still more. They’ll be a big means of education: they’ll make the foundation for a much better agriculture.

‘And then — there’s money now. Co-operatives are beginning to have the means to pay for new tools and machinery. They’re investing in the land they have. Even in this oasis farming, we are going for mechanization. In Yarkand we’ll have our first machine-and-tractor station next year.’

He went on slowly: ‘It’s very difficult still. Even so — think what it means. Half a dozen years ago this Yarkand oasis was farmed by a few landlords and a multitude of small peasants, the one almost as inefficient as the other. Now within a few years we think that here in this oasis we shall have really big co-operatives merged into units of land as large as 40,000 to 50,000 mou.

‘They’ll cut out waste, they’ll use more land, they’ll reclaim from the desert. They’ll have machinery.’ He looked up at me: ‘And they’ll be managed by peasants who could mostly have spat across their little properties a few years back.’

He thought it was time for bed: his day began early. So did mine, but I wanted to stroll for a while. We parted outside my room, he to bed and I to the dust-muffled road that led away
through turning streets to the city walls and an absolute quietness that reigned there.

IV

These grey ramparts were so dry in daylight as to raise a thirst even from looking at them; but at night they were a friendly obstacle between the city and the plain. They lost their blurred and faded uselessness — 'we haven't yet had time to pull them down' — and became once more the ancient frontiers of humanity in Turkestan.

As I walked along a few shopkeepers, closing up, looked across the road with brief curiosity; late comers hurried past; a woman huddled in veils rode by on a stiff-heeled donkey; the sentry at the local police barracks straightened himself in the lamplight. Dust from beneath my feet was like a bitter scent.

Could it be as simple as that? As good? That so many should work selflessly and sensibly to improve the average lot of average man? A colleague had said to me in Peking: 'It is easy to find out what is happening in China. It is very hard to tell it further.'

There would be many currents and counter-currents in this tide of men and things: no need to question that. This cadre was a good man. There would be others. Wherever morale failed, or character, or the stiff machinery of revolution clogged to a bureaucracy at first servile and then arrogant, cadres would also fail, 'little emperors' would emerge, 'inadmissible methods' would flourish. It is true that I found neither repression nor the atmosphere of repression in Sinkiang, but the reverse of these. Yet the president of China's Supreme People's Court could tell the National People's Congress in Peking, this same year, that: 'We lack some urgently basic laws, such as a criminal code, a civil code, a law of procedure, a labour law, and a law of utilization of land. . . . Another serious problem is that a small number of party members and government functionaries do
not pay attention to the legal system of the State and abide by the law.' When that was said the work of providing these laws, and lawyers to defend accused persons, was still in its early stages. If all this were true of the advanced provinces, surely it would be true of Sinkiang.

I think it is true. But I also think that to see it as a major or emergent part of the situation is to see what is not there. Organizational changes of this scale and magnitude and necessity are not made in the structure of an old society without the preliminaries of pain and travail. What is astonishing here is that in making them the factor of coercion was so small; and the factor of persuasion — of persuasion by political leadership, by agitation in the villages, by education, by example, by economic and social advantage — was so great.

No doubt one’s estimate will vary. Reality in China, in terms of individual happiness and welfare, will strike one differently at different times. Confronted by the earnest bureaucrat in some government office, parroting his slogans, one may reasonably mistake the whole grand edifice of official rectitude for a piece of pharasaical humbug. One may long for those eternally smiling boys and girls in the propaganda photographs to look a little sad sometimes, or even cry. One may wince at having human questions answered, time and again, with polite rehearsals of the party line; and understandably prefer to go and see the giant pandas in the Peking Zoo. But when you come against this reality on the lips of a peasant met by chance — and most of the peasants whose conversations I have recorded in this book were met by chance — you are likely to see it in quite another way. You are likely to see it then as evidence and proof that China’s civilisation is once again dynamic and alive.

I walked back slowly into Yarkand, puzzled and yet a good deal moved by this problem of telling it further. There was the feeling of having put one’s hand unexpectedly on the pulsing motors of this Asian universe: of understanding, even if unclearly, the inner nature of the power and drive that
govern these climactic years. I was puzzled by the problem; but I was also happy with it. Even the amazing laughter of a donkey’s bray, horning from the night, failed to upset this strange felicity. The donkey, after all, could be part of the problem too.
CHAPTER NINE

BENEATH THE ROOF OF THE WORLD

The wilderness and the solitary place shall be glad for them; and the desert shall rejoice and blossom as the rose.

Isaiah xxxv.

I

Still far from any beaten track to the outside world, and with the old Indian trade across the mountains to Kashmir completely at an end, some of the antique ways survive in Yarkand. Elderly people got to their feet as we passed, although it is certain that nobody but themselves any longer expected that they should; and this I never saw in Kashgar or Turfan, much less in Hami or the cities of the Tien Shan.

At Kashgar, too, a European was of no remark at all—he was generally taken for a Russian; but in Yarkand during daylight hours I was never in the streets without a little trail of wondering children, and a vaguely hopeful crowd would gather whenever I stopped at shops or booths. This had no other inconvenience than to make casual photography difficult; far from being camera shy, the good people of Yarkand could think of nothing they would like better than to have their pictures taken, and would line up solemnly at the drop of a hat. Of a hatred of foreigners I saw no evidence.

The streets are interesting. A current of excitement seems to oscillate between the strolling chaffering salesmen of an infinity of things and the artisans who sit in monumental calm before their stalls and shops. Some of the old skills are reviving, too. Mamud inquired about these and we visited a courtyard, not far from a dusty green pool, where a score of men and women were making the finest Uighur caps I ever saw: black
and red and green plush bonnets embroidered with silver and gold — finer work, of its kind, than anything to be found in Fez or Algiers — and selling for half the price of caps in Kashgar. Like the cobblers of Turfan and the metalsmiths and locksmiths and leather workers of Kashgar, and others I met, these hatters had lately accepted ‘social transformation’ — had entered, that is, a co-operative agreement of their own and given up their individual status. Their manager, a bearded man of middle age, embarked upon a long and evidently complicated explanation of profit and loss; and Mamud translated word for word in his slow and careful way.

The gist of it was that their hatters’ co-op consisted of thirty-two families: seven women workers and twenty-five men workers. They had followed the blacksmiths who had gone into a co-operative two years earlier. ‘Those blacksmiths had lived badly, he says,’ explained Mamud, ‘and then he says they saw them on bicycles.’ Now there were five such hatters’ co-ops in Yarkand.

Working together, he said, was better than working singly; and it was easier to sell the product. This was because they had organized a selling team to take the markets for them. They bought their materials direct from the State, moreover, so that prices and supplies were regular and steady. Altogether, there was more security. What could a practised hatter earn? Well, he or she could make fifteen hats in ten days and perhaps earn 35 or 40 yuan in a month. This was more, he said, than before. And yet it seemed precious little for such workmanship.

We left the hatters in their sultry courtyard and went on to the silkweavers. Here one caught a real whisper from the antique past. For Yarkand, like Khotan, has made silk for hundreds of years, perhaps for thousands of years, ever since the little kings of South Sinkiang imported silkworms from China and set up their small enterprises long ago. Nowadays there is not much of this Yarkand silk to be had, for in June 1956 there were only thirty-two families making it.

In a low-roofed shed we found half a dozen men with hand
looms that were as narrow as the looms of Muslim Africa, as I remembered them from Bamako and Kano on the southern fringe of the Sahara; and wove to a width of no more than eighteen inches. The Uighurs are lighter skinned than the Bambara and Peulh and Hausa peoples who make cloth on such looms as these in West Africa, and they are built more ruggedly; but their long cotton robes, their workshops and their desert towns, their patient industry, their dust-red plaster houses and their whitened feet in the dust — all that paints pretty much the same picture. Their small mosques are usually of timber and not of baked clay as in Africa; but Islam and the desert have printed themselves deeply on both these lands, and in ways that are strangely alike for all the many miles that lie between.

An old man called Tohsun Sultan answered questions. Before the time of troubles, he said, they had reckoned over two hundred silk-weaving families in Yarkand (no doubt he was thinking of the relatively prosperous days of Governor Yang, but we came no closer than a guess): by 1947 — and on this he was positive — poverty and bankruptcy had reduced the number to thirty-two families. ‘He says that they were too poor even to pay for coffins.’

While the old man talked I had time to watch the weavers. They were working in many colours, their warp coming right across the shed in strands twelve or fifteen feet long; and in order to keep the air moist, avoiding breaks, they had the curious trick of taking a mouthful of water from a gourd and shooting it from their lips in vapour. Our talk was punctuated by these giant sneezes.

Could they make a living? Yes, they could. Now they were selling 70 per cent of their production to the hsien (district) supply-and-marketing co-operative, a State enterprise which guaranteed sale at understood prices. They had just signed a contract, said Tohsun Sultan, to sell this hsien co-operative one thousand twenty-four-foot rolls of silk. As to the other 30 per cent of their production, they sold it themselves in Yarkand market. He was living better, he said, than at any other time in
his life. In three months of the co-operative's existence, he had increased his own takings from 40 to 70 yuan a month. And it was regular; the market was assured.

I think he had good reason for thinking this. In Urumchi, afterwards, I inquired of those who should know whether the State would continue to smile on these pleasant though antiquated crafts. The answer was yes, the State would help the weavers of Yarkand because they were producing something people wanted: later on, with industrialization, their part would become a cultural luxury. Possibly that is why the number of weavers has not increased since 1949. For the hatters of south Sinkiang the position would be different: they were producing hats that were almost a necessity, given Uighur custom, and for them the future would be a gradual shift to mechanized production.

For the time being, the old crafts revive. The only Uighurs who do not wear embroidered bonnets on their days of festival — or everyday, in the bazaars — are 'modernizers' like Mamud who insist on a flat blue cap in what I should call the Stalin-Siberian style. When I asked Mamud why he wore this unpleasing thing he grinned and said: 'You can feed straw to an ox, but not to an aeroplane.' But he added: 'You need a peak to shade your eyes from the sun.'

That June it was close and torpid in these southern oases. Even the children, towards midday, lost the fling and vigour of their games. After siesta we would find our way to the public gardens and stroll among the trees and scented bushes. Once we came upon a gathering and a speaker, hundreds of men squatting on the ground, and Mamud said they were co-operative delegates learning the elements of book-keeping. This might have been interesting, but Mamud could work up no enthusiasm for co-operative book-keeping, so we found a chai hana instead, and I tried unsuccessfully to photograph a clutch of children. But the children preferred hide-and-seek even though the sun was hot, and were indignant that none of us would chase them. Mamud leant back and laughed and
spread upon his chair with abundant thighs and lapping shoulders, and said that I at least was thin enough to run about and lose no weight. I said that I should certainly lose dignity; and it was not to be thought of. Our small talk dwindled among the teacups.

II

Back in Kashgar, it was hotter still. The heat became vicious, the air like glue.

Soon we should be flying northward again. Meanwhile the Kashgar local government, at Tse’s thoughtful suggestion, arranged that Mamud should take us on a brief conducted tour of Kirghiz settlements in the Kashgar Pamir.

Early one morning we embarked in a Gaz 69 and drove westward out of the old city, crossed the brown shallows of the Kizil darya by a new timber bridge, and emerged little by little from the familiar haze of dust. Now we could see the smooth white flanks of the mountains: they hung above the pale green fields of Kashgar like an improbable promise of bliss, and even gazing on them was a comfort in that heat.

West of Kashgar the oasis soon gives way not to the desert, or not to the desert proper, but to a vast gravel plain that carries the last long miles of what was once a glacier: this gravel plain is the most uncomfortable place I ever was in. Even the camel caravans, sloping out of Kashgar on their road to the Terek villages or the Kirghiz outposts in the Pamir foothills, seem to sweat and groan and suffer in this wilderness; and even they are grey with the dust, blurred with the heat.

To guide us Mamud had arranged for the secretary of a small Kirghiz district — part of the Kirghiz self-governing district in the Pamir — to ride in and meet us; and he came back with us now, a short hard man of middle age whose lineless face and burning eyes suggested the stuff of tribal statesmanship. He said little about himself; but Mamud — who seemed able to talk in Uighur to Kirghiz and Kazakh alike (confirming an
impression that these are scarcely separate languages, although political wisdom at the moment absolutely asserts they are) — said that he had fought in partisan ranks against the Kuomintang ‘and that lot’ (for the Kuomintang had not been without its native allies), and was something of a leading light among the lower ranks of the Pamir Kirghiz government.

There is no gradual ascent to these hills: they fence in the desert and its cultivated fringe with steep immediate cliffs. When we had lost our way in the fruitless warrens of a hump of dunes, our companion simply pointed into the dark angle that lies between the cliffs and the plain, and said that Bostan Terek should be ‘over there’. Eventually, as dusk was falling, we drove up to a small green settlement.23

Here the Kuomintang had formerly established a little fortress of baked clay, and kept a garrison of obedient local soldiery: fourteen men and their women, it was said. Now our secretary lived here with his family, together with half a dozen others who composed the local Kirghiz Government; and all of them, without exception, were Kirghiz. This was the first practical example that I saw of home-rule, in Communist China, for the really small minorities (there were 70,779 Kirghiz in Sinkiang according to the 1954 census, but not all in the Pamir). Here at Bostan Terek they administered several thousand people in the near-by valleys: their administrative responsibility was to the central Kirghiz government at Kizil farther north.

We passed the night in that dismantled fortress — its offensive armament, so far as I could see, boasted three sporting rifles with large elaborate hammers and one dog that was really dangerous — and ate well at the board of the secretary’s wife, a fine woman in red tunic and shirt, and with great silver brooches at her breast rather like a cuirass.

Soon after a clear cool dawn we took ponies for our brief excursion. Custom apparently has it that stray visitors be mounted on the safest but also the slowest of the ponies available; and in my opinion this is a good thing, because no matter
how capable one may be in managing a Kirghiz pony there is nothing in European experience to prepare one for capability in managing a Kirghiz saddle. This is a large affair with double-knobbed pommel and leathers that are suited to men whose knees and thighs are also made of leather, and the stirrups are worn short but are not to be extended without untieing odd bits of string and thong that somehow or other manage to keep them fast. All this makes for difficulty when riding up and down steep paths. The pony does not mind in the least; but you do.

The day was brilliant. We rode up nearly to the snow line and found groups of Kirghiz encamped in their yurts on green summits and in lush valleys. Our secretary had sent word ahead; and there was a most delicious meal for Tse and Mamud and me, served in a yurt by its owner who carefully ate afterwards, according to the custom, and whose wife was banished for the occasion. I remember with pleasure a wheaten cake called *chuwatti*; and after these we ate *shish kebab* on thin black skewers.

It seemed to me that these Kirghiz led a simple pleasing life. In the winter they lived down at Boston Terek; in the spring they moved up to these high pastures near the snow line. Flocks of sheep climb the steep valleys, followed by women and children to mind them; and towards midday all come pouring down again. As they begin moving they become suddenly visible from the dust at their heels, and they dash down the craggy steeps like a small rolling avalanche of white stones. They pour in past the sheltered yurts with a clicking of small sharp feet until everyone is home again.

But the simple life is probably less pleasing to the Kirghiz themselves. They are a very poor people. Their winter quarters are still the squalid mud and plaster stables of the past. Their clothes are ragged. Their food is sparse. Those with whom I talked were mainly pleased with the new Government for reducing taxes and removing hostile tax-collectors. Under the Kuomintang, they said, many Kirghiz had been forced by
crushing taxation down into the plains to seek wage labour in the oases. Now, at last, they were coming back again. Already the families above Bostan Terek had increased from about forty ten years earlier to about eighty today. I talked to one or two of these returning families; and theirs was the familiar tale of ill-paid labour for Uighur landlords.

But they told me a curious story of the Kuomintang tax collectors. Taxation, of course, was by head of sheep; but during the last years of the Kuomintang, they said, tax collectors and soldiers had simply confiscated whatever sheep they had wanted and could find. So the Kurghiz had concealed their sheep.

Now there were many ways of concealing sheep in these upland valleys. The tax collectors knew this, of course, as well as the herdsmen. Whenever taxes were to be collected, accordingly, the collectors and their escort would convoke all the men they could find and make them wait in one place for two or three days while the neighbouring valleys were combed for sheep. After that an oath would be imposed on each of the Kirghiz herdsmen. It would be administered with an Uighur loaf — a flat round pancake with a hole in the middle. Into this hole each herdsman would be obliged to insert his penis, and then swear that he had hidden no sheep: if he had lied, it was explained to me as we sat in our yurt over lunch, then it would have been taken to mean that the liar had ‘entered into shameful intercourse with the bread’ — and among these people bread was held to be sacred, the staff of life, for hunger had made it so. When this story was told in that hillside yurt half a dozen dark faces were nodded vigorously: didn’t they remember such things, had it not occurred among them only a handful of years ago? The evil in Sinkiang is still close to most men’s thoughts.

And taxes now? After a long confabulation Mamud explained: ‘They say like this. Before the liberation they had to pay many taxes. They had to provide free transport for the soldiers, delouse the soldiers’ clothing, give them food, gather firing for them. Many such things.

‘Also they had to pay three big taxes every year. The
government tax: and that was a tenth of their sheep. The pasturing tax: and that was a thirtieth of their sheep. The religious tax: and that was a fortieth of their sheep.

‘Now of all these things only the government tax remains, and it is smaller.’

I asked: ‘How much?’

Mamud said: ‘Wait a moment,’ and plunged into another conference with our hosts.

‘Well, it is like this,’ said Mamud eventually. ‘Any family with fewer than eight sheep for each of its members pays no tax at all. Above that, 1½ yuan for each sheep.’ (In Kashgar, a fat sheep was selling at 20 yuan just then: these Kirghiz, however, said they were getting more.)

And how many of these eighty families of Bostan Terek were still too poor to pay any tax?

They said: ‘All but five or six families.’

Taxation, in other words, was little more than nominal. These people were still too poor.

Co-operatives, collectives?

No, no collectives. But they had organized a transport co-operative (a pooling of donkeys) for carrying goods up and down the hills; and also a supply-and-marketing co-operative that was beginning to sell their products and buy their needs. As to livestock, each family continued to own its beasts.

Families returning from Kashgar had received cheap loans from the Government to help them start afresh. They took me to see one of these families: an old woman and her sixteen-year-old son, the father having died in the plains. They had come back five years ago and the Government had given them a credit of twenty sheep: these they were to repay — in number or in equivalent market value — by the end of 1957.

Would they be able to?

The son affirmed they would: already he had thirty-nine sheep; and a horse and a cow and a donkey as well. And yet his father had worked in the Kashgar oasis for many years and left them destitute.
None of these Kirghiz at Boston Terek seemed under influence from their fellow Kirghiz across the near-by Soviet frontier. One might greatly wonder at this, as I did, until the scale and nature of the country spread before one’s eyes. Westward up this steep valley tall snow peaks gleamed in the sun. Were they not, I asked, near the frontier of the Tadjik Soviet Republic?

They looked at me wonderingly and shook their heads.

Mamud translated: ‘They say it is seven days’ riding to the frontier in summertime. In wintertime they say you cannot reach the frontier at all.’

Towards evening we bade farewell to our Kirghiz friends and plunged into the violet dust cloud that rolled its hot breath to the foot of the hills below.

III

Is there equality of the sexes in Sinkiang? No, but there is none the less a sly upheaval in that direction.

Our friend Mei Miao of the Kashgar local government — a Chinese from Chekiang province who looks like a slight smiling schoolboy but is in fact an ex-officer of the Chinese Red Army, a leading Kashgar cadre, and altogether a veteran of the revolution — took us into a dusty courtyard one morning. Here we found a hundred and fifty women or so: of all ages but all of them, even the rosy-cheeked girls, in wedded bliss.

Why should they learn to read and write? And were they really learning? And weren’t they just putting in an appearance?

I really think they were learning. We passed two astonishing hours with these women.

Now the frozen hand of ‘socialist realism’ has gripped Chinese writing since the revolution; and China has still to have her Babel and her Gladkov and her Sholohov — those who will write of the harsh heroic years of actual revolution. Much of that grandiose and earth-shaking sweep of humanity has had
to go, so far as one can tell from translations, into cautionary tales and careful fables. Yet the material to hand is rich and wonderful and strange.

Women pressed us into a crowded room and we sat down behind a desk, Tse and Mei and Mamud and I, rather like an examining body. Women filled the doorway: they peered in through the dirty little windows: they packed themselves all around us. Mei said a few words of explanation; but instead of the women there replied to him an elderly Uighur who entered now upon a long and much prepared speech. This was one of the occasions when word had gone ahead.

I listened gloomily and as soon as Mamud had given Tse his translation we became gloomier still. This was yet another of those poods-and-roubles speeches that are capable, in China now, of skinning a situation of its humanity in the shortest possible time. I looked reproachfully at Mei: he ought really to have known better.

The ugly old Uighur schoolmaster droned onward, absolutely not to be stopped. Facts are facts. He had the facts: I ought to have them. He paused every now and then, jealously watching my pencil. This adult-literacy school, he said, had been opened in November 1955 with only 3 teachers and 250 pupils: today it had 15 classes, working 5 hours a day, and 1,330 pupils. It was an admirable achievement: I could not bring myself to interrupt.

And yet, outside and all around, there surged and rippled the wives and widows of Kashgar; and I longed to know what they would say.

Mei Miao, who is not a veteran of the revolution for nothing, knew quite well what I was thinking, for he was obviously thinking it himself. He glanced at me now and then: finally I raised a protesting hand.

We were grateful, I said, but we wished to talk to the pupils, not to the teachers.

The old schoolmaster looked much put out at this: after all, wasn’t he a man of some importance in this situation?
So we gave the teachers another chance. I asked: 'Do husbands object to their wives learning to read and write?'

It was rather a sly question, because we knew quite well that many husbands did object; but the teachers, for their part, would be sorely tempted to say that since the revolution everything, but absolutely everything, had changed for the better. They were sorely tempted; and they fell. The honour of the school, of Kashgar, of Sinkiang, of the whole revolution, possibly demanded no less.

An elderly dragon in colourless cotton bloomers shot up her hand and answered firmly and forthwith that there was and would be no serious difficulty with husbands. She gave me a ferocious look and swept into a grand tirade. But surely there would be some small difficulty, now and then, in getting husbands to see the light of reason? No, there was none. She sat on the window ledge in hitched-up skirt and cycling bloomers, an Uighur bonnet on her pig-tailed head, and would not give an inch. And I well believe that no Uighur husband would have troubled her.

Mei was thoroughly enjoying himself by now. He stood up on dancing feet and raised his hands and smiled exceedingly; and said with unanswerable firmness (it was a trick of his, this smiling firmness) that all teachers should please go away and leave us with the pupils. The schoolmaster went out, understandably ruffled, the elderly dragon disappeared with a fearful swishing of tails; and the only teachers who remained, tucked in beside me so that the dragon should not see, were two little Uighur girls who had manifestly savoured the whole performance with a rare delight. They were, I believe, the only spinsters in the place: one of them sat next to me, I am bound to admit, and gazed up as though I were a god for having shifted the dragon, or at least a superior person. She was deliciously pretty; and after this the whole affair seemed to me to go with a swing.

The wives and widows of Kashgar pressed in and settled round us, a brilliant rainbow of rich primary colours. They
were of all sorts and sizes and conditions, young and old and family bearing, and seemed of one mind about the pleasures of a thoroughly intimate conversation.

We went fairly deep into the question of husbands. There had been, there still was, a peck of trouble with them.

The wives and widows turned our meeting into an exchange of confidences, and often enough they would be talking across the little room to one another at such a speed that Mamud could not possibly keep up with them, and had to wave a husbandly arm in an endeavour to make them pause. They did pause, but not for long: freedom had a real meaning for them. We took a pile of notes; but what we really needed was a tape-recorder and the means of word-for-word translation: as so often in these weeks in Sinkiang, there was suddenly the impression of a whole people talking freely, talking largely, for the first time in their lives.

It began, so far as I remember, with a woman somewhat older than the others, sitting with clasped hands and mute expression while the younger ones held forth. There was mention of the veil: why, I had asked, do some of you wear it, and some not, and why don't any of you wear it here? I caught Mamud's wink: he was intending to enjoy this even more than I was. They weren't counting him, for the moment, as a husband. But later on, when they were telling their stories, he sucked his pencil and avidly listened; and it was as though he too were listening to a new thing. He stopped smiling then, frowned and pushed back his Stalin-Siberian cap, and began to take notes; and this, I knew by now, was his regular habit whenever he felt that an exact translation was difficult but important.

On the question of the veil, several of the women pointed to this older one amongst them. She looked round a little helplessly, her face troubled with embarrassment. Then she came to life, unclasped her hands and joined in the little chorus of welcoming laughter which came when everyone saw she would speak; clasped her hands again, and began.

We could see, she said, that she was a woman who held to the

facing: KAZAKHS AT BALAK-SU
overleaf: KAZAKH STOCKBREEDER, TIEN SHAN
old customs: she wore the veil. To show us, she unclasped her hands and pulled a dense black veil from over her silver bonnet: it quite covered her face and turned her at once into a mystery. With her long grey gown and red and grey flannel waistcoat, neatly buttoned with seven pearly buttons over her plump breasts, her silken blouse and long wide sleeves and the little silver bonnet on her handsome braided hair, she now looked like any of the well-to-do women who glide silently between the shops of Kashgar bazaar. Then she threw back her veil and her good housewifely face, absolutely unmysterious, glowed with the pleasures of independence — in school, at least — and the two or three gold-crowned teeth she had, signs of wealth and beauty, glittered in her soft smiling mouth.

Her husband, she said, was not a bad man. This was taken, one could see, as highly qualified praise: heads were nodding in sympathy. Her husband treated her well: he was not poor but a trader, and she had never had to go out to work. She could stay at home and keep her hands white and soft. At which she unclasped her hands so that all should see; and they were indeed white and soft, plump hands with mock-ruby rings on three or four soft white fingers. Everyone was loud in admiration. I remembered the song of Alma Khan and the sensual ballads of Karakhoja: the women of Turkestan are puzzled with no shame about the virtues and values of the flesh. Not even revolution, I suspect, will manage to make puritans of the Uighur people.

‘But she says it was dull,’ Mamud translated, quite swept away himself: ‘she says that she sat at home and the canary sang to her, and she was dull. She was sad. Her life was useless to her.

‘She could not make up her mind to join the reading school. She wished to learn to read, but she feared for her reputation. Her husband respected her. He had never taken a second wife although he could well afford to. Would he still respect her if she learnt to read? So at first she sent her two sons to the ordinary school, and she listened to what the neighbours said.’
The women were interrupting, impatient to get on with the story; but Mamud held up his pencil, and told me the rest.

'After a while several women went to reading school, and then she thought that she might also go. Her husband did not stop her. Although a trader he was a progressive man'—this last was certainly Mamud's gloss, but the general sense of it was probably right enough, for they were all watching his face and my face to guess whether we had understood—'and so she came to the reading school, and now she can read quite well. She can read the newspapers. She can write letters. She can even write business letters for her husband.' As to the veil, she wore it in the streets but took it off for school; and many women did the same.

'She says that now she does not sit at home and do nothing. She reads to the old people in her neighbourhood. She teaches them to read as well.'

Out of this woman's mouth there might have come, had we only had the tape-recorder and the time, an epic version of the story of woman’s boredom and subjection. Through all these uncounted centuries, Islamic and pre-Islamic, they had listened to the canary and prattled their love songs, and endured. The revolution in Sinkiang already means a good deal to men: it will mean, perhaps, even more to women.

Another kind of woman spoke later: veil-less, pale and pinched of face, a little strident, who said she was a woman of the very poor. She embroidered flowers for caps both morning and night, but came to school on three afternoons a week. She had the defensive dignity of the self-respecting poor, and so we learned less from her; but she also shared the glowing confidence of other women who spoke before her.

'She says that her husband made no objection. She says that he wants her to learn, she'll earn more if she does. She says that everyone is learning now and she doesn't want to be left behind.' There was a respectful round of applause when she had finished, and rather solemn faces. Other women might be well-to-do, with soft white hands and ruby rings; but this
woman’s hands were like small hazel-brown claws clutching at her head-scarf, and when she talked of her life the shadow of extreme poverty and of all the bloodstained years of Kashgar seemed to fall between us. Even Mamud was jolted from his beaming tolerance: he pushed his cap still farther back, stuck his pencil behind his ear, and looked at Tse and me with candid sympathy in his honest brown eyes. There were times when the meaning he should get across to us was no longer in the words.

We kept them past the hour for going home; but gradually they slipped away. Veils were adjusted and gowned figures swept out through the gates; and the gay pupils we had known became once more the solemn matrons of Kashgar.

IV

We took the plane back to Urumchi and were grateful, on arriving there, for its mountain air and cool breezes and even for its rain.

That same evening the Urumchi Hotel was busy with its weekly ‘social dance’. Now there is no lack of good folk dancing in Sinkiang: Urumchi and Kashgar and Ili all maintain their own state-financed dance groups, and, apart from these, there is a national custom of dancing to tambourines and two-stringed guitars whenever three or four Uighurs or Kazakhs or Kirghiz may be gathered together in the mood for social intercourse.

Of the professionals, though, Urumchi wears the crown. In Kashgar they said: ‘We have the best dancers, but Urumchi steals them all. It’s because they’re the capital, they have more means.’ I saw both dance groups, and agree with them. The Urumchi group could play with huge success to any Western audience, for they command a finish and a glamour and a man-girl lust of competition in their dances that set the heart beating faster as well as the feet; and they have also, now, a brand new national theatre with a stage big enough for eighty dancers. The Kashgar group by comparison is less polished and less
confident: these are girls and boys new from the villages who have not yet learned to think of themselves as professionals. During my stay in Kashgar, though, there was the brilliant exception of Kembernissa, whose charms and energetic dancing might have dazzled Harun al Rashid himself. It is of women like Kembernissa, sombre of eye, superb of movement, lissom, full of fire, that the love songs of Sinkiang were really written.

But the dancing in the Urumchi Hotel is of another and less ambitious kind. It is what the Chinese, who have lately introduced it, call social dancing; and it consists of a more or less syncopated shuffle round the floor. This is dreary when set beside those Uighur carousals, but it has the advantage of occurring at a level of technique that is low enough for anyone, absolutely anyone, to take a hand.

At the Urumchi Hotel, and also at the Tien Shan Hotel, social dancing occurs once a week and is powerfully patronized by Tom, Dick, and Harry and their girl friends. Foreign guests are expected to take part: indeed, they are expected to shine. Isn’t America — Europe — the home of jazz?

A stout girl from coastal China — now a medical worker, I believe, at the new women’s clinic in Urumchi — caught me early in the game that Saturday night. But she soon released me. Tse explained through his laughter: ‘Please forgive her, she says, but didn’t you know it was a tango?’

Social dancing, I suspect, has done a great deal for China. The story is told of the days when the People’s Government was in Yenan, before the triumph of 1949, that ‘certain spoilsports’ objected to it. Men and women, they said, were burning the midnight oil in absurd Western customs, prancing round more or less indecently clutched together, mortally offending the puritan fathers of the revolution. The objection, weightily maintained, was taken to Mao Tse-tung. ‘But Chairman Mao,’ said Tse, ‘told them they were silly. He said it was a good thing. He learnt to dance himself.’ In 1956, however, Chinese newspapers were still moaning about the evils of too much levity on the dance floor.
We had, that evening, the company of a touring group of Pakistani journalists; and it was very much an Asian evening. Even the oldest of the Pakistani journalists, an oyster-like old man with grizzled grey hair and an expression of startling disapproval (whom Tse, in a diplomatic whisper, characterized as 'really a very conservative man'), suddenly took fire and intoned, to everyone's amazement, a dithyrambic monotone which he had written himself and was, apparently, a masterpiece of Pakistani literature. He was greeted with tremendous applause that was more than merely polite, for one people close to folk song is not easily deaf to the achievements of another. Two bright young Pakistanis who embarked on a piece of spontaneous slapstick had less success. The old man carried off the honours, and his disapproving eyes reflected for a moment the gleam of true satisfaction. I should like to know what he said about Sinkiang when he got back home again.

But the girls were soon wanting to dance. They did their duty by the stray European; but conversation was difficult. I would ask 'Uighur?' or else run on through the gamut of Sinkiang peoples until I hit the right one. In polite succession my partners were Tatar and Uzbek and Kazakh and Uighur. Last of all, a nut-brown maiden of slow deliberate step. I had got to Uzbek before she nodded her head.

'Urumchi?' After all, the odds were on Urumchi: that was where you would expect to run across a town-bred Uzbek.

She shook her head and said: 'Chuguchak.'

Now there are rare moments in a reporter's life when deeper meanings break through the factual mosaic. One asks and listens and reads and learns, and the facts build up, one upon another, until one thinks one has understood. But the whole of the facts is liable to be more than the sum of its parts.

The facts about this girl were nothing out of the way. Her father was Uzbek, her mother Uighur: last year she had completed a course of nursery teaching in her native town, and had come to Urumchi where she was looking after little children at Urumchi's new truck-repair plant. Her little Russian, added
to mine, piled these small facts together. Her appearance added
a few more: she was dressed in a neat cotton blouse and woolen
shirt, ankle socks and respectable shoes; and her face and
manner were agreeable and independent. You could have
put her down in a London street without the least damage to
probability.

There is nothing much, it may appear, in that. There are
lots of girls from Asia who traipse along the shopping streets of
London and sit next to you in tubes. But not lots of girls from
Chuguchak. It was Chuguchak that made the difference.

Not that I have been to Chuguchak. It is a place that lies a
good deal off the beaten track, being a frontier town between
Northern Sinkiang and Eastern Siberia, known to past genera-
tions as the staging post on the southward road from Semipala-
tinsk and horrible in all their memories. Le Coq had come
down through Chuguchak in 1904. He thought it an appalling
hole. He had reached it from Semipalatinsk and travelled
down by tarantass, and his sanitary German soul had unfor-
gettably revolted at the bugs and misery of Chuguchak.

Could any good come out of there? History's answer, un-
ambiguously, was no. Yet here was this nut-brown maiden,
charming, self-possessed, swinging round the dance floor of
Central Asia's grand hotel with a thoughtful eye lifting for her
next partner, and planning for the future a career in child wel-
fare: and Chuguchak, positively Chuguchak, had done this
thing.

A few days later, pursuing the same line of thought, Tse and
I took seats in the plane for Ili, northward across the Jungarian
steppe to that same remote frontier with Siberia. We should
pass out of the country of the Uighurs into the country of the
Kazakhs, out of the oases of the Takla Makan into the moun-
tains of High Tartary; and it would be a different kind of
country altogether.
CHAPTER TEN

IN THE MOUNTAINS OF HEAVEN

'Mutton for food, and the milk of mares!'

WU-SUN-KUN-CHU

I

The air hostess was reading Fenimore Cooper: a blonde and gorgeous woman in a dazzling white linen suit with gilt epaulettes, she belonged to a crew which had carried off this year’s Aeroflot prize for their smartest crew and aircraft—as a red silk banner advertised—and she was justly proud of it.

This Soviet airline comes down from Moscow to the Kazakhstan capital of Alma Ata, and from Alma Ata flies on twice a week to Ili and Urumchi in Sinkiang, where it stops. To bring this fine establishment into the heart of Inner Asia was a nice foretaste, I thought, of things to come.

We flew northward into the fringe of the Siberian steppe; and the spirit of the country altogether changed. Here the slopes of the Mountains of Heaven are green with pines and lambent grass, and lose their southern glare of quenching emptiness. They look out on the Jungarian steppe, but the Jungarian steppe runs up into Siberia and reaches to the Arctic Circle; and you are unmistakably in the northern hemisphere within half an hour of leaving Urumchi. The oases of the south could be half a world away.

It is less than two hours’ flying from Urumchi to the frontier city of Ili. We passed the Manass river, a meandering trail of gravel with an ochre-brown core, where Yusuf Khan and his Kazakh cavalry had held the troops of the Kuomintang during the revolt of the Three Regions, and flew towards the hills that
encircle the Kazakh self-governing region along the northern frontier. These plains and foothills between the spurs of the Tien Shan and the Altai ranges far to the east give a bare living to Uighur cultivators and Kazakh herdsmen; a few Tatars and a few Sipo (a people of Manchurian origin); Russians who long ago fled from the Bolsheviks; Mongols of the great Torgot horde that migrated to the Volga long ago and migrated back again in the eighteenth century. All this is very much a frontier land where fragmented peoples, pushed and driven by all the pressures of Inner Asian history, have at last come to rest. It is also the land of Chuguchak.

Arrived in Ili, Tse and I were invited by its Kazakh government to stay in rooms provided for visiting administrators at the new administration officers, a fine building fresh with blue paint and white plaster; and we were grateful for this hospitality, for Ili does not yet enjoy the amenities of an hotel. We settled in comfortably, and took stock of this obscure border city.

Its reputation in Chinese history—a place of exile for political and religious prisoners under the Manchu emperors—was not agreeable. Little about it was agreeable. As at Urumchi, the squalor of the past still flowed in muck and mire round islands of the future: this summer they were preparing to asphalt the two principal thoroughfares and laying a sewage system. Early and late, small columns of workmen would be marching to and from their work, spades shouldered, red banners fluttering on bamboo rods and wheel-barrows bringing up the rear—poor men labouring with pick and shovel who were none the less considered in the van of progress; as, just then, they undoubtedly were.

For this was still the mere husk of a town: a miserable bug-ridden debris of a town, spattered with bloody memories, knee-deep in wretchedness: a town where people still camped while setting out to build their future homes. But the Chinese intend it as one of their great cities of Inner Asia. In 1948 it had housed—if that is a reasonable word for these sub-Siberian huts—a mere 50,000 people: by 1954 the census showed twice
as many, but by 1967, according to the planners, the population of Ili is to have grown to more than half a million.

We saw new high schools, a new hospital, new administrative offices. We visited a bookshop, inspected a cinema. But mostly we wandered in the streets and watched the Kazakh riders on their ponies and the jingling columns of tarantass that came to market; and savoured the small change of life along this unknown and long forbidden frontier.

II

After lunch one day I was sitting in my room, writing up notes, when there entered a man in faded blue jacket and trousers and leather shin boots, a grey-haired man with a calm sallow face and deep grey eyes, who hesitated and then smiled and said in excellent American: ‘You’re Davidson? Yes, they told me. I’m Ma Hai-teh.’

I welcomed him like a long lost brother.

Months before, in London, my friend Peter Townsend who had lived in the north-west after 1941 as a member of the Friends’ Ambulance Unit had said to me: ‘Try and find Ma Hai-teh. He’ll be able to tell you a lot about the recent history of the North-West.’ For this Ma Hai-teh was also Dr George Hatem, an American physician who had joined the Chinese Communists—as had his Canadian friend, Dr Norman Bethune—in the hard years before their cause had triumphed. He had gone to Yenan in 1935, had become the friend of Mao Tse-tung and other Communist leaders, and continued in their medical services ever since. Such a man, if he would talk of his memories, might be a priceless find.

But where to catch him? In Peking they had thought him probably beyond reach. Rewi Alley had said: ‘Ma’s somewhere up in Sinkiang. You might be able to run him down. You could ask them at Urumchi.’ This I had done, and the efficient Mr Hung of the Sinkiang Foreign Department had nodded his careful head and taken a careful note; and this, to outward
seeming, had closed the incident. Such notes, however, are quite likely not to be forgotten or ignored in China now: even if your modest penny, pushed into the administrative machine, seems to be lost without trace and no machinery is heard to turn, something may very well be going on. One day, out of the blue, there will come an answer. And then you will feel, understandably enough, that Chinese bureaucracy is a really splendid thing.

I said something like this to Dr Ma.

He raised tolerant eyebrows, busy and forgiving, and thought it not surprising in the least. ‘The people here got a wire from Urumchi that you were coming and would like to meet me. I’m a long day’s driving into the mountains from here, but they sent up a message last week. I had to come in anyway, for stores, so you haven’t inconvenienced me.’

This was good; what followed was better. For Ma Hai-teh was able and willing to unbutton his memory; and there was so much in it worth the hearing that even after the better part of a week’s talking, now and then as we travelled in the mountains, I was still far from exhausting it. This quiet American had come to China in 1933 ‘to pick up some tropical medicine’, but had soon joined his life’s cause to the Chinese revolution. From Yenan, where he had worked as a physician, he had gone out with a famous expedition which had met the second column of the Long March, across the swamps and mountains of southern Kansu and through Tibetan Chinghai; and later on, after Fu Tso-yi surrendered Peking to the Red Army, had moved there as part of the medical services to the Central People’s Administration. He spoke fluent Chinese, was accepted as a Chinese and considered himself more Chinese than American, had married a Chinese actress and reared a family; and yet, as sincere and sensible people sometimes may, had contrived to weave this foreign life into his own origins. He remains startlingly American both in speech and attitude and reaction, and so far as I know has nothing of the emigré complex.

He told me what he was doing in Sinkiang. As a specialist
in skin and venereal diseases, he was part of a small Chinese medical team whose job was to investigate the general incidence of skin diseases in all the grassland regions which run from the Manchurian frontier in the Far East, on the Pacific side, to the summer pastures of the Tien Shan. His team works from region to region year by year, establishing temporary field hospitals, training local doctors, taking samples and setting up preventive routines, assembling reports and generally plotting the health chart that should make it possible, by the end of the twelve-year plan in 1967, to end the reproduction of several major diseases that are common to the grasslands, syphilis being high on the list.

Ma said: 'We were in Inner Mongolia and Kansu all last spring and summer. Now we’re up here in the Tien Shan for three months and then we’ll go down to Kansu again. Next year we’ll probably be in Tibet for the first time. And after we’re through with Tibet we’ll go on down to the hill peoples of the south-west and Hainan and all that.'

Just now they were at a place called Balak-Su, ‘living with a bunch of Kazakhs in their summer pastures, up there beneath the ice mountains’. They had thirty-two Sinkiang doctors in their present team — mostly feldshers with three years’ theoretical training — and they would take a sample of five thousand cases. ‘We’re nearly through at Balak-Su. Then we’ll move on a bit to another pasture called Sechsen Bel. That’s Mongolian for Eighty-Mountain Valley. It’s a good name.’

I said: ‘You’re going back tomorrow?’

‘I’d one or two things to look after here as well as meeting you. Otherwise there’s nothing. Our job’s in the mountains.’

‘I should like to come with you for a few days’.

Ma said: ‘Sure you could. If that’s what you really want.’

III

Kazakh hospitality reached easily to the provision of a Gaz 69 and a driver so that we could go up into the mountains in
advance of Dr Ma's lorry, and could also get back again to Ili. Old Yusuf Khan said: 'Have you not come from a distant land? Can we not afford to help a friend?'

When I referred this offer to Dr Ma, he said: 'If they want to lend a car, you take it, boy. You can stay up with us for as long as you want, and then come back in it.'

We drove south-eastward up the surging Ili river, a cold swift torrent that flows on to Kazakhstan and pours into Lake Balkhash three hundred miles away.

Along this valley the people were settled peasants of mixed origins, though mostly Uighur, but their villages were nothing like the oasis villages of the south. Each palisaded yard had its dogs, great ugly brutes who greeted us with pricked ears and tremendous barking, and ran along beside, behind, or even in front of us until honour was fulfilled: which was usually agreed amongst them, so far as I could tell, to mean a hundred yards. Children scattered across the country road. Men and women wore flowers in their hair. The land looked rich, and was said to be good for grain and roots and pasture.

Some twenty miles up river we reached the ferry at Yamatoo: the ferry of the Wild Horse. Here the river is wide and dangerous, but can be crossed safely enough by chain ferry carried obliquely on the current. It is one of those chance halting places where people gather and life spreads out in many colours. We had to wait for the ferry: long enough to look at the new municipal restaurant with its red banner of 'joint State–private enterprise' and its tolerant Uighur owner-manager, and listen to the people and their gossip. From that we got little by the way of enlightenment, though, for Dr Ma knew no Kazakh and the driver was a taciturn man whose abilities would not stretch to telling us what was said.

One thing we did understand. As the incoming ferry—a railed wooden platform—came smartly rippling to the bank, peasants shouted from it to the driver: 'Hey, ah-hey, Peek Up!' and widely waved their arms. They wanted us to reverse out of the way, and we soon saw why. Once the ferry had touched the
landing stage these peasants jumped on their carts, whipped up their horses and came bounding down the ramp with a grand indifference to safely. I cannot explain how they came to say Peek Up: it was certainly their word for our Gaz 69.

The ferry took us over in a few minutes’ rapid gliding on the current while peasants who were also crossing gossiped and spat in patient peacefulness upon the coiled brown waters as they rushed beneath. With the noise of these waters and the seething of the ferry cable in its sheaves there mingled the creak of harness whenever horses shifted in their traces or threw up their heads into the slow still summer air. I remembered, irresistibly, how my last journey on a chain ferry such as this had taken me over the Bosnian Sava with many others on a cloud-torn moonlit night during the terrible winter fighting of 1943-44; and ragged men with clean rifles, rebounding grimly from the horrors of the time, had intoned a song, a booming utterly determined song, which stayed with me in nightmare dreams for long years after.

And now this quickly gliding ferry in the sunlight, with the horses drooping their heads a little and the fine white clouds in a warm sky, and men resting and smoking and murmuring their gossip, made its own strong sequel to that distant torture. For all those wars, those necessary wars, were fought and done; and now the ferries went across in warm and sleepy small talk, and the terrific singing of the partisans of ’43 was only a whisper in someone’s mind. It seemed a fine and decent comment on the years that were past: on the things that were done, on the other things that were stopped from being done.

After Wild Horse Ferry the hills began.

We left the last of the gravel road and took to the caravan trails of the Mountains of Heaven. Breasting a rise, we topped a long slow hill and saw the violet rocks close above us and were suddenly caught in the scent of upland meadows. All this long prairie was sown with thyme; and the purple scent of it mingled with the snuff of the dry road and came with us like a cloud into the hills.
Within an hour we had entered the first steep valley and were glad to be out of that endless space at last: little by little the cliffs pressed in until we were driving up the bed of a small river, the water spurting from our wheels, or crossing a tiny pasture that was thick with cow parsley and peppermint against the rocky sides; and all this while we climbed steeply. The birds were numerous now, and were those of Western Europe as well as Asia: besides a golden oriole and many pairs of hoopoe and blue roller, a dipper flashed its tail at us, wheatears and stonechats flitted from the rocks, kestrels trembled in the blue air. Later on I saw a pair of marsh harriers, and made a pleasant link between holidays in Norfolk and these remote glens of the Tien Shan.

We passed few people. Once we overhauled a slow clattering column of donkeys and horses loaded heavily or pulling high-piled carts, the leading beast with a small red banner mounted from its harness on a slender bamboo; and headed stubbornly uphill. Dr Ma recognized it as the transport-section of a stock-breeders’ co-operative from Chaosu, a long way into the hills.

‘That’s all new. They got together this year and formed these transport sections. It means they carry their sheepskins and stuff down to the trading organizations in the valley, and their purchases back again into the hills, for much less cost than they could do it individually before. They can buy and sell in reasonable bulk.

‘A lot of these nomads are doing this. They’ll sell enough donkeys and carts to their own supply-and-marketing co-operative, and they’ll detach two or three men to run the column, paying them a wage because they can’t look after their own stock. It’s quite a big advance.’

These caravans would be days on the road. At another time we passed a train of carts loaded with sheepskins and heading for the valley, and Ma commented: ‘That lot’s from our grasslands too. We passed them, trekking down, a couple of days back. They’ll be at Wild Horse tomorrow. They’ll go on to
Ili, and they'll buy grain and cotton and lamps and oil and stuff, and then trek back again.'

We came to the broad valley of the Tekes river, running now between the high mountains that were still beneath the snow line at this season, and drove down through sunlit prairies to the cattle town of Tekes. Here we stopped at Kasimjan's new municipal restaurant (the Kazakh equivalent of Niadze's agreeable establishment in Turfan); and lunched off radish salad and scrambled eggs in a neat and sensible dining room with new deal tables and a vast oven beskewered with a forest of kebab steels, black and burnt and out of straight from hard employment.

'That cook there,' said Ma, 'was a partisan with Mussojan in 1945.' But the cook was not to be drawn: he paused in his frying and grilling for long enough to let forth a gust of laughter when I questioned him about the past, and said that 'all that was long since gone', and shouldn't we rather eat than talk? But afterwards he came and stood for a while beside us while we ate, a grand Falstaffian version of a Kazakh, and much of a likeness with the riders who splashed along the main street of Tekes in swirling sheepskins and deep felt bonnets above their walnut faces, or gathered in gossiping groups and made their purchases of tobacco and dried melon seeds and lamp-oil and so forth.

Now and then one of these giants would dismount and tie up his horse at the rail outside and stamp in out of the mud and call enormously for food; and then the cook, a man no less enormous in voice and muscle, would bellow back what was evidently Kazakh wit; and the municipal eating house of Kasimjan — notwithstanding its due and proper dignity as a step to Kazakh socialism and a fine ideological example — would boom and echo with the laughter of a thousand years of country humour. It was altogether a muscular occasion.

Within an hour we had quit the fleshpots of Tekes and were hurrying toward the high grasslands, for now the remaining hours of daylight were few and Dr Ma thought rain was on the
way. Already the track was reduced to slithering mud or vanished into the bed of the Tekes; the country grew wilder still and skylines climbed from small hills into high hills; and soon, persevering on our way, we raised far ice pinnacles that surround Khan Tengri, whose jagged tops go above 23,000 feet.

When dusk came we had finished climbing and were pushing through that silent land into the fringes of the grass, held in this region within the frame of tall and nameless mountains; and then in gathering twilight we left the trail for Chaosu and rode across the prairie. Perhaps an hour later we had gained the shadowy bowl of Balak-Su; and at last, our headlights playing on the mysterious scene, we shut off our engine at the yurts of Mussojan.

I saw them next morning through the mist of a summer’s dawn—a close circle of mushroom-coloured tents beside a running brook: and then in that soft light the long pale prairie reached beyond them and on every hand, and multitudinous cattle rode and dwindled until one’s eyes ran remotely up to rock and snow that married with the mist. Only towards midday, in the intervals of a Scottish rain, could one see gleaming visions of those myriad alpine pinnacles, touched with the sun and piercing the vaporous sky, that mark the hidden frontiers of Kazakhstan.

IV

Towards nine o’clock Kazakh families began riding up to our circle of yurts. It would be the same every morning: daily there would be upward of a hundred and more, men and women and children of all ages, some of whom had come for miles across the mountains to the west. These were the people who lived in the ultimate crannies and corners of the Tien Shan, the dwellers beneath Khan Tengri and those who pass their lives behind the ice barriers that face southward to the Sinkiang desert and are seen with uplifted eyes from the streets of Kucha and Karashahr.
More came than Dr Ma’s small team of specialists and Dr Mussojan’s thirty-four *feldsher* trainees could easily cope with. This training project was originally intended to select only a broad sample from each Kazakh and Mongol group in the grasslands, and generally prepare the trainees so that they could afterwards branch off on their own and penetrate to all the people of the mountains. ‘But then,’ said Ma, ‘the word got round that Peking doctors had pitched their tents at Balak-Su, and now everybody comes in who thinks he’d like some medical advice.’

He pointed to a small ridgepole tent beside the brook. ‘There’s a woman in that tent who was brought in a couple of days ago by her husband and brother. She could ride a horse all right, but they knew she was sick, they thought she was going to die.

‘They told us they’d come four days over the mountains. We don’t know how far that is, but a healthy Kazakh goes fifty or sixty miles a day when he wants to. I daresay they’d come a hundred and twenty miles or so.

‘They knew we were here all right. News travels fast in Kazakh land. There’s a story they have — that if an aeroplane flies overhead, someone will be bound to know the names of the people in it.’

We had walked down the grassy slope to the tent, and Ma called a greeting. I peered in and saw a woman lying on a pile of furs. She looked at me unblinkingly with the set sad face of those in sickness. But Ma said: ‘She’ll live. She needs an operation and some treatment.

‘We can’t operate on her out here, but there’s a cottage hospital at the county town, Chaosu, half a dozen miles away, and we’ll do it there. Now we’re giving her treatment to get ready for that.’ Her husband was expected back in a day or so, and would bring food for her. ‘Or she can eat with us. There’s no lack of food in these grasslands now. They say the herds have never been so big.’

Hassan Khan turned up next day to greet a stranger from
afar: he was 'secretary of the government of the second district of Chaosu', and a pivot of the new regime in our corner of the prairie. He came in as though he had ridden for miles, a pure Kazakh in appearance, with high cheekbones and a long slim nose and black moustache curling slenderly along his lips and making a fine contrast with his ruddy face. This, I thought, was the sort of man who had ridden with the Golden Horde: how much would the type and manner and the dress have changed?

He had not, in fact, ridden in for miles; but stepped across the brook from a pair of log cabins on the other side. Ma had pointed them out to me. One of them was the 'government' and the other the Balak-Su supply-and-marketing co-operative store. 'What they say about government, here,' Ma commented, 'this that you simply hang the government's sign-board from a camel's neck.' For the herdsmen would follow their herds, and the government — and the doctors and the rest — would follow the people, moving season by season through the pastures, and wintering in the valleys.

With Hassan Khan, I thought, we might enjoy a brisk exchange of information, not taking too long, and have time for a ride across the prairie afterward. But Hassan Khan had other ideas. He sat quietly before us, a lean man with thoughtful slanting eyes, and apologized for the kumiss being late. The kumiss would come 'with the others'. When Ma heard this he chuckled and said: 'You're in for it now, my boy. They say you are a distinguished visitor from afar. They're going to make a session of it.'

Others were reported in sight across the prairie and we went out of Ma's yurt to greet them. They came in on horseback and jumped from silver-chased saddles, tethered their beasts and came forward on thick straddling legs. There was Sadat Beg, head of the county administration (one of the hsien of the Ili-Kazakh autonomous chou) and Midin Aqsu, one of his deputies; Jahanov Abdullah, who was in charge of the Chaosu health centre and cottage hospital; a squat and very serious
Kazakh whose name I never knew and who was head of the State trading company for Chaosu county; Lu Li-shu, a Chinese cadre who was accountant at county headquarters; and Mahsud of the county tax office. Lastly and somewhat balefully (although perhaps it was only policeman's habit) there was a uniformed man called Ismail, head of the 'public security office', and one of his henchmen.

There was also the *kumiss*, produced I know not how nor whence: two great enamel bins of it to be consumed as the English drink beer or the Chinese drink tea. It is the ancient drink of these mountains, a partly fermented mare's milk that is faintly bitter but rich and nourishing, and slightly alcoholic. This *kumiss* would not have changed in centuries either. It was at one with the horsey ruggedness of these men, with their decorated saddles and their strong intelligent ponies, with the panorama of the mountains and the brown falcons that hovered overhead.

Rugs were spread on the grass since the day was clear of rain; and at Hassan Khan's invitation we ranged ourselves in a circle and drank a formal and preliminary mug of *kumiss*, and began our discussions. They talked of their lives and their intentions; and I wondered, listened to them, what foreigner before me could have heard such talk.

Sadat Beg began. A man of dignity and confidence, with a strong and good face, he plunged into the heart of the matter; and it was history writing itself. He frowned with the concentration of saying what he thought, and leaned forward a little over crossed legs, and led off with the formal phrases which are proper in China now.

'Yes, people did live badly under the Kuomintang.... They did not see the sunshine. They had little to eat, and only the worst of clothing.... They could not even buy white cotton shrouds for the dead: we wrapped the dead in dried
grass before we put them in the ground. And as to schooling, there was little. . . .'

Like a good many of these people now, Sadat Beg had decent riding boots and green corduroy breeches and jacket and a cadre's flat brimmed cap. Others wore the traditional Kazakh felt hat, and corduroys that were black or cherry-coloured; others again wore old jackets of sheepskin. (These corduroys, Ma said, were a sign of this region's new prosperity: they were first brought up in 1955 by the State trading organizations, and had since become popular.) Many of their faces were marked with the smallpox of childhood. Several of them, as they said later, had ridden with Yusuf Khan and Mussojan and other Kazakh cavalry leaders of the Three Regions' revolt; and many of the cadres were now in the Chinese Communist Party.

Sadat Beg was saying: 'And when people fell ill they waited only for death. We had no veterinaries. And as to taxes they were often as much as could be taken from us, and so our people did not try to produce a surplus, they feared it would be taken from them. . . .

'We herdsmen had no means of breeding scientifically and no one came to teach us. People cared nothing for cultural life. They wished only to live beyond notice of the Government. . . .'

They listened with still unmoving faces, watching Sadat Beg, watching me. 'Now all this is changed. Under the Communist Party and Chairman Mao our life is better. People consider the Government their own. We manage our own affairs. We have more schools. People are ready to produce more wealth, and they do produce more wealth.'

Some poods-and-roubles followed; but they were unavoidable and important.

'In these pastures, now, we have three or four times more cattle than before the liberation. Even the poorest among us, those who had no cattle before, have three or four head, not counting sheep. Even these families have felt yurts for the spring and summer, and houses in the valley for autumn and winter, and a plot of land to work. . . .'}
Lu Li-shu took over. He was slow and determined in what he said, a small stony-faced Chinese in regulation blue who had come from Hopei three years earlier. Before the liberation the people of Chaosu hsien had never produced enough wheat for their needs: now this too was changed—in 1955 they had produced enough wheat for two years’ consumption.

In 1953 they had possessed 240,000 head of cattle, horses, cows, sheep. In 1954, 270,000: now in 1956, 389,000.

How many people in this hsien? ‘We counted ourselves in 1953: we counted 42,700 souls.’

We were into the second gallon of kumiss.

There was the ticklish matter of taxation to be examined: always as complicated in China as wage-rates in Britain.

An interesting point emerged. In the Kashgar Pamir the Kirghiz of Bostan Terek paid taxes on beasts in excess of eight sheep for each member of the family: here in the Tien Shan the Kazakhs were better off (much better off, I would say) and paid taxes in excess of six sheep for each family member.

Taxes were always reckoned in sheep: at a rate, for instance, of five sheep for one cow and six sheep for one horse.

So how much did you pay?

Lu Li-shu gave the scale. Over and above a tax-free maximum of six sheep for each family member, you paid on the first 50 sheep the sum of 1 per cent of the market value of your beast. From 50 to 150 sheep 2 per cent: from 100 to 300, 3 per cent: from 300 to 600, 4 per cent. . . . Lambs would not be counted: nor baby camels; nor cows nor horses under three years old. If you worked land with beasts, then these beasts would not be counted either.

The hsien administration kept 15 per cent of tax revenues: the remainder went to the treasury of the Ili-Kazakh autonomous government.

Public health? Jahanov Abdullah said: ‘We have five districts. At Chaosu a health centre and a hospital, and health centres in two other districts, and mobile teams for the two remaining districts. Our hospital at Chaosu has three doctors
and three nurses and three midwives and one pharmacist. All this is new.'

No secondary school before the liberation? They corrected me. 'Yes, there was one but with few pupils. Now it has 700 pupils and 34 teachers.'

Would I not like to see these things at Chaosu?

It was arranged for the afternoon. And now the kumiss was drunk and the discussions were over. They took their leave and untethered their horses and went off across the prairie.

Ma and Tse came with me to Chaosu in the afternoon. On the way we visited the county stud farm and were greeted by our friend Abdul Rachman, who managed it, and stumbled on that old concentration camp of Sheng Shih-tsai's. Abdul Rachman spread before us an enormous meal of newly killed sheep; and thinking that this would be our last meal of the day, we did it full justice. That was really my undoing.

Sadat Beg and others met us on the outskirts of Chaosu, a ragged little cattle town tucked up against cliffs that fall, on the other side of their slope, into Kazakhstan; and we made our rounds. They would end, declared Sadat Beg, in a party.

'But I can't possibly eat any more.'

Dr Ma said: 'Nor can I.'

'Well, please tell them, Dr Ma, that they're very kind but we have to get back to Balak-Su before dusk.'

'I'll try, old man. But I don't think it will work. They won't consider their welcome is complete without a party.'

'But I can't eat any more sheep.'

Inexorably, a party is arranged.

Tse says: 'They want to apologize for not having got everything ready. They say they won't be long.'

'Now look, Tse, we've travelled a long way together, you and I. You try. Do this for me, try and get us out of it.' Bubbling white fat is wafted on the evening air. Nausea threatens.

'They say it will be only a small party. You need not eat much.' Even Tse abandons me.

Of course Sadat Beg and Jahanov Abdullah and the others
take all this coyness for good manners; and they are not to be outdone in returning the compliment. ‘Nonsense, nonsense!’ they cry. ‘A man gets hungry in the mountains.’

We stamp into the little town hall of Chaosu and fill a large room with our jackets and boots and squarely planted elbows. All sorts of people come. There’s been no foreigner in Chaosu for as long as anyone can remember. As to not eating sheep, whoever could imagine such a thing?

I am thoroughly bad tempered by now and scowl at Dr Ma, who sits near by and insists that the party is in my honour, not in his. He smiles ironically when I scowl at him, and his bushy eyebrows, tolerant, forgiving, rise and fall upon his spectacles and tired grey eyes. He will not drink a drop, moreover: and this makes it worse.

‘You ought to drink. It’s good for you.’
‘No no, I never touch it.’

I wait for the boiled mutton with death in my soul. Meanwhile, there is grilled mutton on skewers and draughts of choking Chinese alcohol. Well, but I like grilled mutton: one should at least eat a little of it, one doesn’t want to hurt their feelings. . . .

Speeches of welcome. Over my shoulder these hospitable people are looking at the whole western world: ambassadorial functions grow more imposing with every toast.

Sadat Beg says Kampei. Bottoms up. Kampei, kampei.

Ma says: ‘Can’t think how you do it.’
‘Oh, it’s easy. . . .’ I throw him a bitter glance.

Sadat Beg speaks, Lu Li-shu speaks, Jahanov Abdullah speaks, others rise from different parts of the room and speak: and one by one, uplifted by diplomatic responsibility, I answer them. I feel as though martyred on the tree of diplomacy. One speaks rather well in that position. I listen to myself with admiration and astonishment. After a while I notice that I am even eating boiled mutton, great white gobbets of it, lavishly helped by Sadat Beg who is sitting next to me and has an eye for the really succulent bits. Kampei. Kampei.
They speak. I speak. Kampei. Tse does valiantly. Great steaming plates of mutton come and go. This is how things ought to be. Kampei. What a chance the Foreign Office lost in losing me!

Even great banquets have their end. Energy slackens, bottles empty, plates lie scattered with the bones of sheep, speeches trail into limbo, ambassadorial functions have their term: I have done them proud enough, and so has everyone else. It is time to go home.

Ma says anxiously: 'What a fearful job. Thank god I can stick to doctoring.'

Hurt, I reply: 'Well, you don’t think I enjoy it, do you?' But the evidence is not, alas, on my side. I see Ma’s eyebrows busy with their tolerant but sceptical reply. I am cross with him again.

Driving home through the night, all farewells said, we lose our way on the prairie, run hopelessly into a bog, remain there axle-deep. Ma says: 'I didn’t mean to hurt your feelings, you know.'

I inveigh against doctors, doctoring, journalism, newspapers, practically everything. Ma listens in dismay.

Tse interrupts to say that he insists on walking off through the bog to find Balak-Su and bring back horses to pull us out. Nothing will dissuade him; and the driver goes too. Hours later they return, apparently none the worse for a tremendous bog-trot through half the night; and fruitlessly. Tse’s strength and resilience are surprising.

I recover from bad temper, and apologize to Ma. 'Oh rubbish,' says he. 'You were all right.'

The dawn comes cheerfully; and with it the sound of horses galloping. Mussojan arrives with a shout of greeting. Laughter and explanations: it really was a fine night, we are none the worse for it.

'Take my horse,' Mussojan says. 'It’ll warm you up.'

I gallop on Mussojan’s magnificent pony across the hills to Balak-Su, and arrive in time for breakfast, feeling gigantic-ally well.
From the cookhouse they bring steaming food, and I fall to with appetite and relish. There is nothing like boiled mutton when you are hungry.

VI

Mussojan and Ma talked to me of their work. Little had been known of the health of these grasslands people. Syphilis and other skin diseases were thought to be prevalent: infant mortality was known to be high, and sterility common.

The Central Institute of Venereal and Skin Diseases, with its regional branches, was now ending this ignorance. There was already seen to be a surprisingly wide variation in the health of nomads: the Tien Shan Kazakhs, for example, were generally much better off in this respect than their Mongol neighbours. Here at Balak-Su they had so far examined 2,200 people and found only seventy cases of syphilis, and fewer than ten with clinical symptoms.

'They are a healthy group,' Ma said. 'Fresh air, milk, and mutton, no overcrowding.'

Three years earlier another medical team had examined the health of a pocket of Mongols, about 9,000 in all, living in a small self-governing district called Horbuksen not far from Chaosu. In a fairly big sample they had found a 20 per cent incidence of venereal disease.

Why this higher incidence than among the Kazakhs? There would be, it seems, three reasons. The first was that these Mongols — Torgot Mongols, for the most part, those who had journeyed back from the Volga two hundred years earlier — had found themselves driven into the mountains by stronger peoples, mainly Kazakhs, and a traditional poverty had settled on them. But this poverty the misgovernment of previous years had worsened through its policy of suppressing the minor nationalities: so that the second reason for Mongol misery lay in a traditional ignorance. Squalor was added to hunger.

Lamaism contributed a third reason for disease. In Hor-
buksen the investigating team had found 800 lamas out of a total of 2,000 men: sexual relations had tended to be anything but regular. By 1956 this monastery population was reduced to 200 monks, mainly the older men, while the others had left the monastery (though not necessarily the priesthood) and gone to work, and had often married. In near-by Chaosu, our cattle town, there was a many-walled monastery where more than 400 monks had lived until a few years ago; now there were no more than 60.

‘But when you’re writing about that,’ Ma put in, ‘please don’t write anything to hurt their feelings.’ The party line tolerates no attacks on religion.

Kazakh health was astonishingly good. ‘It’s partly because of the good status of their women. After all, there aren’t many things in Kazakh land that a woman can’t do as well as a man, and some of them she does a darn sight better.’

This was reflected in Kazakh games. I never managed to see any of these wild man–woman games the Kazakhs play on horseback, but I did see a snatch of movie film, in Ili, that recorded one of them. They mount a girl on a fine strong horse and a man on a horse that’s not so good. The man is supposed to be able to ride better than the girl, so they give the girl a rawhide whip and a free hand to lambast the man whenever she can come up with him. Ma had seen this game. ‘Boy, how those girls lash out,’ he said.

The student doctors had interesting stories: even from the bare bones of what they said about themselves there came a little of the wild music of the times.

The first with whom I talked was not a Kazakh but an Uighur, a raw-skinned peasant from the outskirts of Urumchi with a shy manner but a firm intelligent face. Mussojan was good enough to interpret for me. This youth was one of the bright ones whose lives were altered even by the brief ‘progressiveness’ of Sheng’s early period. A landless peasant’s son, he had managed to enter one of the primary schools opened by an Uighur cultural association about 1935. When he was
fifteen he had joined an ‘epidemics prevention course’ run by Soviet medical men at Urumchi; and from that he had passed into the Urumchi hospital as a male nurse — only to be arrested for ‘subversive nationalism’ in 1943. They had let him out of prison in 1945: but ‘when Akmedjan Kasim went back to Ili’ — that is, when the compromise government fell apart in 1947 — ‘he took me with him, and many young men, and we joined the Minorities Army’, the army of the Three Regions in revolt. There he had worked in the medical school of that small revolutionary force, and the head of the school had been Mussojan. So the rest followed almost of itself: the logical enlargement of an individual life that grows from a popular revolution which succeeds.

Tadji was an Uzbek girl from Ili, a handsome round-eyed girl with plenty of self-confidence. She said that her father had run a small eating joint in Ili and so ‘we were a poor family but not a very poor family’. Primary school from nine to fifteen, and then three years of elementary medical training: now, she said, she was qualified as an assistant. What she could do, in fact, was to give injections, talk sense on childbirth, practise first-aid and recognize and treat common sicknesses. Later on, she thought, she would become a real doctor: meanwhile, on this three months course, she was learning the techniques of sampling and registering and record keeping, and broadening her experience. Later this summer she would go with two others into the trackless lands beyond the southern slopes of Khan Tengri, and register the state of health among the mountain people there.

Tadji represents the period of transition. Not for another ten or fifteen years can there be enough Sinkiang doctors to spread medical science more than thinly to these remote peoples; but in the interval there will be Tadji, and scores of young men and women like her, to establish the promise and the possibility of medical aid, to clear a pathway through ignorance and superstition, and carry out preventive programmes.
Those who made this possible are the pioneers of the Chinese revolution: they belong to the devoted ones who are among the most interesting people in China now, but also the most difficult to get at, for they have a self-denying dislike of talking of themselves. I was lying on my camp bed in Dr Ma’s yurt one evening while Dr Ma worked under a bare electric bulb on the microscopic examination of specimens. His colleague Dr Chen came in and sat down and began looking into an encyclopaedia, and later the third of their trio, Dr Yin, also came in and started talking of a difficult case. Out of good manners they all three talked in English while I was there, and so I came to know them better than I could otherwise have done.

They were a trio well worth living with. Dr Chen was from Hunan, a large square man of an imperturbable demeanour, solemn by nature but tolerant from long experience: like Dr Ma, he had served with the Red Army in its hard fighting days and seemed to combine determination with breadth of understanding. Dr Yin was a different kind of man, younger, more vivacious, more slightly built, being from Kwangtung in the sub-tropical south. Both he and Chen treated Ma, who was older than they, with respect and affection. It was from men such as these that one could understand something of the inner strength of a peasant revolution which had carried with it a wide swathe of the intellectual class.

These three men, here on the borderlands of the old Chinese empire, represented not only revolution but also China: China the old overlord, so often the old enemy, but a China now that stood for equality among Chinese and non-Chinese alike. A hundred times more doctors in Sinkiang by 1967: that would be a fact which nobody could misunderstand, and it would be one strong measure of the distance between the old reality and the new reality, the distance between colonial subjection and national equality.

Not all Chinese would be capable of meeting this challenge. In Peking, some months later, the political bureau of the Communist Party would comment on this point that: ‘Great-nation
chauvinist tendencies (among us Chinese) will certainly become a serious danger if we do not take every precaution to guard against them. It should, furthermore, be pointed out that some signs of this danger have already begun to appear among some of our personnel.' But Ma and Chen and Yin were not among these: and I watched with admiration their sensitive care never to seem superior or patronizing to Mussojan and his students, who knew so much less of doctoring than they did.

They finished their work and Ma said: 'There's a dance tonight. It's Saturday, after all. Care to go?'

Gunbuz brought supper: a Kazakh girl with the face and figure of a ripening moon, clad in thick woollens and ribbed stockings, and still astonished at her fortune in serving food to Peking doctors; and then we strolled over the encampment towards a bare electric bulb shining from the top of a pole.

Within its light the students and the cooks and everyone who cared were dancing on the grass to the croaking of a gramophone: social dancing, be it said.

But those wild Kazakh dances?

Ma said: 'Can't help it. This is what they like. This is the new thing. And they'll keep it up till dawn if we don't stop them.'

We stood on the rim of light; and around us the wide bowl of the sky lay above high hills. It was cold beneath those stars. Luckily for me, Yusuf Khan down at Ili had cocked a thoughtful eye at my nylon suit and lent me an enormous overcoat of wolf and fox fur, and now I huddled gratefully into it.

One of the girls walked over and claimed Ma for a partner. Another claimed me. I threw off the wolf fur coat and we danced in the circle of light. In all that vast silence the jazzy gramophone was a mere wailing scratch. Close to me, absorbed by these new-fangled steps, a girl with high round cheeks and dark lifting eyes concentrated on the pain of guiding our feet upon the stubbly turf. Her glowing profile was severe against the starlit mountains, and matched with the distant loneliness of alpine pastures. And the humble foxtrot, even that, climbed dizzily into folklore here.
We parted after a few days. We were sorry to leave and I think they were sorry to see us go; although Ma no doubt breathed a sigh of relief when all those questions ceased.

Through slithering mud and rain we drove down into Tekes, where we stopped again at the restaurant of Kasimjan and afterwards visited on Ma’s recommendation the young woman who is midwife of the neighbourhood. ‘If you want to see the kind of Chinese that are coming up here, and why,’ Ma had said: ‘you go and talk to that girl.’

She was certainly the most charming girl I met in China, a bouncing girl of nineteen with an infectious smile and long glossy hair tied with a wide pink bow; and her name was Spring Wisdom.

She found life an exciting affair: and one could see why. A native of Hangchow, the finest and most civilized city of eastern China, she had come to Sinkiang with eighty other young midwives of Chekiang province a year before, by truck across the Gobi, and had reached Tekes in the previous October. Nobody in Tekes had seen a trained midwife before; and Spring Wisdom, for her part, could speak no word of Kazakh and could not ride a horse, although in Tekes there is nothing else to ride. There were weeks of painful learning.

Now she could speak quite a lot of Kazakh, and she could ride a horse. Mostly she was called out for difficult births: ‘and often enough they’re miles away, and through the night, and I don’t get there in time. . . .’

‘And why did you come here at all?’

Spring Wisdom chuckled deliciously and said at once: ‘To build up our borderlands, of course.’ It was the stock reply; but with this young woman it rang true.

There were, she said, 37,500 people in Tekes county, ‘and so far only 200 Chinese cadres.’

We said goodbye to Spring Wisdom and drove into the rain-clouds of late afternoon. On the way down, as chance would
have it, we passed two other typical phenomena of Sinkiang in 1956: straggling over the mountain trail, some walking and some riding, some carrying instruments and some carrying flags, we met a team of surveyors; and a little farther down, setting up poles, a team of telephone linesmen. Ma had said: 'The surveyors have a tougher time than we do: for we go where the people are, but those surveyors go simply everywhere. . . .'

We were at Wild Horse ferry by twilight.

Dr Ma and Dr Chen and Dr Yin will have left the north-western borderlands by the time this book appears. They will be bumping and jolting on their truck across the prairies of Chinghai, disappearing into blue distances that border on the mountains of Tibet, their passage little more than a cloud of dust and a fearful thrill for countless shepherd boys. But behind them in the hills of Sinkiang, far up where green pastures vanish into snows that never melt, two score of well-trained pupils will be hard at work, applying what they have learnt as they move from one uncharted valley to another. And that, no doubt, is what good government in this backward and long-neglected country should really mean.
CHAPTER ELEVEN

THE DRAGONS OF LORD SHEH

‘Seek for learning, though it be as far away as China.’

Hadith of Mahomet the Prophet

I

At Ili I returned to the question of Sinkiang home rule. It undoubtedly exists, but how much of it is there? Has it satisfied the nationalism of these non-Chinese peoples?

A general wish to hive off from China and form separate republics was never strong in Sinkiang. Even Yakub Beg in the big revolt of the 1870s had not thought of a truly independent Kashgaria: he might want independence of the Chinese empire, he was none the less willing to accept overlordship from British India. Even the handful of ‘pan-Turanian’ nationalists of the 1930s — Sabit da Mullah and after him a few ‘conservatives’ like Masud Sabri — never looked much beyond freedom from Sheng Shih-tsai and the ‘direct rule’ of the Kuomintang. Most seem to have wanted little more than autonomy — but a genuine autonomy — within the frontiers of China. (It had been much the same, vis-à-vis Russia, with the Turkic peoples living in the Tsarist empire.)

To whom, after all, could these Sinkiang peoples look for help? Living at the back of beyond, they were divided from India by centuries of an entirely different tradition and by the highest mountains in the world, and from their Turkic fellow peoples in the U.S.S.R. by little less. China had been their parent source of learning for two thousand years: China after 1949 could offer them a chance of rapid progress. After 1935, true enough, they had known a brief period of strong Soviet influence; and it may have seemed, then, that Sinkiang would
follow the same road as Outer Mongolia and become under Soviet guidance a republic on Soviet lines. Perhaps it was of this that the Ili leaders of the Three Regions revolt had thought when proclaiming their republic of Eastern Turkestan in 1944: better that, perhaps, than renewed Kuomintang domination.

What part in all this was played by Stalin and his policies during the last ten or fifteen years of his life, when Soviet ties with the Chinese Communists were weak or more than weak, and how far Stalin may have expected to become one of the residuary legatees of a Chinese Republic in dissolution, is still obscure. More probably he wanted to regain in Sinkiang no more than the political and economic influence that Russia had enjoyed there during the 1930s: no Soviet government could ignore the importance of friendly relations with the country that lay along their own Central Asian borders. Stalin may reasonably have suspected, moreover, that he might otherwise find Soviet influence pushed out by American and British influence.

Yet it is curious that the Soviet Government should have signed with the Kuomintang a treaty for joint exploitation of the natural riches of Sinkiang as late as 1949 — at a time when it was obvious to all that the Chinese Communists would triumph over Chiang Kai-shek and his western backers. This was evidently one of those instances of ‘great power chauvinism’ with which the Chinese Communists, while otherwise careful to give him their praise, now reproach Stalin; and up to Stalin’s death in 1953 Soviet–Chinese relations seem to have remained anything but good.

There followed a sharp change for the better, and by 1954 all the joint Soviet–Chinese trading and mining companies in Sinkiang, as elsewhere in China, were dissolved. Soviet influence in any administrative or directly political or economic sense had disappeared by 1956; although Soviet economic and technical aid was by then of primary importance for China’s new industries.
While in Kashgar I had talked of these things with Mehmeti Min, secretary of the Kashgar district government, and that tough old Uighur revolutionary had offered some interesting replies.

Why shouldn't Sinkiang follow the same road as Outer Mongolia, as the Mongolian People's Republic, and be independent?

'Our policy is not for that. And my opinion is that it is not necessary to establish a separate republic. Sinkiang has been part of China since ancient times. But in every way we fell behind: you yourself know the reasons for that. Now we have the opportunity to catch up, but we could not possibly catch up on our own. And we have a nationalities policy that satisfies people, and we do not persecute religion. This is thanks to the Chinese Communist party.'

Mehmeti Min is of course a member of that party. So I said:

'Then why not integrate the Kazakhs of Sinkiang with the Kazakhs of Kazakhstan, the Kirghiz with the Kirghiz of Kirghizstan, and so on? After all, they live next door to each other.'

'No, we want to stay in the family of Chinese peoples. It is not necessary for us to establish one big Islamic republic in Central Asia, nor to go in together with the other Islamic peoples.'

'But look at your Tadjiks of Tashkurgan. They live right alongside Tadjikistan. And they aren't a Turkic people, as you are. Why not cut off that corner of Sinkiang and join it with its neighbour?'

'Well, we have good relations with Tadjikistan, of course. But Tashkurgan is part of China. And our Tadjiks have an autonomous district of their own, and that is what they have wanted to have. Altering that would be an international question, a question of negotiations between China and the Soviet Union, and nobody has asked for that.'

He went on: 'Besides, look at the differences. The Tadjiks of Tadjikistan live in a socialist economy, they're far ahead of our own Tadjiks in every way. They're at a different stage of
development, there on the other side of the mountains. How would you put them together, even if they should ask to be put together, which they do not?"

Later on, after returning to Peking, I put the same questions to a Chinese Communist of long experience in Sinkiang who is now the director of a publishing house for non-Chinese books and newspapers. Sa Kung-liao is one of those Communists who went up to Sinkiang during Sheng's 'progressive period', but escaped with his life.

He said: 'The fact is that these small border minorities have been culturally separated from their neighbours on the other side of the mountains for a very long time. It is almost a case of two different cultures in spite of their community of language: one overlaid with Russian culture and the other overlaid with Chinese culture, and that for many centuries. The common names they have can be misleading.

'As to our policy, we are for minorities having all the rights they want, short of the right of secession; and belonging to our family of Chinese peoples.'

The terse doctrine of this lies in article 3 of the new Chinese constitution:

'The People's Republic of China is a single multinational state.

'All the nationalities are equal. Discrimination against, or oppression of, any nationality, and acts which undermine the unity of the nationalities are prohibited.

'All the nationalities have freedom to use and foster the growth of their spoken and written languages, and to preserve or reform their own customs or ways.

'Regional autonomy applies in areas where people of national minorities live in compact communities. National autonomous areas are inalienable parts of the People's Republic of China.'

The minorities' publishing house of which Sa Kung-liao is chairman began in 1950 with the Mongol, Tibetan, and
Uighur languages. To these it added Kazakh and Korean in 1953. By 1967 it expected to be publishing in some twenty-five non-Chinese languages: some of these, in 1956, were still without a script.

III

But if people in Sinkiang had no great urge towards a separate republic, they certainly wished and wish to live their own kind of life.

Of home rule, I think, they now have about as much as the more moderate of Scottish and Welsh nationalists would want for themselves in Britain; although they have it, of course, within the necessary limits of a backward country whose development depends largely on a much more advanced country. While the central government in Peking retains control of foreign affairs, defence, principal communications, and general economic planning, in Sinkiang they are free to run the rest of their affairs, and to that end they receive a vast amount of help from China proper. Their freedom is a real one, and is obviously felt as such: nowhere in Sinkiang did I come across any anti-Chinese sentiment. Non-Chinese and Chinese seemed to be working well together and on a footing of complete equality of status: and the little midwife of Tekes county is no exception, I think, to the general rule. The Chinese 'settler domination' of the past has disappeared.

This building of good relations with the border peoples, while retaining the geographical integrity of the old empire, may be among the key successes of the new regime: and the more remarkable in that it had found the old empire in ruins. Those minorities within reach of the Kuomintang had cowered in subjection or risen in more or less savage revolt, and hatreds had smouldered even when the fires of rebellion were low. Those beyond reach — wild hillmen of the south-west for the most part — had been generally at war with the Kuomintang; and the new regime had needed much time and skill to persuade them into making peace again.
By 1956 the Chinese had gone some way towards an ordered and coherent federalism. Already in 1947, before achieving power throughout China, the revolutionary government had given Inner Mongolia the status of an autonomous region: Sinkiang followed in October 1955: and Tibet was to follow soon after. Elective processes were in formation throughout the country, including the minority regions. Lesser autonomous districts, framed for the needs of smaller or much fragmented minorities, were to contribute another important element in abolishing the old colonial attitudes and displacing these by relations of equality. Shih Chiang-chen, who is deputy secretary of the Commission for National Minorities in Peking, told me that by 1956 they had formed seventy-five of these lesser autonomous districts: 23 chou (large districts) and 46 hsien (smaller districts) as well as six others which fell into neither category. Within these, he said, backward peoples could grow to maturity; less backward peoples could soon catch up with the majority of Chinese.

Of the meaning of this changed relationship the Ili-Kazakh autonomous chou offered plenty of evidence. It was not only that many young people, like Dr Mussojan’s student doctors, could now enter and practise the liberal professions; nor that the outermost inhabitants of the Tien Shan could reach a doctor if they wished. These things had been practically unthinkable before; but they would still have been compatible with Chinese domination. Yet the fact is that the Kazakhs of the Tien Shan have their own home rule within the Sinkiang–Uighur autonomous region: just as, within this Kazakh autonomous district, Mongols and other minorities have smaller autonomous districts of their own.

The general lines of policy are those of the Communist Party controlled and sanctioned by a ‘democratic centralism’, which is supposed to mean that the policy-makers at the top are continually criticized and watched by the rank and file organisations below. I say ‘supposed’ because China — and Sinkiang — are still in a phase of great social change where the real content
of democracy takes the form of a general popular urge towards well-understood objectives: whether Chinese Communists can make 'democratic centralism' work effectively in a later phase — or how far the non-Communist groups and parties that now exist will find it possible and useful to live and grow — is something that remains to be seen. In 1956, at all events, they were clearly moving both towards the establishment of democratic forms and procedures, and towards a large and systematic tolerance of non-Communist opinions.24

These general lines of policy are handed down from Peking to Urumchi, and from Urumchi to the smaller self-governing districts. But the Kazakh leaders in Ili insisted to me that they were not expected to make an automatic application of policies decided higher up. Should they disagree with Urumchi they had the right of appeal to Peking; and they could reject any orders from Urumchi that entrenched upon their self-governing rights (which are duly enshrined both in the new constitution and in special laws promulgated since): although, as they said, 'no such case has yet occurred'.

They raise and maintain their own police forces, but the Urumchi authorities sanction the numbers they decide upon, and the public security office of the Ili-Kazakh region takes orders from Urumchi. Budgetary control follows the same pattern. So far the Kazakhs had done little more than comment on and somewhat modify the general economic plan for Sinkiang drawn up by Urumchi (itself working within an economic framework provided by Peking). But in March 1956 they had established their own planning authority at Ili and in future, with more experience, they expected to make a bigger contribution both in policy and practice. They had already calculated some provisional long-term figures which, they said, showed that the Ili-Kazakh region (with 800,000 people in 1956) could triple its cultivated area by 1967, increase its gross agricultural product by more than eight times, and its livestock by more than five times.

Tax levels were fixed by the central authorities, but modified
locally. (Thus the Kazakhs, as we found at Balak-Su, were paying more taxes in 1956 than the Kirghiz of the Kashgar Pamir.) In 1956, they said, they would retain half their revenue for local expenditure, handing on the rest to Urumchi for general development in Sinkiang. They thought this was rather a high proportion for local expenditure, and explained it by the fact that the new trans-Asian railway would shortly reach them; its arrival would mean a great deal of new capital expenditure. Later on, when the railway was pushed from Urumchi through Kucha and Aqsu to Kashgar, the proportion they kept would be reduced in favour of the southern oases.

I afterwards took up these questions with the head of the Sinkiang finance department in Urumchi, a thoughtful Chinese called Liu Sze-mu. He pointed out that in 1949 the Sinkiang province had been in complete deficit, and that in the first year of the new regime all but a trifle of the revenue had come from central government funds in Peking. In 1951 the central government subsidy was still of the order of 70 per cent; but in 1956 it would be quite small, and should soon disappear altogether. There was, he said, no separate balance of payments for the Sinkiang region; and its planning was subject to central government planning, but once again modified by local conditions and initiative.

Its new industries would generally belong to the central government. 'Our autonomous region,' he said, 'would not have enough money to expand and run them.' The Urumchi coalmines still belonged to the regional government, but later on, when the railway arrived and the mines were greatly expanded, they would be transferred to central government ownership. The big new textile mill at Urumchi (which would shortly be producing at the rate of a million rolls of cotton a year—a roll being 37 metres by 70 centimetres) had also begun as regional property, but was now central government property. The new lorry repair and assembly plant at Urumchi (capable of thorough overhaul of 1,200 lorries a year) belonged to the regional government because it served a specific Sinkiang need.
But nearly all the state trading organizations were run by the central government; and the central government collected whatever profits they made.

Of these trading companies there were 225 in Sinkiang, as well as 20 regional companies and 400 travelling shops — more evidence, according to Liu Sze-mu, of a great expansion in retail trade. Purchasing power in the southern oases was said to have increased by 2½ times since 1949. The terms of trade were also said to be improving for this remote and backward region: figures given me in Kashgar claimed that whereas 1 kilo of iron had been equated to 15 kilos of wheat in 1949, it was now equated to 5 kilos of wheat — and it is in 'goods with iron content', of course, that Sinkiang is mainly lacking.

Another proof of rising prosperity was offered by Zakrerov, the Uighur secretary-general of the regional government, in the shape of revenue figures: taxes collected in the province had expanded from 9,000,000 yuan in 1950 to 107,000,000 in 1955. According to Nusret, vice-head of the Urumchi Planning Department, the share of revenue provided by agriculture and stockbreeding was steadily going down, and the share provided by industry and commerce was steadily going up. Thus in 1952 industry and commerce (including State enterprises) had yielded 53 per cent of revenue, but in 1955 over 79 per cent. He estimated the total value of industrial and agricultural production at 1,283 million yuan in 1957, or about 90 per cent more than in 1952: in the same period the share contributed by industry and commerce (not counting small craftsmen) would have risen from about 5 per cent to about 22 per cent.

Chang Chih-yi had estimated Sinkiang livestock figures in 1943 at 11,720,000 sheep and goats, 1,550,000 cattle, and 870,000 horses. Nusret's figures for 1955 gave 14,200,000 sheep and goats, 2,480,000 cattle, and 1,050,000 horses; but Nusret said that the rate of increase was rapid now, and that provisional figures for 1956 showed much larger stock holdings. Cotton, wheat, and silk production had also climbed steeply.

A group of Sinkiang editors and writers spoke of progress in
the publishing field. There was talk of abandoning the Arabic script of Uighur and Kazakh in favour of a Latin alphabet. Collections of new poetry and new novels were being published in Uighur and Kazakh and Mongol. Folklore teams were collecting old songs and stories:

When I beheld thy footprints beside the lake
I wept big tears,
So that the sand on the lake bottom
Was dimpled with them.
Thou art like a princess:
Thou drinkest thy tea from vessels of silver . . .

Thus sang the Lopliks of the Takla Makan a hundred years ago; and thus, perhaps it will now be found, they are singing still today.

All this goes hand-in-hand with an economic integration of Sinkiang into China proper, and a systematic effort to bring these relatively backward minority peoples into the full stream of Chinese development. But there is another agency besides peace and honest government and economic planning: the arrival in these borderlands of large numbers of Han people — of Chinese.

IV

That Hans * should be flooding into Sinkiang could be in flagrant contradiction to the fostering of home rule and minority development. But circumstances alter cases. The arrival of settlers under the old empire or the Kuomintang had usually meant expropriation for the natives. Han people flooding into these borderlands today are industrial workers for new industries, technicians and professional workers for new services, and agricultural workers for newly reclaimed land: their coming is in fact an essential condition of rapid economic advance.

* In China now this usage is universal — those we call Chinese call themselves Hans: they number about 94 per cent of the whole population of China.
Humanity is still comparatively rare in Sinkiang. Much of this land is empty of people. 'We shall need up here,' said a Han in Urumchi, 'another ten million people in the next fifteen years.' Of course it was an exaggeration: two or three millions might be nearer the mark. But most of these will come from China proper.

More people will depend on more irrigated land and more industry, and the Chinese are busy at providing both. By 1955 the Sinkiang provincial government had increased by about a quarter the all-time low of irrigated land they had taken over in 1949; but this was only a small beginning. 'Our agricultural base,' Nusret had said, 'is still weak.' Of ambitious plans for the near future I heard a good deal from the commander of the Sinkiang 'army of production' — that same Chang Chung-han who had begun 'army production' in Yenan many years before, a 'top Han cadre' of a solid and impressive kind.

This 'army of production' is a labour corps—in Sinkiang of about 300,000 men, mostly Han—which represents the planned transition from the years of full military mobilization to the years of peace. It began its separate existence in 1953, was withdrawn from military command and the Ministry of Defence in 1954, and in 1955 started paying its members at civilian rates. Its main tasks, Chang said, were to rebuild and greatly expand the Sinkiang irrigation system, and to found State farms on new land. As these public farms grew in number the loosely military nature of this production army would altogether disappear; and a general State farm administration would supplant it: its members would become permanent settlers. Thus the production army would serve the dual purpose of helping in the process of demobilization after long years of war, and of channelling labour to long-term projects.

It has had some astonishing successes; and its scale of planning for the future is nothing if not ambitious. I spent a day on one of twelve big State farms beyond the Manass river, on reclaimed land in the Jungarian steppe, and saw crops of wheat and cotton that Chang Chung-han said would provide the
heaviest yields in the whole of China. And yet nothing had grown here before but scrub and straggling weed, and thin pasture for a few thin cattle. So far they had reclaimed about 600,000 acres throughout Sinkiang, mainly on the fringes of the Takla Makan and in the Jungarian steppe; but they had made enough water available, in doing this, to enable neighbouring peasants to reclaim, for co-operative use, about another 700,000 acres. By 1962, Chang thought, State farms in Sinkiang would be farming on 2,500,000 acres of new land, and by 1967 (the end of the twelve-year plan), on as much as 7,000,000 acres of new land — or twice the whole irrigated surface of Sinkiang in 1949.

‘That will all be newly irrigated land,’ Chang said. ‘But the water we shall provide will not only irrigate State farm land. It will also irrigate new land for peasant co-operatives alongside our farms. It will help the stock breeders; and provide reservoirs and big canals for transport and electric power. It will give us much more fish. It will improve the whole countryside.’

Some notion of the planning scale may be seen from the intention that the country town of Manass, little more than a dusty village now, shall grow into an entirely new city of 300,000 people by 1967 or so, linked by the new trans-Asian railway to Ili and the frontier in the west and to Urumchi and China proper in the east. I saw some of the foundation buildings of this new city and they are framed on a big scale. The hospital at Manass already had 500 beds in new buildings and 5 qualified doctors and 45 assistants, serving about 35,000 production-army workers in the neighbourhood. Chang said: ‘We shall build many new towns in Sinkiang.’

He gave me facts about this work of renovation; they revealed something of the drive for radical change that is now at work in these long neglected borderlands. Thus the production army has planted 80,000,000 trees within the past five or six years; and the work continues. Mostly, as I saw for myself along the southern roads and in the foothills, they are poplar and willow and laburnum; their planting reaches back across the
centuries to those Han Dynasty plantations that were celebrated in the *Hou Han-shu* records. As to irrigation, apart from minor improvements to water courses and small canals, and to repairing and building many *kariz*, the production army’s main task is in systematic control of Sinkiang rivers. Thus in the Aqsu oasis they have already built a canal with a flow of 30 cubic metres per second capable of irrigating 130,000 acres; at Korla a canal with a flow of 12 cubic metres per second; at Karashahr two canals each of 15 cubic metres per second; at Hami two canals of 8 cubic metres per second; on the Manass river ten canals with a total flow of 101 cubic metres per second; and a good many others of the same size. They have built many reservoirs and intend to build many more: the Karashah torrent, for instance, is to flow into a reservoir capable of holding enough water to irrigate 500,000 acres of otherwise desert land. Within ten years’ time, Chang thought, the population would have risen to 8,000,000 people; and the cultivated area would be about four times as great as in 1949.

The same planned integration of Sinkiang with China proper — both by raising the economic level of the Sinkiang peoples and by bringing in many Han workers — can be seen in the beginnings of industry. Yilali Din, deputy manager of the Urumchi textile mill, told me that 700 of his 3,300 employees were non-Han; and the proportion would steadily increase as skills were learned. The Urumchi truck repair plant had 300 non-Han out of 1,400 workers.

Skills are being taught in new technical schools and colleges. Thus the Sinkiang Institute (founded originally by old Governor Yang as a school for Chinese administrators) had no more than 17 pupils in 1947 of whom only one was non-Han: in 1955 it had some 1,300 pupils of whom only 18 were Han, the rest being Uighur and Kazakh and a sprinkling of the smaller minorities — and, another revolutionary change, 250 were girls. Teaching was no longer in Han but in Uighur (this being well enough understood, apparently, by Kazakhs and others). Elsewhere one found the same trend: thus the Urumchi school of
mines, expecting to produce its first batch of graduates by the end of 1956, had 567 Han students but also 411 non-Han students. The excellent directors of the Urumchi Womens' Clinic, Mme Tung Lan-che who is Sipo and Mme Muhaddes Halijah who is Uighur, were proud to say that many Sinkiang women were entering new medical services: they had established 328 midwives as well as many health centres up and down the region. Most of the students at the Urumchi medical college will come from the minorities.

These gains should be seen against a wider background.
When the Central People's Government was established in 1949 it faced many stiff minority problems.\(^{27}\) The 2,500,000 Miaos of the south-western mountains had long fought the Kuomintang. Their neighbours the Yi, numbering some 3,250,000, were still taking slaves, and their agriculture, such as it was, rested on slave labour. With the Tibetans, whether in Tibet proper or in the Chinese–Tibetan borderlands, it was little better: their social structure was hopelessly out-of-date, and their suspicions of the new regime correspondingly deep. Of the big minority peoples only with the Chuangs of the far south-west (about 7,000,000), the Turkic peoples of Sinkiang (about 4,500,000), and the Mongols of Inner Mongolia (perhaps 1,250,000) could the new regime rely on good relations almost from the start. Yet even with these friendly minorities there were many difficulties. For they were all at a grave disadvantage compared with most Hans: they were all backward peoples, although their degree of backwardness varied from the relatively advanced Uighurs to the primitive hillmen of Yunnan.

If Chinese federalism was to become real then peace must be made with all these peoples, and this meant generous aids to self-government. But self-government by itself would not be enough, for it could easily go hand-in-hand with minority
stagnation. At a time when the Hans themselves were laying the foundation of modern industry and a socialist economy, these minority peoples could not be left to linger in the ancient ways. The new regime has therefore addressed itself to the infinitely difficult and delicate task of coaxing and helping them towards higher levels of economy and social life.

It has shown in this much tact and patience; and even so it has run into trouble here and there. With the hillmen of the south-west it has striven either to win over chiefly hierarchies or else to broaden the old autocracies into more progressive organs of native authority. By 1956 it had succeeded in weaning many of these hill tribes from their slave-taking and slave-holding habits; and in western Szechuan, for instance, it was moving towards a land reform among Tibetans and the abolition of such traditional forms of chiefly oppression as the exaction of  ula, of free labour or free gifts; although it was finding this far from easy. At the same time, in Tibet proper, it was seeking for allies in a similarly cautious effort to coax that rare and scattered people at least a little way towards the post-mediaeval world; and this too it was finding far from easy.

'In this complicated matter,' remarked Shih Chiang-chen of these south-western peoples, 'we have a very broad policy. For example, when we are trying for a land reform among a tribal people, we insist on certain guarantees for chiefs: such as that they are not to be removed from their positions, and their standard of living is not to suffer. We are now being helped by the fact that many of these chiefs have visited the rest of China, and seen that we are really going ahead, and they want to go ahead too.'

Elsewhere the new regime has run into fewer problems and, as in Sinkiang, achieved some brilliant results. And everywhere it is trying to forge new links. When in Lanchow on the way back to Peking, I spent some instructive hours at the Kansu branch of the Central Institute of Minorities: a college that does, essentially, two things — gives language and pedagogical instruction to selected minority students, and prepares selected
Han students as interpreters with these minorities. Its aim is to forge links across the often wide gap that separates Han from non-Han in these parts. They had in Lanchow college, while I was there, 1,333 students of thirteen nationalities, of whom 403 were Tibetans from Chinghai and 187 were Mongols from Chinghai and Kansu. One Tibetan I met was an ex-lama from Kansu; another was a shepherd boy from Chinghai: both were being trained as elementary schoolmasters.

An even more interesting pupil was a man called Awezu from a little lost people called the Yuko, who live in the high valleys of the Nan Shan. Dr Ma had told me about these Yuko, for he had spent part of the previous summer in looking into their state of health; and when I asked if they had a pupil from that minority, they produced Awezu. He said they numbered only 5,000 souls but were recognized as a distinct nationality, and nowadays had schools and home-rule of their own. ‘In the past the Chinese said we were Tibetans. But we knew that we were not. Our traditions say that we came from India long ago, and our language is nothing like Tibetan.’ They had no script for their language yet; but they were hoping to acquire one in a few years’ time.

The making of scripts for minority languages is another contribution to an eventual unity of the ‘family of Chinese peoples’. Of about fifty minority languages spoken in China, only twenty or so have written forms; and of these only a handful are of any practical value — Mongolian, Tibetan, Uighur, Kazakh, Tai, Sipo, and Korean. Many scholars, Han and non-Han, are now working on the long and laborious task of improving these and devising others. At the Central Institute of Minorities in Peking, Professor Fei Hsiao-t’ung explained how they set about this.

‘First of all, we solve the problem of the interpreter. We teach the selected language we are studying to a number of Han pupils; and we teach Han to a number of minority pupils. Then we put these Han and non-Han pupils together and send them into the field to collect facts. They study the spoken
language from many points of view, and eventually bring back their findings to philological and phonetical experts here. At the moment we are studying in this way seventeen minority languages which have as yet no script.

'Once we have mastered the elements of a language, we set about experimenting with a script for it. It is a long task, for there are no short cuts to a good script. Thus our present alphabet for the Yao language has as many as eighty letters. No doubt far too many — but the Yao language has eight tenses and is exceedingly complex. We are much further with the Chuang language, and for this we hope to have a good script for general publication shortly, and we are already training Chuang teachers in its use. Where minorities have their own scripts, we are helping to modernize and simplify. That is especially true of Uighur and Mongolian.

'In all this, we are building a sort of railway from illiteracy to university. Because our peoples are so varied in their stages of development, there have to be many stations on this railway, and the trains have to go at different speeds — sometimes fast and sometimes slow. And you get on to our train at the station that suits you, and off again when you've had enough.'

Professor Fei chuckled, pleased with his analogy: 'Yes, and we're also producing the machine tools of education. The rolling stock. For instance, we are training the people who are to train others. Very shortly we shall be sending a whole department of these training "machine tools" into Tibet. They will lay the foundations of secondary education there.'

VI

In its turn, too, this drive to bring the backward peoples of China into a condition of genuine equality with the Han majority must be seen against a wider background. The China of a dozen years ago could have done little or nothing for its minority peoples: it could do little enough for the majority. Yet by 1956 the Chinese had moved far towards an entire renovation of the
core and fabric of their national life. They had gathered a harvest of new experience in government: they had acquired new resources. They were still poor; but they were much less poor than a dozen years before.

In the absolutely vital field of agriculture they had shifted from an individual peasant economy, primitive in its technique, barely capable of growth, to a co-operative economy that contained within itself the basis for advanced technique and rapid growth. New towns and new industries were springing up. One of twenty-four very large scale industrial projects that were near completion in 1956, the Number One Automobile Plant at Changchung, had turned out its first lorries, and would produce by the end of the year as many as 30,000 of them. Other new plants were making generators, precision cutting tools, measuring instruments, ball bearings: the sinews of an industrial China. And in all this, too, the minority peoples had begun to have their part.

Looking for the picturesque but finding ball bearings instead, a nostalgic western traveller has complained of what he calls this 'all-eclipsing ideal of the raised standard of living'. One can see what he means: to that ideal the old ways fall victim, the quaint and the curious among them, and the meditative beauties of the mind tend to get lost in the bowl of a cement mixer. More food, more machines, more know-how: these are the songs of China now. Severe and unromantic songs maybe: yet the people who are singing them might possibly reply in words that Bernard Shaw used of England seventy years ago.

'What we want is not music for the people, but bread for the people, rest for the people, immunity from robbery and scorn for the people, hope for them, enjoyment, equal respect and consideration, life and aspiration, instead of drudgery and despair. When we get that I imagine the people will make tolerable music for themselves, even if all Beethoven's scores perish in the interim.'

Let me add that Beethoven’s scores, far from perishing in China, are penetrating into places never seen before: in Urumchi, let alone Peking, they already had the beginnings of a symphony orchestra when I was there.

What the Chinese have achieved in all these things, through a process of change that will be monumental in history, they have evidently not achieved without blood and sweat and sacrifice. And what may well astonish the stranger — especially a stranger from Europe, so accurately schooled in the possibilities of mass suffering — is that the achievement has gone hand in hand with such a measure of agreement. For the Chinese now achieve this basis for a larger and better life not with diminishing popularity and thus with terror and coercion, but with increasing popularity and even with enthusiasm. No doubt one cannot guarantee the ultimate result, for man is an unreliable animal at the best of times; yet it stays to be recorded that with every solid advance towards a new society the Chinese revolutionaries, so far, have reduced the disabilities under which their opponents (or former opponents) suffer.

They have carried with them millions of businessmen and managers and shopkeepers and small craftsmen in a drive to transform and tremendously expand their industry and commerce. They have drawn into action a large number of non-Communist and even anti-Communist intellectuals. They have placated the minority peoples, calmed their outraged hatred of everything Chinese, shown them new paths of development. Above all they have liberated in millions of ordinary people the springs of energy and talent that were bound or useless in the old China. Tadji, Maiti, Habibullah, Spring Wisdom, Dr Aysa’s students — a few of them have passed through the pages of this book: these and their myriad companions — who have understood the times they are living in, who have seen where they stand in the eye of history, who have decided where they want to go — are the people who guarantee, in the end, the profoundly fecund nature of China’s social changes, and make these changes truly irreversible.
Can the Chinese, even so, evolve a genuine freedom? Can they master the bureaucracy of revolution? The years 1956–7 saw new and serious answers. 'Let many flowers bloom together: let diverse schools of thought contend' — such statements of evolving democracy were the beginning of a move towards an undermining of bureaucratic and authoritarian citadels of power, towards a massive airing of grievances and an admission of sins, towards a systematic growth of democratic control, that promised much for the future. What China's leaders seemed attempting, in this 'campaign of rectification', was nothing less than to bridge the gap between the harsh necessities of violent change in a much impoverished and backward country, and the humanist traditions both of socialism and of Chinese civilization.

Meanwhile their achievements are enormous. Yet to those who would still — in good faith — doubt this, they return a modest answer. Look at China now, this answer says: you knew that China must change or die, you writers and your travellers and your experts have said for years that only radical and reasonable change could give new life to China. You welcomed the Kuomintang when it seemed to stand for revolution; but the Kuomintang failed. It is we who have carried through this necessary revolution. It is we who renew and restore the civilization and the greatness of humanity in China. But if, for all that, you should reject China as she is today — then surely you would risk the futility of the good Lord Sheh?

For it is told in that ancient Chinese fable how this generous and well-meaning nobleman fell in love with the idea of dragons. He adorned his palace with drawings of dragons, and carvings of dragons, and the porcelain effigies of dragons. He spoke continually of the importance of dragons.

But when a real dragon heard of all this love and came to ask for bed and board, the good Lord Sheh was terribly upset and slammed the door and called for spears, and swore it was not this kind of dragon that he loved. . . .
LEAVING HAMI

OLD BOGDO would not clear his summit for our going from Urumchi; but the weather in the valleys brightened after days of heavy rain, and the aeroplane for Lanchow was allowed to proceed. We made our farewells to the excellent Mr Hung, to Saidi Ibrahim, to Abdel Kader and other friends; and were sad in our departure.

As we flew along the northern flank of the Tien Shan — above the old caravan town of Kuchengtse and on to Barkul — there was a last glimpse of storm-racked mountains reaching far back along the skyline; and I thought again how China was not at all the flat yellow map of one’s childhood but a whole continent of rolling plains and deserts and vast inexorable mountains. Here within a few hundred miles there were enough nameless peaks to keep the climbers busy for a lifetime.

Before Barkul we flew south across the ice ridge and came bumping over the Turfan depression as it climbs slowly up to Hami. Then the kariz of Hami pricked their way across the stones beneath; and we swung down to land.

In Hami there was no lack of dragons. Through this bazaar of dust and small change on the desert frontiers of Sinkiang and Kansu the revolution had passed with careful all-compelling hand. The trading quarter was a-flutter with the red silk banners of co-operative enterprise; and among these were many boards whose blue lettering showed that their owners had gone into partnership with the State.

It is after all the thoroughness that continually impresses. One could expect that here and there in this remote land the old ways would persist or resist: that here in Hami, with its tradition of rebellion and its tricky cosmopolitan population
and its border sensitivity and its sheer isolation, the revolution might have paused or pushed round, and left Hami to a later time.

But in July 1956, said Achmetjan the ex-cobbler who is vice-chairman of the local government, nine Hami peasants out of ten were in farming co-operatives: they had tripled the quantity of irrigated land since 1949.

Now they were waiting for the tractors; and the railway.

Before 1949 they had had no qualified doctors: now they had three or four, and half a dozen assistants. He took me to the new hospital and an English-speaking Han doctor who was in charge of it said they had four qualified doctors and four assistants.

Further down that dusty street we found a schoolmaster saying farewell to his pupils for the day. Seven years ago, said this schoolmaster, they had had no more than 1,000 primary schoolchildren in Hami: now they had 5,000. Now they were teaching in Uighur as well as in Han.

We lingered with these people, for they were the last we should see of Sinkiang. Tse bought Turfan raisins for his colleagues at the Foreign Ministry. I talked of cotton prices with a shopkeeper lately gone into partnership with the State; and strolled, after dark, through lamplit streets and stared into little booths where oil lamps guttered, smelt again the bitter night-time scent of the dust in the road and floated sleepily upon a tide of memories. I wondered if I should ever see this country again. To it the old travellers had always returned, persevering through all discouragement, time after time; and it was not difficult to see why. This savage empty country has a strangely tender embrace.

In the morning we drove to the airport through a clear and limpid dawn. Above us the snows of the Karliq Tagh sparkled in a blue mist. Hami was a long low line of poplars on the flat horizon.

Out of the desert came the earliest lorries of the day. Foul with travel, they had driven the last marches of the Gobi during
the night hours; and now their drivers would eat and sleep before pushing toward Turfan when the sun was low again.

The old caravans had vanished, and the lorries had taken over. But soon the lorries would also vanish; for somewhere beyond the desert skyline to the south, sweating in sand and rock, the railway engineers were eating up those evil miles.

The gates of Sinkiang were creaking wide on their hinges of sand and sun as we took our leave that day; and flew, sadly enough, into the desert cloud.


**APPENDIX**

**SINKIANG POPULATION FIGURES**

*According to the Census of 1954*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Population</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Uighur</td>
<td>3,737,003</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Han (Chinese)</td>
<td>550,904</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kazakh</td>
<td>510,552</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hui (Tungan)</td>
<td>144,841</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kirghiz</td>
<td>70,779</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mongol</td>
<td>59,920</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Russian</td>
<td>19,066</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sipo</td>
<td>13,152</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tadjik</td>
<td>15,089</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uzbek</td>
<td>12,968</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tatar</td>
<td>6,463</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dahur</td>
<td>2,035</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Man</td>
<td>1,138</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others</td>
<td>790</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>5,144,700</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Of these, approximately*

- Agricultural: 3,500,000
- Stockbreeding: 380,000
- Stockbreeding and some agriculture: 180,000
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   Minority population figures are drawn from Census of 1954: they show a total of about 35,000,000 non-Han or about 6 per cent of total population.
28 See also Fu Mao-chi in *People's China*, No. 3 of 1957
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INDEX

ABULKHAIR TÜRE, 125
Afforestation, 53, 236
Agriculture:
  approximate numbers employed in, 248
  co-operatives, in Hopei, 43-9;
in Turfan, 81, 164, 168; in Yarkand, 169 ff.
  land-holding system, 157
  land reform, 157 ff.
Akmedjan Kasim, 127, 130, 132-3
Ali Khan Türe, 125
Alley, Rewi, 11, 52, 54, 58, 109, 137, 202
Ambolt, N., 108, 249
Autonomy, local, 230 ff.
Balkh, 85
Battutah, Ibn, 21, 251
Bezeklik, 48, 81 ff.
Bogdo Ola, 62, 71, 245
Brecht, Bertolt, 141, 161
Burhan, 133
Byron, Robert, 145, 249
Caravans:
  across Gobi now, 14, 60
early links by, 86
Census of Sinkiang, 248, 251
Chakar, 93, 154, 162
Chang Ch’ien, 85
Chang Chih-Chung, General, 127
Chen Han-seng, 11, 52
Chen Tao-shin, 108
Chin Shu-jen, 107 ff.

China Reconstructs, 251
Chu Shao-ling, General, 118
Co-operatives:
  agricultural, 43-9, 81, 164-8, 169 ff.
  artisan, 182 ff.
  among Kazakhs, 207, 214 ff.
  among Kirghiz, 189
Creel, H. G., 79, 249
Dandan Uiliq, 93, 149, 158
Economy, planning of, 230 ff.
Education, development of, 74, 114, 237
Fa-Hsien, 60, 89
Federalism, 230, 238 ff.
Fei Hsiao-t’ung, 11, 240
Gandhara, 87
Hami, 60, 95, 244
Han emigration, 234 ff.
Hedin, Sven, 18, 60, 113, 249
Herrmann, A., 18, 249
Hodja Niaz, 107, 110-11
Home Rule, discussion of, 225 ff.
Hou Han-shu, 86, 237
Hsuan Tsang, 89
Hudson, G. F., 249
Ili, 200 ff.
Ili-Kazakh autonomous region
  and government, 225 ff., 231
Industrial development, 232 ff., 237
Irrigated area, see Irrigation

Irrigation:
ancient extension of, 249 ff.
at Turfan, 101
present extension of, 157, 236–7.
new canals, etc., 237

Karadong, 150
Kariz, 62, 162, 237
Karlik Tagh, 61, 246
Kashgar, 140 ff.

Kazakhs:
autonomy of, etc., 225 ff.
co-operatives, 73, 207
numbers, 248
Khan Tengri, 113, 123, 209
Kharakhoja, 48, 81, 94
Kharoshthi, 88
Khotan, 75, 87, 93, 109, 112, 151

Kirghiz:
at Boston Terek, 187
autonomous region, 185 ff.
numbers, 248
Kizil, rock temples at, 89
Kushan influence, 87–8, 149

Lanchow, 54–6, 239
Land reform, 154–6, 170 ff.
Landlords, expropriation of, 158

Lattimore, Owen, 63–4, 115, 249
Le Coq, A. Von, 63, 89, 91, 93, 96–7, 149, 249
Lin Tse-hsu, 75
Literacy, adult school of, 190 ff.
Livestock, at Balak-Su, 112, 214
general, 233
Local government, 101
Lop, 95
Lop Nor, 85

Lo pliks, 234
Lou-lan, 59

Ma Chung-yin, 108 ff., 111
Ma Hai-teh, 11, 202 ff., 246
Ma Ho-san, 109, 112, 171
Ma Pu-fang, 54
Mao Tse-min, 108, 117
Mao Tse-tung, 108, 117, 156, 176, 197, 202, 249, 251
Masud Sabri, 130

Mavat, 153, 155, 162
Minority areas, 230, 238
institutes, 239, 240
populations, 238, 248, 251
publishing house, 228
problems, 238
Mirab, 101, 128
Morrison, Ian, 134–5
Mosques, 21, 145–6
Murtuk, 93

National Minorities, Commission for, 230
Nationalities, policy, etc., 225 ff.
Needham, J., 137, 249
Niya, 149 ff.

Pan-Turians, 110
Plan, autonomous economic, 231
Populations, 238, 248, 251
Qomul, see Hami
Qumarata, 89

Revenue, Sinkiang, former origins of, 103
present origins of, 232
Revolt of Three Regions, 120 ff.
Roads, development of, 148
Rock temples:
Bezeklik, 81 ff., 91 ff.
Kizil (Kucha), 89
INDEX

Sa Kung-liao, 228
Sabit Da Mullah, 110-11
Sheng Shih-tsai, 112 ff., 138
Shipton, Eric, 250, 251
Silkweaving, 182-4
Simgin gorge, 83
Sinkiang Institute, 67 ff., 237
Soviet Union:
  medical aid, 138
  policy towards Sinkiang, 115-16, 226
Stein, Sir Aurel, 18, 27, 58-9, 88, 93, 149 ff., 250
T'ao Shih-yueh, General, 131, 133
Tarn, W. W., 83, 250
Taxation, 172, 188, 214, 231-3
Teichman, Sir Eric, 59, 65, 114, 250
Thomson Glover, Col. J., 111, 251
Tihwa, see Urumchi
Tochari, 88
Torgot Mongols, 218
Tsaidam, 53, 56
Turfan, 79 ff.
  local government at, 101
Uighurs:
  autonomy, 230-1
  early feudalism, 92
  industrial development, 237
  irrigated areas, 157, 236
  land reform, 154, 156, 170 ff.
  numbers, 248
  origins of, 88-9
Urumchi, 63 ff.
Uzman, 130, 134-7
Water rights: see Irrigation and Mavat
Wheeler, Sir Mortimer, 26
Wu Ai-chen, 105-7, 249
Yakub Beg, 18, 96, 110-11
Yang Tseng-hsin, 97, 103 ff.
Yarkand:
  agricultural co-operatives at, 169 ff.
  artisan co-operative at, 182 ff.
  impressions of, 181
Yolbaz Khan, 107, 118, 130-1, 133 ff.
Younghusband, Sir F., 13, 17, 250
Yumen, 56, 58