

KHARAKOTO AND OTHER DETOURS OF THE SILK ROAD

Original idea

Any original exploratory trip starts with an original idea. In this case the idea came in stages. I first came across a place called 'Etzina' in *The Travels of Marco Polo*, 13th century. Location vague. A while later in Peter Hopkirk's *Foreign Devils on the Silk Road* I read it was also known as Kharakoto. Hopkirk's 'devils' were western archeologist-explorers, not averse of carting cultural relics to Europe, Russia or America. In the early 1900's one of them reported Kharakoto's city walls still stood impressively tall. Hopkirk also provided its approximate location.

On a Chinese roadmap I found 'Ejina Qi'. Had to be it. It was 400 kilometers north of the Silk Road town of Jiuquan in the desert of Inner Mongolia.

It came up in an email exchange with a co-traveller on a previous trip, also forever drawn to unknown untouched places. Coincidentally she too had read Hopkirk and knew about Kharakoto. What would be left of its ruins? Still those walls? Or just a few stones sticking out of the sand? We decided to go and find out.

We next discovered that the access road to Ejina Qi from Jiuquan was closed for foreigners, as halfway is the launch site of China's manned spacecraft, in a military region.

Getting to Kharakoto was going to be a challenge.

Exploratory trip

We started out from Yinchuan, just across the border of Inner Mongolia in Ningxia. It has the nearest airport to Bayan Hot, the capital of Alashan Prefecture of which Ejina Qi is a part. One morning in Bayan Hot we went to the police station to apply for a travel permit. We were there just before opening hours and the morning ritual surprised us. Hundreds of police lined up in the inner courtyard, surrounded by grand buildings. Solemn music started, heroic and melancholy, and with a Russian touch to it. It was moving and at the same time almost made me laugh.



the police station

Approaching Ejina Qi from Bayan Hot means avoiding the 'East Wind' launch site. So our permit for Ejina Qi was issued without a hitch.

And we were even allowed to continue from Ejina Qi directly to Jiuquan, passing the site, and saving us a 600 kilometer detour. Well, almost allowed. A superior arrived when we were about to leave and hastily withdrew this permission.



All morning it seemed it was going to be a boring 650 kilometer desert ride from Bayan Hot. Deserts can be beautiful. But this one wasn't. Then the second half got better. Near Ejina Qi suddenly the color green existed again.

We checked in in a hotel at the central crossroads of the town. Well, almost. When forms were filled, rooms inspected and roomcharge paid the receptionist changed her mind and made it known her hotel was not allowed to accept foreigners. She didn't give in, I didn't give in. A Chinese guest also at the desk got involved, waved with his identity card, the receptionist jotted some details down and the issue disappeared as sudden as it had materialized.

At dusk forty fifty people gathered at the central crossroads, at dawn two hundred. Day labourers looking for a job. Construction work, harvesting melons. Seemed there was plenty to do for everyone. One told me he made 200 yuan a day, sometimes even more. That is a lot of money out there.

He was from the central province of Hunan. The opposite dynamics surprised me. Usually those from the less developed poorer west of China head east to make a living.

Kharakoto literally is 'Black City' and that is also how the Chinese literally call it: 'Hei Cheng'. We took a taxi out into the desert. Excitement rose. What would be left standing? We saw a few minor ruins, spread out. Then in the distance from the desert rose the city walls.

We walked in through one of the original gates. The earthen walls, sand dunes swept up against them, were eroded by time but still stood tall and formed a perfect square enclosure. Only a few small structures remained inside. Pottery shards were everywhere. We strolled across, through the opposite gate, back again, to a side gate, to the stupa's on one of the corner, up the wall. There was no one else around. To have such a place all to oneself: amazing.



Another visit to a police station. Asking again if we could travel directly to Jiuquan, using the road past the ‘East Wind’ site. Six seven nervous officers came to see us. There was no way. The site was in a military region, police had zero authority there. They would likely get in trouble if they told us we could go.



133 km to the ‘East Wind’ Launch Site

My map showed roads leading south, west, north and east from Ejina Qi. South was the ‘East Wind’ base. East was another military region, no foreigners allowed. North led to the Mongolian border: closed for foreigners. So we returned by bus the way we came, until after 450 kilometers we got to the junction town of Nuo’ergong. We sat and wait, a bus to Alashan Youqi was supposed to pass by that day still. And it did. From Alashan Youqi it was easy to get to Zhangye in Gansu province.



We continued along the main branch of the Silk Road in Gansu, and visited some of its sites. The Mogao Grottoes near Dunhuang were special; Jiayuguan, supposed end of the Great Wall, was a tourist trap.

Exploratory detours led us to Guazhou, the Yulin Grottoes and the archeological site of Suoyang. Then we left the Silk Road and crossed the Qilian Mountains to Xining.