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Oasis dans la mondialisation : ruptures et continuités

*Oases in the globalization:
ruptures and continuities*



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The Central Asian oases - from trading towns to centres of modernisation

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Les oasis d'Asie central ont connu de vrais changements liés à des paramètres historiques et aux transformations récentes dans les sociétés associées. L'Asie centrale chinoise a, elle, connu des changements très rapides. L'oasis de Kashgar est utilisée ici comme exemple pour démontrer les processus de modernisation vers des standards chinois, qui ont mené à l'établissement d'une Zone économique Spéciale.

Keywords: Kashgar, Xinjiang, special economic zone, transformation, silk road

Mots-clés : Kashgar, Xinjiang, zone économique spéciale, transformation, route de la soie

Introduction

The fertile oases along the Southern Silk Route have experienced tremendous changes over time. In earlier times they were strongholds of local and regional rulers somehow loosely integrated into the Chinese Empire or affiliated to it. During the Great Game some received special attention and became focal points of imperial desires. The Kashgar oasis performs as one important case in point. After the Chinese Revolution a process commenced that is lasting until today. The oases towns became centres of agricultural modernisation and administrative headquarters of socio-economic reforms and ideological leadership. The process of modernisation has led to a concentration of power and created a centre of growth. Chinese modernisation takes place in urban centres, in this specific case in oases at the fringe of the Takla Makan Shamo⁶⁸. The process of Chinese modernisation will be illustrated from a peripheral viewpoint in space and over time. The transformation from the fortified centre of short-lived Kashgaria to the present-day special economic zone as part of the trans-Karakoram Gwadar-Kashgar corridor will be presented with its effects on the urban population as well as on the mountain communities in its vicinity. The Central Asian oases are undergoing path-dependent changes that are embedded in the specific constellations of the concerned nation states and are functioning as places that participate in trans-boundary exchange along inherited trade routes.

Central Asian oases in history

The Tarim Basin is bordered by flat corridors that utilise the semi-fertile spaces between desert and mountains. The circum-Takla Makan routes were described as the Northern and Southern Silk Routes. Along these routes we find oasis settlements that reached prominent

⁶⁸ See Cao Fangjun (2009) and Huaiyin Li (2010) for aspects of the Chinese debate on modernisation; Kreutzmann (2012a) for a general review of the Chinese modernisation process; Bovingdon (2010), Kreutzmann (2013a), Millward (2007) for the background on historical transformations and the process of transformation in Xinjiang.

places in history. Alteshahr - the six oasis towns - are a prominent example of this⁶⁹. In historical times these towns epitomised the concentrated agro-urban settlements that grossly distinguished themselves from the wide desert and steppe regions supposedly controlled by nomads. The dichotomy between urban dwellers and agriculturists on the one hand and the pastoral nomads and traders on the other reflects a perception of the Central Asian oases that has been accepted as the structural properties of the interface between the population centres of China in the east and Europe and the Levant in the west. Spatial connections of punctual urban centres were spanned by mobile pastoralists who thus contributed to a network of exchange.

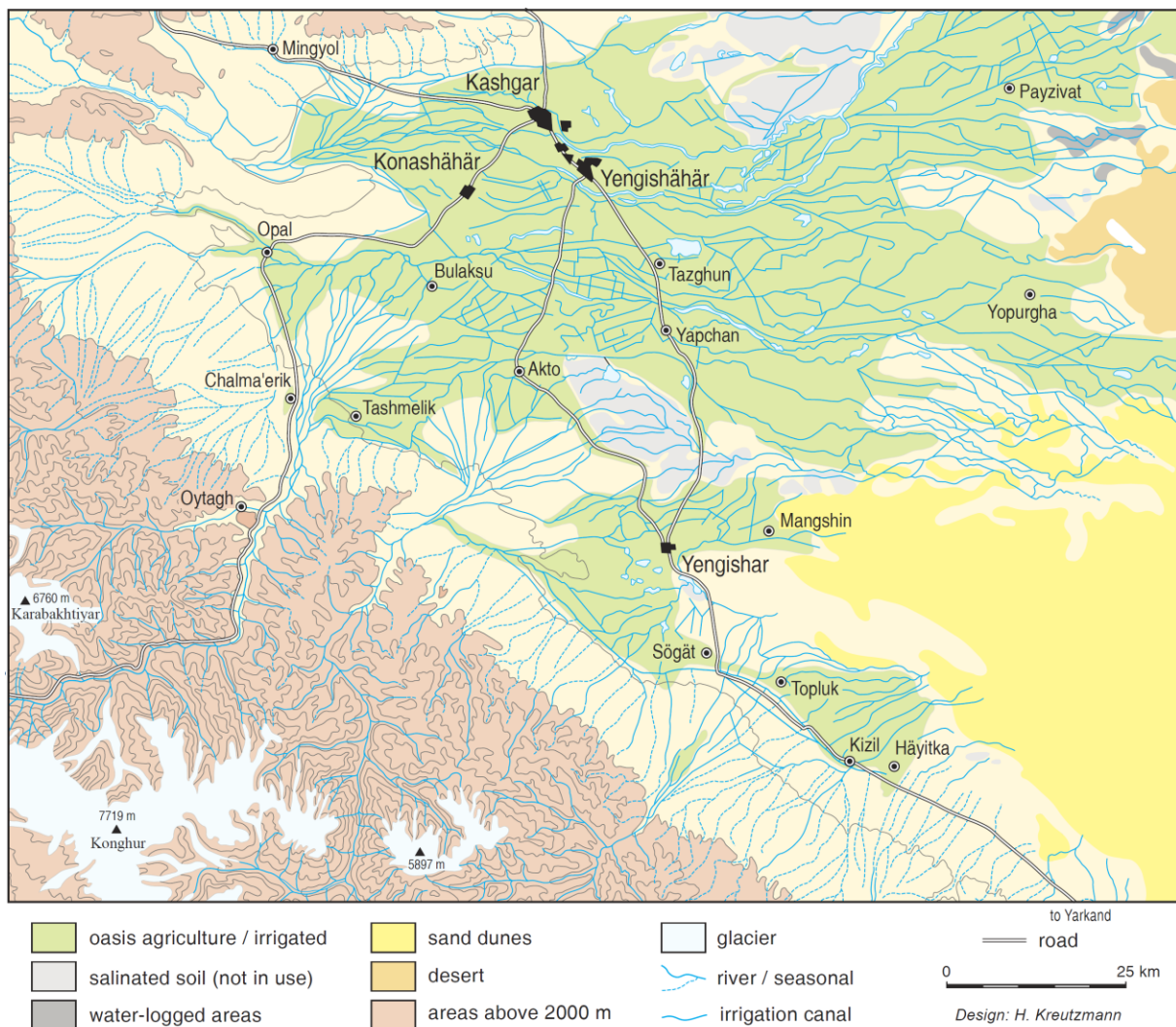


Figure 1: Kashgar oasis

Source: Adapted from Kreutzmann, H. 2007, p. 374

The Kashgar oasis - compact town/city and spread-out rural area at the same time - has been the central market place of an extensively irrigated plain bordering with desert and steppe regions (Figure 1). Seasonally huge quantities of meltwaters are supplied from the high mountain glaciers of the Western Kun Lun Shan which originate from Konghur (7,719m) and

⁶⁹ See Rudelson (1997).

Muztagh Ata (7,454m) massifs and provide the required quantities for irrigation of the cotton, fruit and grain crops in the oasis at an altitude of app. 1200m. The environmental setting - a steppe location at the foot of the high mountain ranges and at the edge of the extensive desert of the Takla Makan Shamo - accounts for its ecological prominence based upon a significant water supply. The compact oasis is only conceivable in relation to its wide-spanning spatial counterpart of surrounding desert. Both depend on each other and are part of exchange networks that found their focal point in the weekly markets. Up to the Chinese Revolution Kashgar featured a Thursday market where oasis dwellers were offering their agricultural products and other commodities derived from a wide-ranging trade network.⁷⁰ For pastoralists these markets were the meeting point where livestock could be bartered and sold. In exchange necessary nutritional and household goods were purchased that were distributed among the pastoral households in a widespread vicinity of the oasis town. After the Chinese Revolution these weekly markets were banned and only reintroduced within the reform framework of Deng Xiaoping. Kashgar opened a Sunday market in 1981 at the outskirts of the town which has developed to a major shopping area of the town for specific food items and livestock⁷¹.

Central Asian oases in transformation

The somewhat romantic perception of irrigated compact oasis and arid extensive steppe experienced a significant transformation when space was ordered by boundaries. Various khanates took over oases towns, maintained control and lost it again. State-building experiments such as Yakub Beg's short-lived establishment of Kashgaria were of limited duration (Figure 2). During the 'Great Game' in the late 19th century when boundary-makers were at work and constructed territorial spaces that belonged to competing opponents⁷².

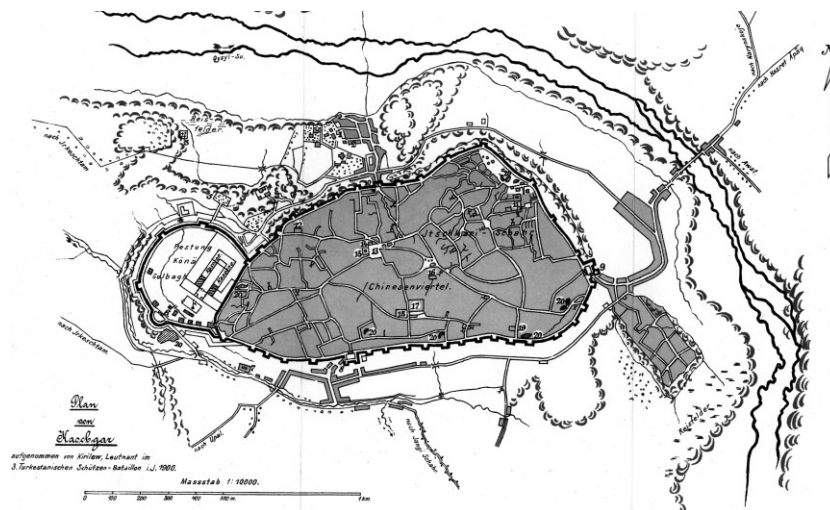


Figure 2: Fortified Kashgar around 1900
with city wall according to a plan drawn by Lieutenant Kirilov in 1900
Source: Hartmann (1908)

⁷⁰ Hedin (1899, I: 271); Schultz (1921: 44-48).

⁷¹ Kreutzmann (2012b: 118).

⁷² See Kreutzmann (2013b).

The network character suffered in relation to a cross-border perspective latest in the 1930s when boundaries between Afghanistan, British India, China and the Soviet Union were hermetically sealed. A more aggravating transformation took place within the controlling states. Collectivisation in the Soviet Union commenced in great style in Central Asia in the late 1930s and in Chinese Central Asia in the 1950s⁷³. Collectivisation of agro-pastoral production detrimentally affected the exchange systems; weekly markets in the urban oases were banned and replaced by a state-controlled supply system. The oasis towns became seats of higher-level administration and control agencies. Most of them were part of so-called autonomous prefectures, regions and/or republics without any autonomy. Maoist and Stalinist modernisation took place in urban settings as they were selected as growth poles from where spin-off effects would reach the periphery. A developmentalist inspired hierarchy preferred urban settlements where 'modern' amenities were available. Although the social organisation in the rural areas was significantly transformed by introducing collective farms and people's communes, the gap between urban and rural communities widened. Autonomy and nationality policies were applied for whole spatial entities, their effects changed urban lifestyles in the oases more significantly than the production patterns of mountain farmers and pastoralists. Consequently, the oases functioned as prime foci of development. Economic activities received a significant momentum in the wake of the 'four modernisations' when private entrepreneurship could thrive in the markets and towns.

Central Asian oases - linkages and networks

Economic reforms in China and the dissolution of the Soviet Union leading to independent Central Asian republics provided a new boost to oases development in Central Asia. The westernmost Chinese trading oases have become entrepôts and border towns for the cross-border trade with the former Soviet republics and now independent Central Asian states. In addition the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) has highlighted the importance of the interface between China and Russia since its inception in 2001. The establishment of Kashgar as China's latest Special Economic Zone (SEZ) in 2010 is an example of the changing importance of this interface in global contexts (Figure 3).

The urban oases perform as centres of modernisation according to Chinese regional planning⁷⁴. The reinvention of an oriental city is reflected in modern architecture, layout plans for new urban quarters and public spaces. At the same time an accelerated process of modernising the oases affected commercial centres and living quarters alike. The demolishing of the old city that had begun in the 1990s with the rebuilding of the commercial centres continued to the dismantling of the living quarters in the mud-brick housing quarters. In a short span of time the 'traditional' house was replaced by 'modern' apartment buildings.

⁷³ See McMillen (1979).

⁷⁴ See for details An Sha-Zhou et al. (2011).



Figure 3: Kashgar as latest member of China's Special Economic Zones
Source: Design Hermann Kreutzmann 2013

Kashgar is a prominent case in point that has got more attention than others. Thus, the oasis towns have found an exceptional position within the context of modernisation. What happened to the pastoral hinterland? Since the beginning of the 21st century the resettlement programme within the 'Great Development of the West' campaign (*xibu da kaifa*) is the expression of linking both entities the compact and the scattered or the urban and the rural. Resettlement leads to bringing modernisation to the periphery and is at the same time fostering rural-urban migration.⁷⁵ The implementation of a full-flung special economic zone is only at its beginning, the pace is significant; thus, the transformation process might even speed up further. The vision is to transform this urban oasis into a prosperous international trading centre where welfare for the majority population and accessible modern lifestyle will suppress and/or replace popular unrest and expressions of ethnicity that have frequently led to severe confrontation. Whether this experiment will bear fruits needs to be awaited.

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⁷⁵ See Kreutzmann (2012b, 213a).

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