

Chapter Nine: Deserts in Xinjiang

China is about the size of the lower 48 US states. It also contains something over one sixth of the world's population, or 1.3 billion out of 6 billion. Since the entire population of all 50 US states is some 250 million, one might think that China must be bursting at the seams with people. The Chinese government thinks that and, fearful that the country cannot feed such a huge number of people, has imposed a one child per family policy since the late 1970s. That policy has been modified somewhat (ethnic minorities were always allowed to have two children, and now many rural families are being allowed the same privilege), but the idea of severely limiting population growth is still in place and still enforced. Well, more or less; some families have more than one child and just pay the required fine, and other families, particularly the rural population that have migrated to the cities, seem to do what they like because they don't officially exist. The unfortunate few who get caught, or whom the authorities decide to make an example of, suffer forced abortions, imprisonment, and beatings.

For my part I don't know what all the fuss is about. I have traveled about the world a bit, but China seems to have as much empty space as anywhere and a good deal more than most parts of Europe (Belgium is more densely populated than China, so I'm told). The fertile areas of the Eastern provinces are, to be sure, heavily populated.

But not so long ago, while traveling from Beijing to Nanjing by train, I was struck by how much emptier the Eastern countryside was...



...though no less cultivated...



...than most of rural England.



Moreover the greatest part of China's territory is mountains or desert where few people can currently live. (Britain, by the way, could be fitted several times into New York State yet it houses and feeds some 60 million people—one fifth of the entire US population).



So where are all these 1.3 billion people? Well, one begins to get a sense of them in Beijing from time to time, when sitting in rush hour traffic jams, for instance...



...or when trying to wend one's way through the flocks of bicycles...



...or when shopping in the antique market.



But most of Beijing is not crowded, not even Tiananmen Square...



...or the Forbidden City, where all the tourists go.



and wandering through the city parks affords many solitary delights.



Other big Chinese cities are similar. Shanghai has huge areas empty of people, both in the old section and in the newly built-up area across the river. Hong Kong is bursting with uninhabited forests, and hills, and sandy beaches, and on the island too, not just in Kowloon.



Moreover, China is finding no problem feeding itself these days despite having a larger population that it has ever had before.

There used to be periodic famines in imperial times, and there were famines under Mao too (though he was himself mainly responsible for them by his crazy policies). But China is now awash with food.



The main differences are no doubt trade (which easily makes up for periodic shortfalls at home by imports from abroad), superior farming techniques, and the abandonment of a command economy by the government. If things stay as they are now, and even if the population doubles in the meantime, China need never suffer a famine again.



So all I can conclude is that there is no population problem in China at all. And if there isn't one in Belgium either (which is more crowded) then there is no population problem anywhere in the world.

All this is by way of preface to my main topic, which is the vast emptiness of Western China.



I have been in the two westernmost provinces of China, Tibet and Xinjiang, which border on India, Nepal, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Tajikistan, and several other -stans of resurgent Central Asia. I was on a tour visiting important historical sites associated with the Old Silk Road which involved a lot of moving around by bus and train. The impression that most stands out in my mind as a result is just how little habitation there is out there.



We traveled on several different days through miles and miles and miles of nothing. Trackless wastes of grey earth, black gravel, sand, and desperate tufts of grass stretched out in all directions, disappearing either into simmering haze, or deceptively attractive mirages, or the burning barrenness of far away hills.



If one forgot the fact that one was traveling on a well-metalled road and that there was a well-used railway line keeping one company at no great distance away, one might think one was lost on the moon.



Every so often the inhospitable emptiness would give way to a sudden burst of green. Trees, cultivated fields, streams, and houses would appear as if by magic out of nowhere.



Many of these oases were, I discovered, entirely man-made. Human labor and ingenuity had managed to direct regular supplies of water from distant snow-capped mountains through channels that snaked miles underground and that gave access, at periodic intervals, through specially cut shafts to thirsting life above.



The transformation was altogether remarkable and paid glowing tribute to that natural resource which the population doomsayers forget or deny, namely the human mind. If you want to traverse the driest deserts, scale the highest mountains, sail the most raging seas, peer into the most distant galaxies, or even just feed the teeming masses, find a human mind and your work is more than half done.



For instance part of the desert through which we traveled was dense with sophisticated high-tech windmills taking advantage of the unceasing winds to generate electricity for distant cities.

Other parts were being drilled for oil and natural gas. Oil, of course, has existed in the earth for millennia and yet only in the past century or so has it become a resource. Before then it was unknown or, if accidentally discovered, regarded as a dark, gooey nuisance. Electricity too has always existed and yet again it only became a resource in the last hundred years. The power of wind has, by contrast, long been used for human goals, from windmills to sailing ships. But only recently have high-tech windmills come into operation, and for generating electricity too.

What made these things into resources when for so many millennia they had no value at all? Human ingenuity and only human ingenuity. I dare say there are untold resources available still on the earth, and even more so on the moon and the planets, that are just waiting for their usefulness to be discovered and used. Take the sun, for instance.



If there is one thing that deserts have in abundance it is the heat and light of the sun. We regard this, of course, as the problem with deserts and what we would like to get rid of. But in fact it is a wonderful resource—a renewable and clean resource—

just waiting to be exploited. Unfortunately we don't have the technology to harness and use it fully or well. We are waiting for some human mind to come up with that technology for us.



Perhaps
that mind already
exists. Perhaps it
is now diverting
its leisure hours in
a jazz band...



...or it's still in
school...



...or it is only a twinkle in its father's eye.

Perhaps, indeed, it's on holiday somewhere having fun.



But if the population doomsayers have their way, including the doomsayers in Beijing, that mind may never get out of the womb alive or may never be conceived in the first place.

But enough. Let me conclude that China, along with many another under-developed country, is a miracle waiting to happen. The world is good, very good, as Holy Writ says, and it is more than sufficient to house, feed, and clothe 6 billion billions of people let alone 6 billion—provided we keep on treasuring, and keep on using, that infinitely resourceful resource that is the human mind. Moreover there are planets and worlds galore out there waiting to be modified into other earths.



We often ask ourselves if there is intelligent life on other planets. In my opinion the question is misdirected. Probably there is not such life, but there jolly well should be and it's up to us to put it there. The Chinese are already eyeing the moon as a resource for mining minerals. They are exactly right. Let's put intelligent life permanently on the moon first and then expand to other places. On this point at least Mao was right and his successors, who introduced the one-child policy, wrong. China needs all the people it can get. And so do the rest of us.

But despite all the grandeur and history of these sites, what impressed me by far the most and what stays still embedded in my imagination is all those miles and miles of nothing. China sure is one huge, empty place.

