



# GEOLOGICAL SOCIETY OF HONG KONG NEWSLETTER

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The GSHK has just concluded an 18-day field excursion to South Xinjiang. Complementing our North Xinjiang series of four years ago, this latest piece by Miss Carina Khan, written based on her personal impressions, will now complete the picture of a fascinating and magical place – Xinjiang – which we have all fallen in love with.

Dr. Margie Chen

## South Xinjiang Impressions: 25 July - 11 August 2013 by Carina Khan

South Xinjiang has always been a region which has captivated my imagination - from the diversity of its landscape, the yesteryear history of the Old Silk Road, to the rich culture of the Uyghurs and other ethnic groups. Another reason for my fascination is of course the fact that I had such a fantastic and memorable experience with the 2009 GSHK trip to North Xinjiang that made me very much look forward to coming back to this region again. My opportunity came when the GSHK announced that we would be making an 18-day trip to South Xinjiang over 25 July - 11 August 2013.

Eighteen days seemed a long time, but taking into consideration the vastness of the region - and we covered some 5,500km - the trip actually went by in no time! As with every trip, everyone would have his or her own special moments to take home. For me, there were simply too many highlights - from snippets like seeing the soles of many of our hiking boots started to peel off (mine included) as a result of the intense heat of the desert, to experiencing winter like chilliness of a few degrees Celsius when we left Bayanbulak, on our way to Tian Shan.

It was a delightful experience to have visited the true heartlands of the South where the Hans were not the majority ethnic group. This diversity was refreshing to me - whether it was the Uyghurs' distinct facial features, their language or the way they dressed. And on reaching Tashkurgan in the

Pamir highlands, we met yet another ethnic group in that region - the Tajiks. I was particularly impressed with how they dressed and the headdresses they adorned - both men and women - so colourful, so pretty.

South Xinjiang is of course dominated by the massive Taklamakan Desert in the Tarim Basin. I had looked forward to crossing the desert via the 550km long Tarim Desert Highway for some time already. Would I encounter camels along the way, how does the sand remain off the highway and so forth were just some far-fetched questions on my mind. Surely, a highway through the world's second largest shifting sand desert has to be some engineering feat to say the least. Indeed, having seen how they had put in vegetation all along on both sides of the highway to anchor the sand with their roots, and the associated irrigation system to pump water to those plants, it was nothing short of being impressive.

Living up to expectations, Xinjiang is a land of extremes and it has so much to offer - fascinating, mesmerising and fun. And I haven't even mentioned the treasures we had unearthed along the way - some tangible but mostly unforgettable experiences.



### **Day 1: 25 July**

**HK 香港 - Beijing 北京 - Urumqi 烏魯木齊**

Strictly, I should have put in a Day 0, as we had already had a pre-trip gathering the weekend before, sharing information, collecting our super smart Team T-shirts and basically building up our high spirits for the trip. Day 1 was essentially a day of transit, flying from Hong Kong via Beijing, arriving into Urumqi just after midnight. It was all pretty smooth with no hiccups - so far so good.

### **Day 2: 26 July**

**Urumqi 烏魯木齊 - Korla 庫爾勒**

Our first stop was at the Xinjiang Geological and Minerals Museum, a museum we wanted to visit 4 years ago but were unable to do so as it was closed for renovation. The 4-year wait was worthwhile as the museum turned out to be a cove of treasures - precious exhibits from all across the province and beyond. We headed out of Urumqi after lunch, passing on our way, the world's second largest wind farm at Dabancheng (達坂城) before arriving into Korla. Our big loop around South Xinjiang officially started.

### **Day 3: 27 July**

**Korla 庫爾勒 - Gatehouse 鐵門關 - 羅布泊大裂谷  
Lop Nur Rift Valley - Lunnan 輪南**

Same as last time, we travelled by 4WD's - all seven of them, the best of the best Toyota Land Cruisers, as we knew we had challenging terrains ahead of us. Our team of 4WD's were indeed a pretty impressive sight wherever we went! Places we visited today included what used to be the Iron Gatehouse of the Old Silk Road in the morning and the Lop Nur Rift Valley in the afternoon. We then went onto Lunnan, just south of Luntai (輪台) for the evening, getting ourselves ready for our 2-day journey through the Taklamakan Desert along the renowned Desert Highway the following day.

### **Day 4: 28 July**

**Lunnan 輪南- Desert Highway 沙漠公路 - Tazhong 塔中**

The Desert Highway really was some engineering achievement built in the 1990's, connecting Luntai in the north all the way through to Minfeng (民豐) in the south, cutting through nearly 500km of moving sand desert. Soon after leaving Lunnan, we reached the Tarim River Euphrates Poplar Forest (塔里木河胡楊林). These desert beauties were truly fascinating, surviving the harshest of conditions in a desert. It was interesting to note that more than half of the world's remaining Euphrates Poplars were located in the Tarim Basin. Another highlight for the day was of course the opportunity to experience what it was like walking on sand dunes. We knew it was hot, but we had no idea what the intense heat of the desert's sand (some 60+ degrees Celsius no less) could do to our hiking boots! Soles started to peel off and quite a few of us had to buy new shoes. We were adequately forewarned that the accommodation at Tazhong would be rather basic but when we arrived, the hotel did not have enough rooms despite our advance booking made months ago. Still, we were all experienced travellers to expect the unexpected, so it was all very well taken. Some of us were lucky and had pleasant enough rooms (a relative term in any case), but a number of our male participants had to stay in more basic rooms with minimal facilities. We would like to thank our gentlemen, who kindly endured this hardship with no complaints.



**Day 5: 29 July**

**Tazhong 塔中 - Desert Highway 沙漠公路 -  
Minfeng 民豐**

Today was a relatively light day, as we continued the remainder of our desert journey, arriving into Minfeng not too late in the afternoon. On reaching Minfeng though, I couldn't help but noticed the change in mix in demographics. Everyone around us looked different - indeed, there were very few Han faces as we were greeted by the local Uyghurs, and it felt a little like we had travelled to a foreign land. Minfeng was also the place where some of us went out to observe the night skies after dinner. It was a crisp night with minimal light pollution, a perfect combination for the budding fans of astronomy amongst us. We managed to admire and identify many of our stars and even the Milky Way with our own naked eyes.



**Day 6: 30 July**

**Minfeng 民豐 - Hotan 和田**

Leaving Minfeng we headed towards Hotan on Highway G315. Hotan is of course famous the world over for its jade (和田玉) or nephrite as it is known in English, prices of which, for good quality pieces anyway, have gone up exponentially in recent years. Everyone was pretty excited when we reached Hotan's Jade River as we were eager to try our luck. Whether there were any prized pieces I wasn't sure, but we all had fun. It was not uncommon during our trip to have rather late lunches, first because our

itineraries were packed but also it was the fasting month for the Muslim Uyghurs, which at times meant it could be a little tricky finding restaurants which were open for business. Today turned out to be one of those days, but we were finally rewarded with a sumptuous meal of lamb pilaf, kebab and yogurt at a quaint Uyghur restaurant. The food was divine - I had never tasted anything so delicious!

**Day 7: 31 July**

**Hotan 和田 - Moyu 墨玉縣 - Mazartagh 麻紮塔格山  
- Hotan 和田**

Day 7 was unforgettable, not just because of the sights, but more because of a rather unexpected episode of several of our 4WD's not having enough fuel! How that could have happened was really quite unforgivable but essentially our head driver underestimated the distances involved to get to our intended destination of Mazartagh which was back in the desert. Not only that, the problem was our cars' petrol tanks were not fully filled when we set off and there were no re-fuelling stations on the way! Still, we managed to pull it off and arrived at and returned from our destination safely. An adventure we could have done away with but since this incident, the head driver made sure that this did not happen again.

**Day 8: 1 August**

**Hotan 和田 - Yingjisha 英吉沙 - Kashgar 喀什**

Day 8 was one of the longer days on the road, as we needed to transfer from Hotan to Kashgar. On our way, we passed by Yecheng (葉城), which happened to be the starting point of the Xinjiang-Xizang Highway (新藏公路 G219). We all took photographs of the big "0 km" overhead signboard. Had we went onto that road further, there could have been a chance of taking a glimpse of K2, but that was not on the plan this time. For a future GSHK trip perhaps. Before arriving into Kashgar, we stopped by Yingjisha, a town renowned for its hand-made knives.



**Day 9: 2 August**

**Kashgar 喀什- China-Pakistan Highway 中巴公路 - Aoketayi 奧克塔依- Stone Fort 石頭城 - Tashkurgan 塔什庫爾干**

I had looked forward to this day well before the trip, as we would be heading into the Pamir Highlands on the Karakoram Highway or the China-Pakistan Highway (G314) as it is otherwise known, which was one of the more scenic routes in the region. We passed by three peaks of the Kunlun Mountains which were more than 7,000m in altitude. They were Kongur Tagh 公格爾峰 (7,719m), Kongur Tiube 公格爾九別峰 (7,530m) and Muztagh Ata 慕士塔格峰 (7,546m). The snow capped peaks and the glaciers were breath taking as we drove past them - they all seemed so close! The only drawback was perhaps the weather as the sky was a little grey, which as a result meant that our view was not as perfect as we would have hoped. Just imagine how spectacular the views would have been had we had a blue sky backdrop. Our day ended with a visit to the 2,000 year-old ruins of the Stone Fort which gave rise to the Uyghur name Tashkurgan. A perfect overnight stopover before continuing our journey to the Pakistan border the following day.



**Day 10: 3 August**

**Tashkurgan 塔斯庫爾干 - Pamir Highlands 帕米爾高原 - Khunjerab Pass 紅其拉甫口岸 - Kashgar**

Tashkurgan, at an altitude of 3,100m, was another hidden gem. We met yet another ethnic group, the Tajiks, as this town was literally right next to our neighbouring country, Tajikistan. The Tajiks' facial features were even more pronounced compared

with the Uyghurs, almost European in my opinion. I was fascinated by their attire too, which compared with us, was much more interesting in style and colour. We left



Tashkurgan in the morning and headed south for the Khunjerab Pass, for which we needed special permits. The Khunjerab was also known as the highest paved international border crossing in the world, at an altitude of some 4,693m. While we made it to the last 2 km, we fell short of actually reaching the national boundary, as that was as much our "guanxi" was able to take us. The road between Tashkurgan and the Khunjerab Pass was windy and mountainous and we did encounter a recently occurred landslide which blocked our road, causing traffic jams on both sides. Our drivers, proactive as they were, decided to jump the otherwise quite orderly long queue, and by so doing saved us hours' of waiting time. We were part of the cause of the havoc which followed as a result but we were assured it was "necessary" and in any case, it's all part of our experience in our Xinjiang travels!

**Day 11: 4 August**

**Kashgar 喀什 - Old City 高臺民居 - Abakh Khoja Tomb 阿帕克霍加香妃墓 - Eidgah Mosque 艾提尕爾清真寺 - Kashgar Western and Central Asian Bazaar 喀什中西亞大巴紮**

There is a saying "if you haven't been to Kashgar, you haven't been to Xinjiang". Indeed Kashgar has a rich history dating back to the Old Silk Road days. It was an important stopover for travelers then making those epic journeys across Central Asia. Kashgar is very much a Uyghur city and when we visited the Western and Central Asian Bazaar -

arguably the largest bazaar in the world - we could not spot any Han faces at all. It was a market place for the locals, selling anything from animal furs to everyday necessities that anyone could think of. Visiting the old city was another interesting experience; we were able to see how the Uyghurs lived in areas which had largely retained its millennia-old character. I could only hope such precious living cultural heritage would be preserved in the coming years. Other interesting sights we visited were the Eidgah Mosque and the Abakh Khoja tomb. Again, there is so much history behind each sight that it is impossible to mention all.



#### Day 12: 5 August

**Kashgar 喀什 - Bachu reef shoal deposit 巴楚生物礁**  
**- Aksu blue schist 阿克蘇藍片岩 - Aksu 阿克蘇**

We now started to head back east, leaving Kashgar for Aksu. We made two geological stops on our way, which turned out to be very fruitful. First, we stopped at a location soon after Sanchakou 三岔口, at Bachu, which according to William's research, we should be seeing lots of fossils as it was an Ordovician reef shoal deposit. Sure enough, fossil samples were plentiful. I was amazed how accurate William's locations had been throughout the trip. Thet and Tracy hit the jackpot when both of them managed to unearth large and relatively intact samples of orthoceras. Unfortunately, Tracy didn't manage to bring her prized piece back to Hong Kong at the end of the trip; perhaps it was not meant to leave its original habitat. Locating the Aksu blue

schist was equally exciting as this was only one of the world's two locations where such formations could be found.

#### Day 13: 6 August

**Aksu 阿克蘇 - Baicheng 拜城**

There had been so much travelling so far in the trip that we decided to take it easy today, both for us and for the drivers, so it was a morning of free time, just so that everyone could catch up with more rest before continuing on our journey. The highlight for today was actually in the afternoon, soon after we left Aksu when No.6 car broke down. It eventually had to be towed for repair. It was increasingly becoming a challenge when we finally reached the hotel at Baicheng and realized that most of our rooms were located on the 4th floor - everyone's luggage was getting heavier by the day, not just because of our rock and fossil samples which we collected, but the irresistible dried fruits and nuts which we picked up from Kashgar / Hotan which weighed even heavier! The dried fruits especially, whether they were dates, apricots, figs or grapes, were so deliciously sweet that it's absolutely impossible not to bring some home!

#### Day 14: 7 August

**Baicheng 拜城 - Kizil Grottoes 克孜爾千佛洞 -**  
**Kizilgaha Beacon Tower 克孜爾尕哈烽火臺 - Kuche**  
**Mosque 庫車大寺 - Ruins of Subashi Buddhist**  
**Temple 蘇巴什佛寺遺址 - Kuche 庫車**

Today was a day of visiting key historic sites in Kuche, or Qiuci (龜茲) as it was formerly known, the largest of the thirty-six kingdoms of the Western Region (西域三十六古國) in ancient times. We first visited the Kizil Thousand Buddha Grottoes, an important cave complex perched on the northern bank of the Muzat River (木扎提河) dating back to the 3rd-8th centuries AD, which featured one of the earliest Buddhist mural artworks. It was a must visit for anyone who had an interest in the Old Silk Road, Buddhism or art. There had been much vandalism over the years by irresponsible visitors, so it is now

forbidden to take any belongings into the grottoes. Only several caves were open to the public but of the ones that we saw, we could still see the vivid colors used in the original murals. Other sights we visited included the Kizilgaha Beacon Tower and the Kuche Mosque before finishing the day at the Ruins of the Subashi Temple. Again, the Subashi Temple was an important piece of history of Buddhism in Xinjiang. Over 10,000 monks resided here in its heydays (6th-8th centuries AD) and Xuanzang (玄奘) also stayed here for 2 months while on his way to India. It was a perfect conclusion to our Old Silk Road education before moving on the next day into the mountains.



**Day 16: 9 August**

**Bayanbulak 巴音布魯克 - Dushanzi 獨山子**

The temperature measured 3 degrees Celsius as we left Bayanbulak and continued our mountain journey. Bayanbulak, a place we visited 4 years ago, was just as picturesque, no more no less, although we did notice the town now had more hotels compared to last time. It was a refreshing change breathing some crisp mountain air. As we travelled further into the mountains, the accompanying colors also changed from the earthen tones which we had grown so accustomed to in the last two weeks to a more lush green of more temperate climates. As we left Bayanbulak, I was particularly touched to be able to come across in person a species of sheep - the Bayanbulak sheep - which I had only read from books before then. I had to thank my good fortunes. The weather was in our favor too - glorious blue skies, snow-capped mountains.



**Day 15: 8 August**

**Kuche 庫車 - Tian Shan Grand Canyon 天山大峽谷 - Bayanbulak 巴音布魯克**

As we left Kuche, we were also leaving the big round-the-desert loop and we started going north into Tian Shan via the G217 highway (this highway actually spanned all the way from Hotan in the south to Altay (阿勒泰) in the north). Right by this pass was the Tian Shan Grand Canyon. This canyon was a stunning masterpiece by Mother Nature - the twisting and turning of rock formations, the massive tall cliffs, the colours, the air of mystery were truly spectacular. The temperature started to fall as we approached Bayanbulak, so much so that by the time we checked into our hotel, central heating was on in our rooms as it was barely 10 degrees Celsius. So we experienced the raging 40's in the desert to a few degrees Celsius in a matter of days. The down jackets and gloves that some of us brought were gladly put into use this evening.





**Day 17: 10 August**

**Dushanzi 獨山子 - Kuitun mud volcanoes 奎屯泥火山 - Kuitun Canyon 奎屯峽谷 - Urumqi 烏魯木齊**

It was a revisit for some of us to the Kuitun mud volcanoes but the Kuitun Canyon was a first for everyone. At 200m meters below, we could see the Kuitun River running through the canyon. It was also a very interesting geological feature as we could clearly see the multiple layers of terracing on both sides of the river bank. After a leisurely lunch, we finally started our way back to where we set off 17 days ago, Urumqi. We were treated to a lavish dinner by Mr Li, our previous head driver for the North Xinjiang trip, for our last evening before leaving for Hong Kong the following day.

distance, but it will forever be close to our hearts. Such is the magic of Xinjiang.

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**Day 18: 11 August**

**Urumqi 烏魯木齊 - Beijing 北京 - Hong Kong 香港**

We sadly had to say goodbye to Xinjiang this morning, leaving our hotel at 7am and headed to the airport. Unexpectedly our flight from Beijing to Hong Kong was delayed for nearly 6 hours due to thunderstorm in the capital. Scheduled to depart at 3:30pm, our plane didn't actually take off till 9:00pm, which by the time we reached Hong Kong, it was past midnight. So there we had it, our trip officially stretched into Day 19. Even the Airport Express was closed for the day. Good times always come to an end, but as our trip was finally drawing to a close, it was the beginning of our pleasant memories for many years to come. Xinjiang may be far away in