

# Account of a Journey to the West (Si Yu Lu), 1219–1224, by Ye-lü Ch'u ts'ai

Ye-lü Ch'u ts'ai, accompanied Genghis Khan during his invasion of Persia. He recorded his views of what were to him western lands (but for us they are in Central Asia), particularly several important cities along the Silk Road such as Samarkand, Bukhara, and Balkh.

In the year A.D. 1218, in spring, in the third month (April), (Ye-lü Ch'u ts'ai) left Yün chung (the present Ta tung fu in Northern Shan si), crossed the T'ien shan mountain, traversed the ta tsi (great stony desert), and the sha mo (sandy desert), and reached the camp of Chinghiz Khan.

In the next year (1219) a vast army was raised and set in motion towards the west. The way lay through the Kin shan mountain. Even in the middle of the summer, masses of ice and snow accumulate in these mountains. The army passing that road was obliged to cut its way through the ice. The pines and kui trees are so high, that they (seem to) reach heaven. The valleys there are all abounding in grass and flowers. The rivers west of the Kin shan all run westward, and finally discharge into a lake. South of the Kin shan is Bie-shi-ba, a city of the Hui lu (Uigurs). There is a tablet dating from the time of the Tang dynasty, on which it is stated that here at that time was the Han hai kün (military administration of tile Han hai). The Han hai is several hundred li distant from the city (of Bishbalik). There is a sea (lake) with an island in it, on which a great number of birds use to mew. West of the aforesaid city, 200 li distant, is the city of Lun t'ai hien, where also a tablet of the Tang is found. South of the city (of Bishbalik), 500 li distant, is Huo chou, the same place which at the time of the T'ang was called K'ao ch'ang, and also Yi chou. West of Kao ch'ang, 3000 or 4000 li distant, is the city of Wu-duan, which is the same as the realm of Yü t'ien of the Tang dynasty. There is a river there in which is found white and black yib stone (jade).

At a distance of more than a thousand li, after having crossed the Han hai, one arrives at the city of Bu la. South of this city is the Yin shan mountain, which extends from east to west a thousand li, and from north to south 200 li. On the top of the mountain is a lake, which is seventy or eighty li in circumference. The country south of the lake is overgrown with lin k'in trees, which form such dense forests, that the sunbeams cannot penetrate. After leaving the Yin shan one arrives at the city of A-li-ma [= Almalik]. The Western people call a lin k'in (crab-apple) a-li-ma, and as all the orchards around the city abound in apple trees, the city received this name. Eight or nine other cities and towns are subject to A-li-ma: in that country grapes and pears abound. The people cultivate the five kinds of grain, as we do in China. West of A-li-ma there is a large river which is called I-lie [= Ili River, which flows into Lk. Balkesh].

Farther on, west of this river, is the city of Hu-sze-wo-lu-do, the capital of the Si Liao. Several tens of cities are subject to it. Several hundred li west of Hu-sze-wo-lu-do is the city of T'a-la-sze. From this place 400 li and more to the south-west are the cities of Ku-

djan, Ba-p'u, K'o-san, and Ba-lan. K'u-djan abounds in pomegranates. They are as large as two fists and of a sour-sweet taste. People take from three to five of this fruit, and press out the juice into a vessel. That makes a delicious beverage for slaking thirst. Around the city of Ba-lan there are everywhere ba-lan Gardens; hence the name. The blossoms of the ba-lan tree resemble those of the apricot, only they are a little paler. The leaves are like the leaves of the peach tree, but a little narrower and smaller. The blossoms appear in winter, the fruit ripens in summer.

In Ba-p'u are large water-melons, weighing fifty pounds each. A long eared (i.e., a donkey) can only carry two of them at the same time.

Northwest of K'u-djan (Khodjend) there is the city of O-ta-la. More than ten other cities are subject to it. One time the chief of this place ordered several envoys (of Chinghiz), and several hundreds of merchants (who were with them), to be put to death, and seized upon their goods. That was the cause of the army being directed against the Western people.

West of O-ta-la more than a thousand li is a large city called Sün-sz'-kan [= Samarkand]. Western people say that the meaning of this name is "fat," and, as the land there is very fertile, the city received this name. The country there is very rich and populous. They have gold and copper coins, but their coins are not provided with a hole, nor have they rims (as the Chinese copper coins have). Around the city, to an extent of several tens of li, there are everywhere orchards, groves, flower gardens, aqueducts, running springs, square basins, and round ponds, in uninterrupted succession; indeed, Sün-sz'-kan is a delicious place! The water-melons there are as large as a horse's head. Regarding grain and vegetables, however, the shu, the no, and the ta tou are not found there. It does not rain there in summer. People make wine from grapes. There are mulberry trees, but not fit for the breeding of silkworms. All cloths are made of kü-sün. The white colour for cloth is considered as a good omen, whilst black is the mourning colour. Wherefore all clothes seen there are white.

West of Sun-sz'-kan (Samarkand) six to seven hundred li is the city of P'u hua [= Bukhara]. It abounds in every kind of products, and is richer than Samarkand. There is the residence of the so-li-t'an of the Mou-su-lu-man (Musselman) people. The cities of K'u-djan (Khodjend) and O-ta-la (Otrar), and others, all depend on P'u hua.

West of Bokhara [Pu' hua] there is a great river (the Amu-daria), flowing to the west, which enters a sea. West of this river is the city U-li-ghien [= Urgench], where the mother of the so-li-tan is living. This city is still more rich and populous than Bokhara.

To the west (mistake for south), near the western border of the same great river (Amu-daria), is the city of Ban [= Balkh]; and west of the latter is the city of Chuan [= T'uan?]. Farther on, direct west (mistake for south), one reaches the city of the black Yin-du. Their writing is different from that in use in the Buddhist kingdoms (Sanskrit) as regards the letters and the pronunciation. There are many idols of Buddha. The people there do not kill cows or sheep; they only drink the milk of these animals. Snow is unknown there. Every year they reap two crops. It is so hot there that a vessel of tin put in the sand melts immediately. Even by moonlight one is hurt as on a summer day (in China by sunbeams). In the south there is a great river [= Indus R.?], the water of which is as cold as ice. It runs very rapidly and discharges itself into the southern sea. In that country much sugar-cane is cultivated. From its juice the people make wine and sugar. To the north-west of Yin-du (Hindustan) is the realm of K'o-fu-ch'a. For several thousand li on every side are

plains, and no more hills are met with. The people there have no cities or towns. They breed much cattle and horses. They make a fermented beverage from honey. In that country the days (in summer) are long and the nights short. In little more than the time necessary to cook a mutton chop, the sun rises again. K'o-fu-ch'a is the same country as Ku-li-han, about which the T'ang history reports the same facts. But the name has changed in the long course of time.

Mediæval Researches from Eastern Asiatic Sources (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1888), pp.13-24