



AKSU

AKSU, an important urban oasis on the Silk Road where Buddhism flourished during antiquity. The trade route provided Buddhism (Great Vehicle) with the means to spread from Gandhāra on the Indo-Afghan frontier to the Tarim basin in the 1st century CE. The abundance of cave sanctuaries carved into sandstone cliffs around the city recall the popularity of Buddhism and the ancient melting pot of eastern and western cultures incorporated Persian, Indian, Greek, Tocharian and Chinese influences (Boulnois, 2001).

Nowadays, Aksu is a town and major oasis of the Northwest Tarim Basin in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region of China (**FIGURE 1**). Located between the southern foot of the Tien Shan Mountains (“Heavenly Mountains”) and the edge of the Taklamakan Desert, the administrative area of the city (18,184 sq km) had a population of 572,700, in 2000, composed of 52 percent Han Chinese, 47 percent Uighurs and 1 percent Hui Chinese. It is a major administrative center of the Aksu Prefecture. This vast area stretches over 131,341 sq km with a population of about 2.19 million inhabitants, mainly composed of Uighurs (about 72 percent). People are mostly concentrated in foothill oases and marginally in small mountain villages in the Kirghiz pastoral area of the medium Tien Shan (Xinjiang Bureau of Statistics, 2001).

The name Aksu literally means ‘white water’ in Turkish. The town and surrounding areas located in the arid zone are dependent on the torrential streams running from the Tien Shan Range. At an altitude of about 1,000 m, the Aksu oasis is strategically located at the confluence of the Toshkan and the Aksu Rivers, where the strong flow runs off the mountain over the deposits of



a large alluvial fan. The abundance of water comes from the melting of snow and ice of the numerous and wide glaciers located in the high mountains, such as Tomur Peak (Pobedy Peak, 7,439 m), the highest peak of the Tien Shan mountains. The upper Aksu basin stretches over the territory of China but also extends over East Kyrgyzstan, where rainfall levels are higher than that in the Southern side of the Tien Shan (*Atlas kyrgyzskoï SSR*, 1983). Therefore, the Aksu River permanently flows through the year and stands as the main water supplier to the Tarim River, with a volume contribution up to 76 percent (Ren, p. 393).

The wealthy past of the Aksu oasis is reported in Chinese chronicles. During the Han Dynasty (2nd century BCE to 2nd century CE) and the Tang Dynasty (618- 907 CE), when the area was under Chinese control, the oasis was an important stopover on the northern branch of the Silk Road. Between Kashgar and Anxi, merchants and travelers reached Aksu as they made their way around the northern edge of the Taklamakan Desert, through the Tarim Basin. Aksu was also connected with the Ili Valley and Junggar Basin by an ancient road crossing northward over the hills of the upper Aksu River valley to the Tien Shan ranges. Near Aksu many historical sites (dating from the 3rd to the 5th century CE), such as the Qiuci murals and the Sayram Thousand-Buddha Caves, recall a time when Buddhism flourished along the Silk Road. After the desertion of the caravan trade in the 14th century, the oasis activity inevitably declined. At the end of the 19th century, Aksu City remained a regional trade centre with large bazaars and caravanserais, according to Francis Younghusband who visited Aksu in 1887 (Younghusband, p. 154). The town population was then 20,000, plus a garrison of about 2,000 soldiers (Reclus, p. 140).

Nowadays, under the pressure of Chinese government policy, this remote area has undergone important changes in human and economic geography. The abundant water resources and the plentiful sunshine induce a vegetable cover duration of about 200 days per year in Aksu piedmont, thus providing profitable conditions for the development of agriculture. As a consequence and since the 1980s, the Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps, a paramilitary organization whose aim is to colonize the strategic areas of minority nationalities, started building large mechanized state farms and a vast water network in order to exploit unused arable lands. Through the last two decades, the irrigated surface of the oasis more than doubled. Since the westward extension of the Southern Xinjiang railway reached Aksu in 1998, a

substantial migration of Han has taken place, especially for cotton, rice and vegetable cultivation in the new lands reclaimed from the desert (Government of the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, p. 71).

Aksu oasis is also undergoing rapid industrial expansion due to the development and processing of abundant natural resources. The recent exploitation of oil and natural gas in the Tarim River high-yield oil fields has brought about economic growth and structural changes in the Aksu oasis. A 424 km-long new highway, connecting Aksu City to Khotan across the Taklamakan opened in 2007, improving access for the exploration and the development of a new oil field in the desert. Accordingly, an extensive industrial park of oil-field services and petrochemical enterprises has started to actively produce chemicals, fertilizers and plastics in Aksu. The Aksu region is also rich in non-ferrous resources such as mercury, lead and particularly coal. In 2007, the 55 coal mines located in the Tien Shan Mountains produced two millions tons of raw coal that were conveyed to the thermal power plants in Southern Xinjiang (Government of the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, p. 72).

Aksu used to be known as a traditional Uighur oasis with a substantial and thriving agricultural economy, but the progressive Sinicization and industrialization of the area, through intensive development and exploitation of local oil and gas deposits along with improvements in transportation infrastructure, has implied a dramatic economic expansion since the 1980s.

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