



## KHOTAN I. GEOGRAPHY

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Located between the northern foot of the Kunlun mountains and the edge of the [Taklamakan](#) desert ([Figure 1](#)), the city of Khotan had a population of 184,500 in 2000, mainly Uyghurs (about 84 percent). It is today a major administrative center of the Khotan Prefecture, a vast area that covers over 249,146 km<sup>2</sup> and has a population of about 1.74 million inhabitants, mostly concentrated in the piedmont oasis, such as Niya, Keriya, and Guma (Xinjiang Bureau of Statistics). The oasis also shelters the cities of Karakash and Lop and more than 300 villages.

At an elevation ranging from 1,350 to 1,500 m and situated on regular slopes made of alluvial fan deposits, Khotan has long been known for its flourishing, oasis-based agriculture system. Because of severe natural conditions of aridity with only 33 mm rainfall per year and an average annual sunshine duration of 2,500 to 2,900 hours, sophisticated irrigation has always been vital, water being supplied almost exclusively by the rivers and streams that come down from the Kunlun mountains. Through recent hydro-agricultural programs and the modernization of agriculture, cotton crops have gradually gained ground over traditional agriculture.

The Khotan region is strategically situated at convergence of the ancient roads running along the Kunlun range, where abundance of water could be found in the middle of the arid land. The oasis of Khotan is located on a southern branch of the famous Silk Road, which is the main caravan route connecting China and western Eurasia with India via the Karakum pass, Afghanistan, and Central Asia across the Pamirs (see [TAKLAMAKAN](#), [COMMERCE](#) iii. In the



Parthian and Sasanian periods; CHINESE-IRANIAN RELATIONS i. In *Pre-Islamic Times*). Two large rivers, fed by the spring snow melt from the Kunlun glaciers, the Karakash Darya (River of black jade) and the Yurungkash Darya (River of white jade; [Figure 2](#)), flow into the oasis and merge in the desert 120 km north of the town of Khotan to form the the endoreic Khotan Darya river. In the past, the Khotan Darya was connected to the Tarim river, but, today, the stream vanishes in the sands of the Taklamakan, about 250 km north of the city of Khotan. It was this guaranteed annual water supply and the irrigation works that ensured Khotan's importance on the Silk Road.

The discovery of ancient Khotan is due mainly to two famous explorers, the Swedish geographer [Sven Hedin](#) and the British-Hungarian archeologist [Aurel Stein](#), who, in 1896 and 1910, explored and described in detail the agrarian settlements and buried cities spread out along the abandoned riverbeds of the southern Taklamakan desert. In addition to the archeological evidence, its past can be patched together from historical sources, mainly the Han and Tang Chinese chronicles (see [CHINESE TURKESTAN i](#)).

The oasis of Khotan was probably occupied by Iranians early on, although the burial practices of the graves excavated at Sampula may not be as conclusive as thought by some (Mallory and Mair, pp. 155-56). The ancient city of Khotan is first mentioned in historical sources such as the *History of the Former Han* (period from 125 B.C.E. to 23 C.E.), in which Khotan was known as Yutian (Hulsewé and Loewe, pp. 96-97).

For at least a thousand years, from about the time it was conquered by the Chinese in 73 C.E. and into the 13th century, the multicultural kingdom of Khotan, which was Buddhist in religion until the Muslim conquest around 1000 CE, was a center for the exchange and transmission of people and goods, as well as languages, religions, and art, which show Persian, Indian, Greek, Tokharian, and Chinese influence (see [BUDDHISM i. In Pre-Islamic Times](#); [GANDHĀRAN ART](#); Boulnois, p. 81). At [Dandān Öiliq](#), Buddhist monasteries, temples, and paintings of Buddhist and Hindu deities in Graeco-Buddhist style were discovered.

The economic prosperity of that period is explained by urban and commercial development supported by culture made possible by organized irrigation. Khotan is thought to be the first place outside China to cultivate the mulberry to produce and, from the 5th century C.E., export [silk](#) and silk rugs, making it a center for silk production in the Tarim Basin (Beal, II, p. 309; Chen Yu, pp.



131-34). Stein (1907, p. 134) suggested that Khotan was the place named *Serindia* by ancient geographers. Khotan was also famous for its nephrite **jade**, extracted from the mountains and alluvial deposits from the rivers, such as the Yurungkash River, also called the White Jade River (Bonavia, pp. 307-8). This made it the starting point of the “Jade Road” which spread this semi-precious stone into the whole of China. When **Marco Polo** visited Khotan in 1275, he found a land divided into estates and an abundance of cotton, flax, hemp, wheat, wine, and other produce (Marco Polo, I, p. 136).

After the Muslim conquest in the 11th century and the eventual abandonment of the Silk Road in the 14th century, economic activity in the oasis declined. The area of the oasis itself has steadily contracted over time, as is shown by comparison of the archeological data from excavations of cities, agrarian settlements, and remains of orchards in the region. This trend is viewed as a continuation of thousands of years of desertification that is due both to natural factors (such as climate change, especially in hydrology) and to human pressures on marginal lands through practices such as overgrazing. In present-day Khotan, the old town of flat-roofed houses and narrow, winding streets is gradually being replaced by the wide squares and straight avenues of modern Chinese urbanism. The city remains a market center for local agriculture, especially for cotton, grapes, and other fruits. It is also still an active commercial center for export of jade and silk goods to China and India. These luxury products and the area’s historical fame have opened up new perspectives, as it increasingly becomes a major stop for tourists visiting the ancient trading posts on the Silk Road.

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