

When Homo Sapiens discovered the Far East.

How Central Asia and the Far East became inhabited has been the subject of many studies, and although numerous theories have been elaborated, they were sooner or later replaced by new theories due to the lack of firm material supporting the previous ones.

We know that the Peking Man, Homo Erectus, of which 40 individual fossils were found in 1927, just to disappear again during WW2, was living 400.000 years ago. The fossil of the Java Man is even older. The Yuanmou Man of Yunnan province has been dated to 1.7 million years ago. Since no link could be found between them and their far away cousins of Africa came up the theory that Homo Erectus may have appeared independently in two or more different places of the world. However, following the results of new researches based on DNA this theory has by now been set aside.

Then between 60.000 and 100.000 years ago came Homo Sapiens. Compared with Homo Erectus, Homo Sapiens had different physical features like a larger brain and furthermore whereas the first one was only able to fabricate very simple stone tools such as core and chopper, the latter was able to build up much more complex ones, develop languages, make clothes, create shelters and even produce some forms of arts.

Based on present knowledge Homo Sapiens came from Africa, crossed the Middle East, the Indian sub-continent and reached Sundaland (Indonesian Archipelago, Malaysian Peninsula, the Philippines and South of Indochina). Although the surface of Sundaland doubled sometimes during the glaciation periods linking some islands to the continent it is thought that Homo Sapiens was using the maritime way since people living in the islands have older DNA markers than people living on the continent.

But let us put some dates on those migrations keeping in mind that later corrections of such statements are quite frequents. Homo Sapiens would have reached Sundaland 50.000 years ago. From there he moved:

- south to Australia, reached 40.000 years ago and then but much later to various archipelagoes of the Pacific and finally to New Zealand only 1.000 years ago.
- east to Taiwan, Okinawa and Japan 40.000-30.000 years ago.
- north to China and further north to Siberia 30.000 years ago whereas another group travelled directly from Middle East to Siberia passing north of Central Asia.
- from Siberia a group moved south-east probably pursuing the woolly mammoth and reached Hokaido (Japan) during a glaciation period whereas another group coming from China reached Japan through Korea. Which one has reached Japan first is unknown.
- Still from Siberia a group reached the Bering Strait crossed it by foot to Alaska 15.000 years ago and finally arrived in Patagonia 12.000 years ago.

Between East and West Asia lay what is now called Central Asia and the Chinese Far-West (Xinjiang province). It is a vast region located north of the Himalaya. Starting from west we distinguish the Ustyurt Platen, the Turan Lowland, The Kyzylkum Desert, the Kazak Uplands and finally at the east the Tarim Basin of Xin Jiang and north of it the Gobi Desert.

Whereas part of the Tarim is at an altitude of 150 meters **below** the sea level, the mountain chains bordering the basin: the Altai mountains, the Tien Shan, the Kunlun Shan and the Pamirs are among the highest in the world often exceeding 7.000 meters.

Only one river, the Tarim River, made up by the confluent of the Yarkant and the Aksu rivers some sections of it being dry part of the year, ends down in the Lop Nur. The climate is continental and very dry, the Himalaya acting as a screen between steppes and deserts to the north, and the Indian Ocean to the south. In winter in the northern part of Central Asia the temperature goes down to 40°C below zero.

In such environment it is not possible for any large human groups to settle permanently except around a few oases and so far, the steppes have been inhabited only by nomadic tribes. However difficult as it can be to cross high mountain passes and deserts Central Asia remains the shorter means for communicating by land between East and West Asia and as a consequence each inhabited oasis became a small market place where the nomadic tribes could exchange the goods which they produced against the ones they required.

European explorers such as Hedin, von Le Coq and Stein in the early 20th century mentioned their discoveries of desiccated bodies in Central Asia. Although they appeared like mummies, they had been naturally preserved by the very dry climate of the Tarim basin and the salty soil in which some of them had been buried. Surprisingly the first discovered mummies were of Caucasoid origin meaning the region was inhabited by Caucasians some 3000 years ago. The oldest one found so far and known as the Xiaohe Princess, is 3800 years old.

With the discovery in Japan of apparently Caucasoid skeletons was raised the eventuality that these people may have pursued their migration eastwards to reach Japan but further DNA studies seem to indicate that the latter were more likely migrants coming through Siberia.

During the last two decades many buried places were discovered in the Tarim Basin and more than one hundred mummies were collected. Interesting is the fact that DNA analyses of 92 individuals from the Xiaohe complex show that the maternal lineages of the people concerned were from both East Asia and West Eurasia whereas the paternal lineages were almost exclusively from West Eurasia.

Many of the mummies are in excellent state of conservation, even the hair is physically intact having kept the color from blond to red to deep brown and generally long, curly and braided. The same is true for the clothes thus allowing a positive comparison with Indo-European textiles of the same period.

As we have seen the Xiaohu Princess was living around 1800 BC and was a Caucasian whereas East Asian people appeared 800 years later. From then on until 300 BC the Tarim Basin was continually inhabited by a mixture of Caucasoid and Mongoloid people.

What language was spoken then? it seems that Tocharian, an Indo-European language was commonly used in the Tarim Basin.

Later on, in the first millennium AD, as Chinese culture was dominating all East Asia, local languages were to a certain extent influenced by the Chinese language even when the former was from a different origin, in the same manner as words of Greek or Latin are found in European languages of non-Greek or Latin origin.

In those days the influence of China was such that the Chinese script was adapted to write the Vietnamese, Korean and Japanese. That was fitting relatively well for the Vietnamese as the language structure is comparable to the Chinese one but that is not the case for Korean and Japanese. The Koreans developed later on their own alphabet whereas the Japanese kept the Chinese script for the nouns and developed their own syllabary, the katakana, to express grammatical forms, mainly particles, not available with classical Chinese ideograms. More recently the Vietnamese adopted the Roman alphabet, Quoc Ngu, developed by the Portuguese missionaries.

While observing similarities between some Japanese or Korean words and other words of Turkic languages like Finnish it has been thought that they could have a common origin however that theory is for the time being kept aside and it is assumed that the actual word similarities should be the results of intense language contacts when the original tribes were still at the nomadic stage. Cases of similarity occur also between Japanese and Austronesian languages but in that area final conclusions have still to be produced.

The main language families found today in Central and Far East Asia are

- the Turkic and Mongolic families in the north, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Xinjiang (China) with 33 million speakers.
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- the Austroasiatic family including Mon (Myanmar), Khmer and Vietnamese in the south-east with 65 million speakers (excluding Austroasiatic of India and Bangladesh).
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- the Sino-Tibetan family in the north-east covering Sinitic and Tibeto-Burman with respectively 1.3 billion and 39 million speakers
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- The Austronesian family in the south-east of which the coverage is in and around the Indian Ocean with part of Indonesia, the Philippines, Vietnam (Chamic), Madagascar, Easter Island, Taiwan, and Hainan, with 376 million speakers.

Here again we have to keep in mind that some points of classification have not been definitively finalized and some of them are still a subject of controversy.

To conclude, that is the present situation 50000 years after the apparition of Homo Sapiens in Sundaland.

Here below are maps of Sundaland and the Tarim area as well as some photographs of the mummies mentioned in the text.

For those interested two videos taken by the author:

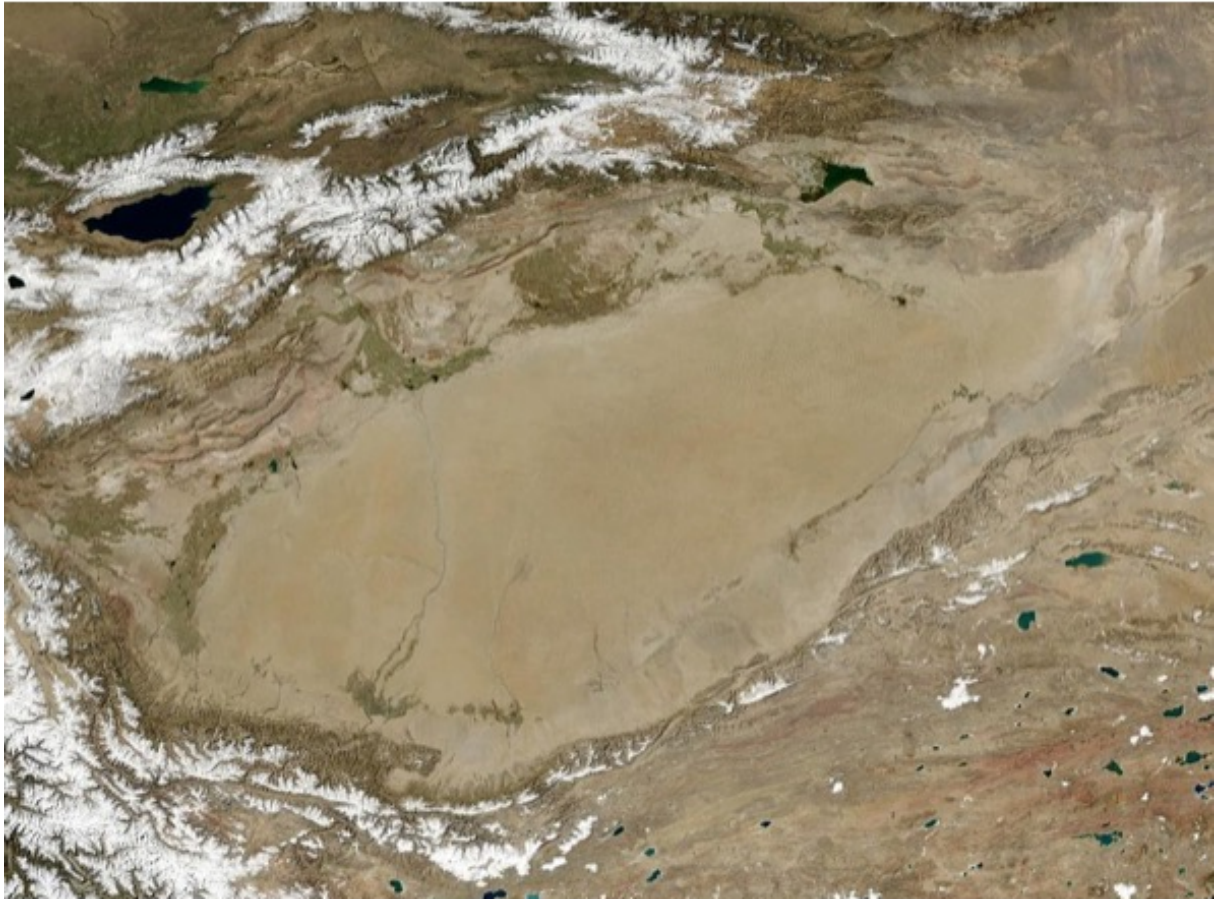
- A journey to Xinjiang, the Chinese Far West.
- <https://www.dropbox.com/s/ivdnlh0auvhy3vy/Silk%20Road.mp4?dl=0>
- Crossing the Gobi Desert (Mongolia).
<https://www.dropbox.com/s/g2r07rsz9cs5o1r/Gobi-Mongolia.mp4?dl=0>

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The map here above covers approximately the tectonic plate called Sundaland.

When looking at it one has to keep in mind that during the glaciations periods today's islands were partly or even totally linked together allowing people to walk freely like on the continent.



Some of the snow-covered mountains around the basin are reaching 7000m whereas at its lowest level the Tarim Basin is at 150m below the sea level.

(a NASA photograph)



The distance from Turfan (right) to Kashgar (left), where ends the mentioned video, is about 1200km.

Most of the mummies have been found around Loulan (right).



An administrative map of the Tarim Basin.



The Beauty of Loulan, a mummy dating to about 2000 BC, from the site of Qāwrighul (Chinese: Gumugou), on a terrace above the Kōnchi-darya (Chinese: Longque-he, or Peacock River), the Loulan area. The woman is dressed in clothes of wool and fur, with fur moccasins, and she has a comb (lower right), a wheat basket (top right), a grass oven (top left), and a large winnowing tray (top left).

(Photo J. Newbury/Discover.)

A 4000-year-old Loulan Beauty



A child mummy.
Only the eyes of the child have been replaced
by colored stones.