

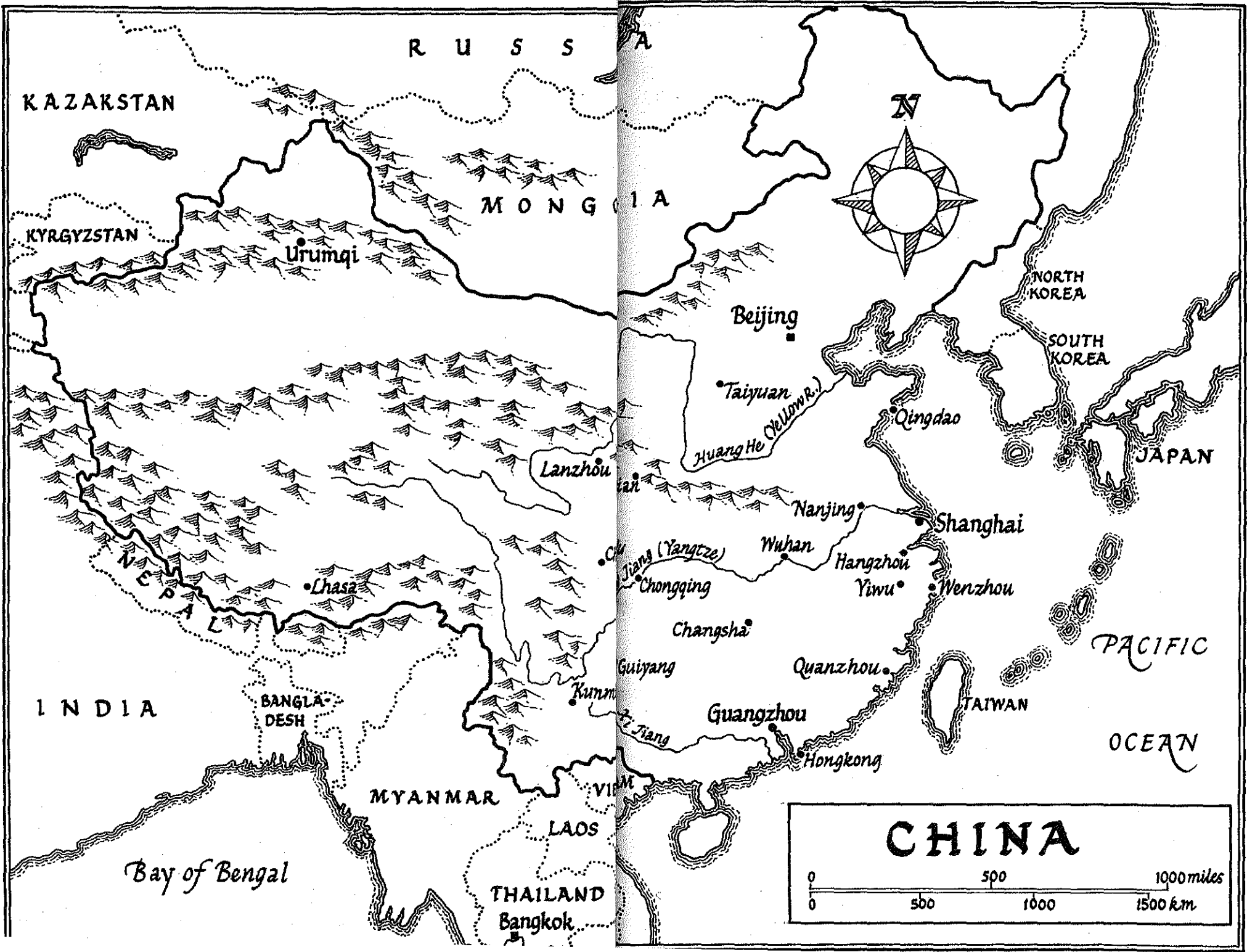
**WHERE UNDERPANTS  
COME FROM**

*From Checkout to Cotton Field-Travels  
Through the New China and Into the  
New Global Economy*

JOE BENNETT



THE OVERLOOK PRESS  
NEW YORK



KAZAKHSTAN

R U S S I A

KYRGYZSTAN

Urumqi

M O N G O L I A

Beijing

Taiyuan

Huang He (Yellow R.)

Lanzhou

N

NORTH KOREA

SOUTH KOREA

JAPAN

NEPAL

Lhasa

Chang Jiang (Yangtze)

Nanjing

Shanghai

Wuhan

Hangzhou

Yiwu

Wenzhou

I N D I A

BANGLADESH

Changsha

Guiyang

Quanzhou

PACIFIC

TAIWAN

OCEAN

Bay of Bengal

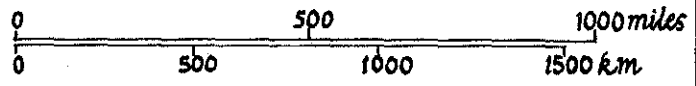
MYANMAR

LAOS

VIETNAM

THAILAND  
Bangkok

**CHINA**



minaret that looks like an Islamic oast house, and the dusty streets of a settlement that comfortably predates Christ.

“Turfan?” says Stephen, making no effort to mask his surprise.

“Turfan,” I say decisively.

A quarter of an hour later we turn left off the highway and are driving up a main street of impeccable twenty-first-century urban China. Stephen looks across at me.

“Turfan,” he says.

I swivel to face Ivy. “I’d like to see old Turfan,” I say.

“Old Turfan?”

“Yes. This is new Chinese Turfan. I want to see old Turfan.”

“Is not old,” says Ivy.

“No,” I say.

“We stop?” says Ivy.

“No,” I say. I can’t be bothered and I’ve seen the photos and I’ve had three chunky bottles of afternoon beer.

“Urumqi?” says Stephen with a fat smile.

“Yes,” I say, “Urumqi.”

When we reach Urumqi in the early evening I discover that my hotel is holding an ethnic night. The hotel doors are opened for me by a boy and a girl dressed in traditional Uighur costume, all bright and shiny and flamboyant. Both the boy and the girl bow, smile and say “Good evening, sir” in English. And they are both Chinese.



Click to Pronounce: [Urumqi](#) and [Uighur](#) Also spelled Uyghur

[Click to see Uighur people.](#)

# 20

## STRETCHING THE HORSE'S TAIL

SATURDAY, AND I AM DUE AT THE YIDA SPINNING MILL AT 2 P.M. I spend the morning in People’s Square where a low stage has been erected in front of rows of plastic seating. The seated area is roped off. The square has been decorated with red and gold lanterns, helium-filled and tethered to the ground by strings. When a breeze shifts through the square they dance like a field of giant tulips.

All this is in aid of recruitment to the authorities. An army officer in a booth is trying to interest youths in his promotional material. But he keeps glancing back at a little gas stove under his desk on which he’s frying eggs.

I am given a leaflet that urges me to join the police. It has a few words in Chinese, Arabic and Russian, but consists mainly of cartoons. They depict policemen assisting the elderly, giving directions, rescuing the trapped, smiling like lottery-winners, and bearing no resemblance to any cop I’ve seen in China.

The fire brigade’s here, too. Three fire engines have drawn a crowd of males, as big machines do everywhere. And other onlookers are staring up at the raised extension ladders in the hope that something will happen.

Music erupts from free-standing speakers, and dancers pour on to the stage. This is ethnic dancing for the people. The boys wear sky-blue jackets and tooled boots, the girls red satin dresses and dainty white

shoes. The music is sinicized Muslim, racy, pulsing, exotic. The boys leap athletically to impress the girls, and the girls twirl coyly to seduce the boys. Or at least that's the idea. But it seems heartless stuff to me, a tamed exoticism, divorced from the way of life that gave it meaning. It reminds me of those national costume dolls in protective plastic sleeves that are inexplicably popular in the touristy bits of Europe.

(The only bit of Europe that doesn't seem to sell such dolls is England. England has no traditional national dress, unless one counts the uniform worn by Morris dancers, and most people are wise enough not to. If a doll were sold in true English national dress it would wear a skirt and blouse from M&S. And it would carry a plastic raincoat, because you just never know.)

The crowd in the seats has grown and I make to join it. A uniformed arm swings up in front of me and presses firmly against my chest. Its owner is not beaming like a lottery-winner. I don't argue.

The dancers are followed by an awards ceremony. A boisterous MC introduces a few uniformed dignitaries to the stage, men resembling the basilisk generals who stood behind Brezhnev at May Day parades. Then younger men come up to receive awards for I don't know what—firefighting, rescue, that sort of thing, I imagine—accompanied by half a dozen shoulder-toted television cameras. The cameramen are so keen that their viewers should see exactly what's going on that the live audience can't.

A hunched old man has been watching me make notes. When our eyes meet he sidles across and addresses me in Russian. I manage to dredge up "*Rooski yazik ne zhnayoo*," meaning, I hope, "I don't speak Russian." Inevitably, I suppose, it convinces him that I do. He whispers fiercely to me and makes semi-covert gestures of dismissal at what's going on on the stage.

"*Rooski yazik ne zhnayoo*," I say again, and he nods and keeps going. But it's clear what he isn't saying. He isn't saying how wonderful it is to see our young uniformed heroes honored for their endeavors. When he eventually falls silent, I shrug.

"*Rooski yazik ne zhnayoo*," I say once more.

"Ah," he says with bitter disappointment, "*Rooski yazik ne zhnayee?*" He spits and leaves.

The awards ceremony over, we are given a plump Chinese singer then more dancing by a different ethnic group, then nothing. The sea is empty and the crowd gathers round the military fire engines. Three youths in boiler suits and rappelling harnesses have climbed to the top of the extension ladders from which ropes are hanging. A countdown from ten and then the three boys leap from the gantries and slide to the ground, their arms and legs spread wide like falling stars. Two land deftly on the square and then turn to look up at the third who is spinning slowly at the midpoint of his rope, fiddling with a carabiner at his waist. TV cameras swing up to capture him. A brass hat looks down at his shoes and mutters darkly.

The woman who greets me at the Yida spinning mill is young, beautiful and impressively fluent in English. I tell her how impressively fluent in English she is.

"Thank you," she says, blushing in textbook fashion, "I spent three years at university in Melbourne. My degree was in financial studies. But when I finished I wanted to come home."

She seems genuinely keen to show me the mill but we have to wait for a manager to join us. She gives me a light blue company cap and a set of earplugs.

"Do you keep in touch with your friends in Melbourne?"

"I have no friends in Melbourne. My friends are here." Her tone is surprisingly emphatic. But then the manager arrives, jacketless, smiling, and we set off down corridors to the heart of the mill.

It occupies the site of a former government enterprise that went bust. The present owner is a private company, the Esquel Textile Co. Esquel began as a small outfit in Hong Kong in the late seventies. As China opened up, so Esquel flourished. The company moved into mainland Guangdong with the first wave of Western-style enterprises and simply grew.

Esquel makes shirts. It makes 60 million shirts a year. It makes shirts for Polo, Nike, Hugo Boss, Tommy Hilfiger and a trade directoryful of other brands that you don't mentally associate with China. Two-thirds of those shirts go to the United States. Most of the

rest go to Europe. If you're wearing a shirt from Marks & Spencer, Esquel probably made it.

The company grows, spins, weaves and knits its own cotton. A little of their thread goes on to the open market, but it is unlikely that it actually went into my pants. But, as my guide points out, cotton thread is pretty much cotton thread.

Esquel is in Urumqi because of the long-staple cotton. China just can't grow enough of that cotton to feed its clothing mills. Last year the country had to import 3 million tons of raw cotton, much of it from the United States. It then made that cotton into thread, made the thread into garments, sent the garments back to the United States and made a nice profit.

"In 2006," says the girl matter-of-factly, "the Chinese textile industry grew 50 per cent."

You read a lot of figures like that in the newspapers. Some of them are probably trustworthy. They are the sort of figures that make Western investors' eyes water. They are the figures that have driven a tsunami of Western capital East, capital that has collided with China in much the same way as India once collided with Asia. Just as India pushed up the mountains that overlook this mill, so the impact of Western money pushed up the first skyscrapers of Pudong. But what is pushing them up now, in Pudong and in Urumqi, is increasingly Chinese capital.

Living in the West we are so familiar with private enterprise that we barely notice it. It's just a muted background hum. In China it is raw, new, dynamic and revving. You can hear its growl.

Sixty young men and women in face-masks sit in a very clean room. Beside each of them is an opened bale of cotton, like the bales I saw stacked at the co-operative. The youngsters are sifting the cotton by hand, grabbing a compressed wad from a bale and with intense attention ripping it tuft from tuft to check for impurities. Examples of impurities—feathers, hair, scraps of paper—are mounted on a wall-chart for the benefit of visitors like myself. The young workers do not look up. With delicate Asian fingers they just tear apart cotton tufts under fluorescent lights. And this is all they do, for eight or more hours a day, and for six days a week.

I ask how long the average worker stays in this job and I am told that few last more than a month or two. "Labor is becoming a problem," says my guide.

In the best Western tradition the company has an official verbal view of itself: "A company of fun people serving happy customers." These words are posted on the wall outside the room where the cotton-sifters sit. I doubt that any irony is noticed.

Below the mantra are the articles of the company's mission statement.

Be a good citizen and a good employer.  
Cherish the environment.  
Explore and embrace innovative solution.  
Reduce wastage through functional excellence.  
Dare to err but quick to learn.

After the manual cleaning, the process of turning cotton into thread becomes entirely automated. A mesmeric Swiss-made machine sweeps endlessly back and forth over a compressed bale of cleaned cotton. The bale is the size of two cars. At each sweep the machine grazes a layer from the monstrous wad and sucks it into an air-drying duct where it is tossed and tumbled and fluffed and sent on its way to be carded.

Carding begins the process of straightening the cotton fibers, making them lie parallel to each other and overlapping. The carded cotton emerges like a fluffy horse's tail. The manager gives me a hank to toy with. It's sweetly tactile stuff. When I tease it apart it resists weakly.

"What holds the fibers together?" I ask.

Apparently every individual cotton fiber has a wall of cellulose. When the seed-head bursts open, the cellulose dries and shrinks and causes the fiber to twist into spirals, both clockwise and anti-clockwise. It's similar to the way a human hair curls when you draw it between clenched fingernails, or a ribbon furls when a scissor blade is run along it. These natural spirals make the cotton spinnable. Though the fibers are shorter than in, say, wool, the natural tendency of the spirals to intertwine and grip each other creates a strong thread.

After carding comes combing. The difference between the two processes, as far as I can gather, is one of degree. The long horse's tail feeds into another Swiss machine and emerges as an even longer horse's tail.

Each machine, whether it blows or cards or combs, has a host of identical siblings, thoughtless, obedient and quietly chuntering. These are the unpaid workers that create the world's wealth. A few slightly better paid workers tend the machines like stablehands, sweeping, feeding, nursing, cleaning.

After carding and combing the horse's tail is stretched again and twisted, gaining length and strength and beginning to look like rough thread. The largest room in the factory is the spinning hall, the size of a hockey pitch or two. I am reminded of my fifth-form history textbook and sepia photographs of cotton mills in Manchester, with women and children in rags and clogs tending clattering machines on which sat bobbins. Here are the same bobbins, thousands of them the shape of unopened pine cones. But the machines here don't clatter and most of the attendant slaves are gone. The hall is almost deserted.

I ask what these machines are called.

"Spinning machines," says my guide.

"Have you heard of the spinning jenny?"

"No," she says.

But effectively these machines are descended from the spinning jenny. And it in turn was descended from that most fundamental invention, the spinning wheel. It was the spinning wheel that enabled human beings to turn short fibers of either animal or vegetable origin into thread. From thread came cloth.

But the spinning wheel made only one thread at a time. As originally designed, the spinning jenny made eight threads at a time. These machines make hundreds of threads at a time.

Thread winds on and off the bobbins endlessly, passing through a series of eyes and guides to be stretched and twisted and improved and rewound. The autonomy of the machines is staggering. I watch as a machine halts at a fault in the thread, snips twice to excise the fault, reattaches the snipped ends with a multiple twist too swift to follow with the eye and chunters back into production. And everything is



The spinning jenny was invented in 1764 by James Hargreaves in England. The device reduced the amount of work needed to produce yarn, with a worker able to work eight or more spools at once.



clean enough to eat off. The machines are so far beyond my capacity to design or build that I feel awed.

The final product of half a dozen industrial processes is a bobbin with the bulk of a melon and the shape of Mount Fuji. These bobbins are identical to the bobbins that I saw feeding the knitting machines at the Kingstar factory in Quanzhou. The bobbins are wrapped, stacked on pallets, and wheeled to railway carriages on the factory branch line. From here they cross China. Most go to Guangdong and the Esquel shirt factory. From there the globe.

Every one of the million threads of cotton I am wearing at the moment passed through a factory like this and precisely this process, a process on which I am and always have been dependent but of which I knew nothing. It was this sense of industrial ignorance that launched this little quest. At the same time I realize that the process is essentially simple, a primitive discovery of an attribute of nature, refined to its essentials, then endlessly repeated.

An hour or so after we left it, we're back in a boardroom.

"So," says Miss Lovely, "any questions?"

I ask about the specific thread for underpants. The manager tells me it is single yarn for reasons of softness, 120-count or higher. Essentially the higher the count, the finer the thread. Shirt yarn has a count of between 40 and 80. Jeans yarn is 7 to 10. Shirt or jeans yarn is generally double yarn, which, as you may perhaps guess, is two single yarns twisted together for strength.

"And there are other mills in Urumqi?"

"Yes," says the girl, "several, but most are government mills. This is the best mill."

I don't doubt her.

The cotton that Yida spins comes mainly from the Aksu region north-west of here. And it is all contracted direct from farmers.

"And those farmers," I say, "are they Chinese or Uighur or a mix of both, or don't you know?"

"They are all Chinese. We do not like Uighur people. They are lazy and they tell lies."