

Synopsis:

YUMEN

The future of a ghost town

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Yumen, on the edge of the Gobi desert in the province of Gansu, is one of those places in China that with time starts to look like a ghost town, abandoned by the authorities once the nearby natural oil or mineral resources have run out. Although Yumen was built in 1955 to be the first oil drilling town in China, the reserves of black gold have dried up since 2004, emptying the town of its 130.000 residents. Yumen has therefore been abandoned by the Chinese authorities, and the hundred or so workers who live amongst the ruins for nine months of the year are kept busy with the maintenance of the railway and unloading of the freight trains that pass. They are paid 3000RMB for their labour, in compensation also for living in abandoned houses which they manage to fit out as their homes. Most of them come from the province of Gansu, some have been there for two years, while others don't know if they'll be back the following year... The big grocery shop, which doubles as a café and billiard hall, is the main meeting point for the residents. In the main street with its run-down shop fronts, there is still a little park where people use the equipment to work out, there is a small group of mechanics working around some trucks, while other workers go towards a building site where a hotel and apartment blocks are almost complete. While the locals don't seem to know what these new buildings are intended for, it is fairly certain that their construction is linked to the renaissance of this region of the Gobi desert where huge wind-farms and solar-panel arrays are being installed. Following the trend, Yumen's hundred thousand oil workers have moved to less than 100km away, to the town of Jiuquan, where there is a boom underway thanks to the town's reconversion to renewable energy. Some were able to afford to buy a flat in the residential complex specially built to house them by the Chinese government back at the beginning of the 2000s. At the same time, a primary and secondary school were built by the Yumen oil company.