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THE PHYSICAL AND HUMAN GEOGRAPHY OF INNER ASIA IN THE EARLY 1920S THROUGH THE EYES AND LENS OF C. P. SKRINE

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This paper will provide an overview of materials in the archive of Clarmont P. Skrine, British Consul General in Kashgar from 1922-24, which may prove to be of value for the study of the geography and issues of environmental change in Inner Asia (especially in Western Xinjiang).<sup>1</sup> "Environment" here will be understood broadly to encompass both the natural world and patterns of human settlement.

Let me start with a little background on Skrine and his time in Western Xinjiang.<sup>2</sup> The son of Frank Skrine, a British India civil servant still known to some for his book (co-authored with Denison Ross) on Russian Central Asia, the younger Skrine followed in his father's footsteps. Posted to India in 1912, Clarmont Skrine became a Persia specialist, had appointments at Kerman and Quetta, and then was sent to Kashgar as the temporary replacement for Percy Etherton, who went on leave but intended to return there after a year. Skrine took his wife Doris along with him, travelling up the Hunza Valley, crossing the Mintaka Pass, and then circumventing Mustagh Ata on the south to arrive in Kashgar in June 1922. Among his first discoveries was that Etherton had cooked the books at the consulate; the evidence Skrine provided resulted ultimately in Etherton's not returning to Kashgar. When it became clear Etherton would not return, Skrine's original appointment was extended for an extra year into the middle of 1924.

While some feel that Skrine may not have taken his duties very seriously, a careful examination of his papers would suggest otherwise.<sup>3</sup> Like Etherton, he was very concerned about the Bolshevik threat and devoted considerable attention to gathering intelligence information and, where possible, prodding the local Chinese authorities to combat any efforts at Bolshevik infiltration of

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<sup>1</sup> My project is to publish in book form a selection of Skrine's writings (especially his letters to his mother) while he was en route to and on assignment in Kashgar and illustrate them with his photographs (many of them previously unpublished) and his wife's drawings. In addition this project will probably result in several articles assessing Skrine as a player in the "Great Game," addressing the issue of his relationship with his predecessor, Percy Etherton, and publishing and analyzing his transcriptions of texts of Turki folklore.

<sup>2</sup> There is one biography of Skrine, by his late cousin John Stewart, which is solidly based on the materials of the family archive: *Envoy of the Raj: The Career of Sir Clarmont Skrine, Indian Political Service* (Maidenhead: Porpoise Books, 1989). I am much in the debt of Mr. Stewart for his hospitality and encouragement when I began my study of Skrine several years ago.

<sup>3</sup> Cf., for example, the dismissive comments by Alastair Lamb in the 1986 reprint of Skrine's book: *Chinese Central Asia: An Account of Travels in Northern Kashmir and Chinese Turkestan*, with an Introduction by Alastair Lamb (Hong Kong, etc.: Oxford University Press, 1986), p. vi.



Xinjiang. Skrine also took very seriously his duties as the advocate for the interests of the British subjects in Xinjiang, most of them merchants from India proper or Afghanistan. In the process, he travelled extensively both north and south from Kashgar to other major oasis cities of Western Xinjiang such as Aksu, Yarkand, and Khotan. In commenting on the duties of the consul, he insisted that this was a job, which required regular "tours," since the legal cases involving British subjects were invariably decided locally.<sup>4</sup> Perhaps most important for our purposes here is Skrine's genuine curiosity to learn about the region, something which his touring enabled him to do in a way that would not have happened had he simply sat in the relatively comfortable confines of the *Chini Bagh* (the British consulate).

There is another aspect to his "touring" which deserves special mention. Before he left India, he spent some time at Dehra Dun, the headquarters of the Survey of India, whose mapping mandate also included Central Asia.<sup>5</sup> Thanks largely to Sir Aurel Stein's work, significant areas in and north of the mountains had been mapped, but there were still a lot of blank spots. Skrine was supplied with base maps and mapping equipment, instructed in its use, and spent some time practising, so that he would be ready to explore areas not visited by Stein. It is worth noting that, thanks to the consulate library and other reading he had done, Skrine knew ahead of time where other Europeans had or had not been. While he was by no means as intent as had been Sven Hedin to avoid following in the footsteps of others, Skrine often chose his routes in order to explore new ground. On his return he was able to provide the Survey of India with materials which were used to draw a detailed map of the mountainous region south of Kashgar around Mt. Kongur, which was then incorporated in the updates to the Survey's larger mapping project. Skrine also contributed material for the confidential route books published by the Government of India, which brought together information on all the routes of travel through the mountains and in both Chinese and Russian Central Asia. And he sent materials to Stein, which he thought would be of interest to the latter.

In general, Skrine was a good observer, kept careful notes, wrote extensive reports to his superiors and long letters home. With remarkable regularity, given the distances and difficulty of sending mail riders over the challenging terrain to India, back in London Momma Skrine received a letter a week from her son. Fortunately for us, she saved every one of them. When Skrine

<sup>4</sup> For example, British Library (hereafter BL) Oriental and India Office Collections (hereafter OIOC), MSS EurF 154/9, C. P. Skrine to his mother, Helen Skrine, Kashgar, August 30, 1923, p. [2], where he notes that the consul should spend six months of the year on the road. While one might dismiss such assertions as simply *ex post facto* justification for his not spending most of his time sitting in the Consulate in Kashgar, he seems to have a valid point. If nothing else, the touring would substantiate the British "presence" in the region.

<sup>5</sup> On his interaction with the Survey of India staff and on the equipment he was provided by them, see BL OIOC, MSS EurF 154/8, C. P. Skrine to Helen Skrine, Dehra Dun, April 19, 1922, pp. [2-3]. On the reception of his work when he returned to India, see BL OIOC, MSS EurF 154/10, C. P. Skrine to Helen Skrine, Simla, November 27, 1924, pp. 2-4.

returned to London, he took that archive in hand, along with his wife's letters (which, alas, have since disappeared) and other materials and published in 1926 a book, *Chinese Central Asia*.<sup>6</sup> He supplemented his personal observations with materials based on extensive reading in the published literature on the region.

Skrine was also a serious photographer. Of particular relevance here is his interest in landscape photography, which was not always easy in the conditions of Xinjiang where, more often than not, there was a great deal of dust haze. His letters and diary include technical data and a lot of comments on the successes and failures (of which there were plenty) of his photography, and he even included in his book an appendix with some technical advice on landscape photography there. Before he had actually written it, he insisted that the value of the book would be mainly for its photographs, although arguably that prediction considerably understates the value of the volume he produced.<sup>7</sup> A number of his other photos appeared in various periodicals as well as in one or two books by others who had been in the region.<sup>8</sup>

His book does provide a rather limited idea of the overall value of Skrine's materials concerning his time in Xinjiang. Honoring the obligation he had to clear its contents with his superiors in the Indian government, he was, if anything, overly scrupulous in self-censorship. For the most part the book is a travelogue and descriptive account, one which studiously avoids politics. As one might imagine, his letters, diaries and reports are another matter. Furthermore, various topics of largely family interest were not published, even though some of them do have a bearing on our subject here. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, we need to note his tendency to romanticize his surroundings. He was particularly fond of drawing parallels between the mountains and people of Xinjiang with those in his native Scotland.<sup>9</sup> It seems that rather early in his trip he planned on publishing about it; so even what one might wish to think are spontaneous and objective observations in

<sup>6</sup> See the appended bibliography for details on the several editions.

<sup>7</sup> See, for example, BL OIOC, MSS EurF 154/10, C. P. Skrine to Helen Skrine, Kashgar, January 3, 1924, p. [2].

<sup>8</sup> The most important of the periodical publications is his abundantly illustrated article, "The Alps of Qungur," *The Geographical Journal* 66 (5) (1925), pp. 385-411. A good many of his photos illustrated the book by the White Russian emigre Paul Nazaroff, who had taken refuge in Kashgar and with whom the Skrines frequently interacted there: P. S. Nazaroff, *Moved On! From Kashgar to Kashmir*, tr. Malcolm Burr (London: Allen & Unwin, 1935). The *London Times*, May 14, 1925, p. 20, published some of his photographs under the heading "Unknown Mountains Explored in Chinese Turkestan," and *The Times of India Illustrated Weekly*, April 10, 1927 Pictorial Supplement, included a number of them under the title "With a Camera Across the Roof of the World: The Picturesque People of Chinese Central Asia." Some were also published in a French illustrated magazine.

<sup>9</sup> For example, in BL OIOC, MSS EurF 154/10, C. P. Skrine to Helen Skrine, Kaying Bashi, August 8, 1924, p. 17, he explains why he called one of the small valleys "Glen Scotland" and lists the "7 things also found in Scotland", among them thistles and rain. His admiration for the Kyrgyz of the mountains in some instances was expressed in his comparison of them with Scottish Highlanders. Not having spent significant time at home in more than a decade of his Indian service, Skrine indeed was homesick for the hills of Perthshire.



his letters and notes show signs of being "literary" set-pieces in anticipation of their later use. When he finally did sit down to write up the material in systematic fashion, as he himself admitted, he was a compulsive re-writer. While none of this is surprising (surely the same kind of thing can be said about any number of other authors who travelled in and wrote about the region), it is important to stress that his writings, both public and private, present a view through a certain distorting lens. The same, of course, can be said for the photographs, since photography is hardly an objective art. Given a choice, I believe we should prefer the unpublished rather than published versions of his observations.

With a few exceptions, Skrine's unpublished written materials pertaining to his time in Kashgar are on permanent deposit in the Oriental and India Office Collections (OIOC) of the British Library (BL) (MSS EurF/154). Prints of some 200 of his Kashgar photographs (and a few of the negatives) are also there (Photo 920). A sizeable selection of the photographs and most of the surviving negatives are in the collections of the Royal Geographical Society (RGS) in London. While the writings have been grouped systematically in folders (e.g., letters home for the year 1922), the cataloguing of the photographs is still in progress, with as yet little having been done to identify and organize properly the material in the RGS.<sup>10</sup> Once the new wing on the RGS building has been completed (the target date is summer 2004), the hope is that the cataloguing process will move ahead rapidly. The RGS contains what is undoubtedly one of the most extensive and valuable collections of photographs of Inner Asia to be found anywhere: eventually catalogue access to them will be available through the internet. While Skrine himself attached labels to many of the prints and compiled lists of captions for photos he was submitting to publishers, some prints and most of the negatives can be identified only by someone familiar with the whole of the Skrine archive. It is likely that precise identifications for the location where some photographs were taken will never be established. Presumably this kind of problem is common to many collections of old photographs.

In addition to the material in these two major repositories, some Skrine material is still in the private holdings of his relatives, the Stewart family. Since the Stewarts deposited the most important of the documents and photographs in BL, about the only unique items of any consequence for our subject which they still hold are a few of Doris Skrine's unpublished drawings (she

<sup>10</sup> The file numbers for the catalogued prints in the RGS are: X38/018241-018292 (a few photos here are not from Central Asia), X696/024395, X761/025316, X802/025646-025650 (plus one unnumbered print), X830/025736 (and possibly 025737), and in the collection of smaller-format prints, 88627-88666. I have examined all the relevant Skrine photographs and negatives in the RGS but for a collection of lantern slides which he used in his lectures that were in remote storage and not accessible. It is possible that some of these are now unique images—for example, while still in Xinjiang he was anticipating lecturing on the Kongur mountains and indicated he might use some of his wife's drawings of the flora for illustrations. The original drawings have not survived unless they are in the lantern slides.

was a reasonably accomplished artist and did various portraits of people in the places where the Skrines traveled).<sup>11</sup>

Let us now turn to some categories of information which are to be found in the Skrine material.

1. *Climate*. While he apparently did not keep a daily record of weather, Skrine frequently comments on it and, for certain segments of his travels, records in his field diary maximum and minimum temperatures at specific times of day.<sup>12</sup> Unfortunately, the first volume of the field diary, which may have contained additional such specific information, has not been preserved. Naturally one has to ask whether what he experienced was the normal pattern. More than once he comments that the weather turned out just the opposite of what people had told him in advance to expect for the particular time of year.

Since Skrine had a particular interest in documenting the mountains he visited, his descriptions and photographs are very useful for what they tell us about glaciation. It is very likely that comparisons with modern photos taken from similar vantage points would be quite revealing about what one might guess is the retreat of many glaciers in the face of global warming.

2. *Flora*. He provides running commentary on the trees, flowers, fruits and vegetables encountered in various places, although using popular rather than scientific names. While in the mountains near Kongur (especially in the Kaying Valley), he and Doris collected specimens and she drew pictures of them. On his return, he sent the collection to the Royal Botanical Gardens to see whether they had discovered any previously unknown species (he had joked with his mother about possibly discovering something new which might be awarded a scientific name such as *Polyanthus Skrinii*) but was disappointed to learn that all were previously documented.<sup>13</sup> He was particularly interested in the extent of forestation in the mountains. In cases such as the Kaying Valley, which he extensively photographed, there would be some value to comparisons with photographs taken today. While he noted little logging, today there is a lot of it; one would like to know more about the degree to which there has been deforestation.

His landscape panoramas in some instances document the extent of cultivation in and around major towns. While he published some of these photos, others are unpublished, presumably because the mountains he was particularly interested in showing were obscured by haze. Even in those photos though, there is often exquisite detail of landscape in the foreground. Presumably one could identify the locations from which he took the photos and take comparison photos today. It is very likely that population growth and

<sup>11</sup> A few of Doris Skrine's drawings are in BL OIOC, MSS EurF 154/54, "Kashgar Sketches by D.F.S."; Skrine published one as the frontispiece to his book.

<sup>12</sup> OIOC, MSS EurF 154/43, Skrine's field diary, pp. 52ff.

<sup>13</sup> OIOC, MSS EurF 154/9, C. P. Skrine to Helen Skrine, Camp Kaying Bashu, July 12, 1923, p. 15]. I have in my temporary possession a very few Central Asian materials of Skrine's (all of them to be deposited in BL), including a four-page "List of Plants Collected. Determinations and distributional details by W. S. Turrill M.Sc., F.L.S., The Herbarium, Kew."



urbanization have totally filled many of the areas which had been uninhabited or under cultivation.<sup>14</sup> Skrine's writings also include numerous comments on where he encountered cultivation and the extent of irrigation (including at least one failed irrigation project by a local Chinese administrator). Of particular interest are his comments on where he encountered cultivation by the pastoral Kyrgyz herders in the mountains. Today one can still see traditional ditches dug by hand, but occasionally supplemented by plastic piping to bridge gullies (in Skrine's time, hollowed logs were used) [Fig. 2]. It is possible to compare photographs and see how some mountain valleys now have seasonal cultivation where it had not existed in Skrine's day [Fig. 3].

3. *Fauna*. The most abundant information he provides on local fauna is in the context of hunting and in connection with the fur trade. Skrine and his wife were enthusiastic hunters, in the first instance to supply the larder of their mountain camps or supplement the fare of the consulate kitchen. On one occasion, in the "jungle" near Maralbashi, Skrine and Paul Nazarov bagged a wild boar, which the Russians particularly relished.<sup>15</sup> He also attempted some trophy hunting (although with little success).<sup>16</sup> Quite often British army officers came up into Central Asia to hunt for sport. In particular the Skrines hosted a General Pigot, who spent several months there, including the dead of winter when temperatures were well below zero. While Skrine's material probably contains little data on wild animals which can be systematized in any way, there is quite a bit which gives a sense of relative abundance and location of certain species.<sup>17</sup> His comments about the difficulty in finding competent local hunters as guides when in the mountains are of some interest, especially since today one sees quite extensive evidence of hunters' camps when in the same mountains.

Skrine's letters home are full (to excess) of information about furs. Soon after his arrival in Kashgar he began to buy furs for presents. While he seems to have struggled a bit to avoid using his position for economic activity that would have been considered inappropriate by his superiors, he became rather heavily involved in the fur trade. Thus we learn a great deal about which furs

<sup>14</sup> To give one obvious example, the British Consulate (*Chini Bagh*) in Kashgar in Skrine's time had extensive grounds, some of which were planted as a formal garden and orchards, others available for Doris Skrine to grow vegetables and keep quite a menagerie of animals. One of Skrine's favorite photos of the consulate was taken with a telephoto lens from across the river; in it one can see extensive irrigated paddies below the consulate along the river. Now what is left of the *Chini Bagh* [Fig. 1] is crowded behind a modern hotel; presumably any trace of the former gardens and fields has disappeared.

<sup>15</sup> See BL OIOC, MSS EurF 154/9, C. P. Skrine to Helen Skrine, Kashgar, November 22, 1923, pp. [3-4].

<sup>16</sup> BL OIOC, MSS EurF 154/9, C. P. Skrine to Helen Skrine, Camp, Yangi Art Jilga, Southern Tian Shan, September 17, 1923, pp. 3-4; C. P. Skrine to Helen Skrine, Bai, Akin Circle (420 miles) from Kashgar on the Urunchi road), undated but ca. October 11, 1923, pp. 1-2; C. P. Skrine to Gen. Pigot, Bai, October 11, 1923.

<sup>17</sup> He picked up occasional tidbits of information about subjects such as hawks and falcons and the trade involving them; see BL OIOC, MSS EurF 154/43, p. 23, diary entry for November 6, 1923.



Figure 1 *The Chini Bagh, the British Consulate in Kashgar, as it appeared in 1996*

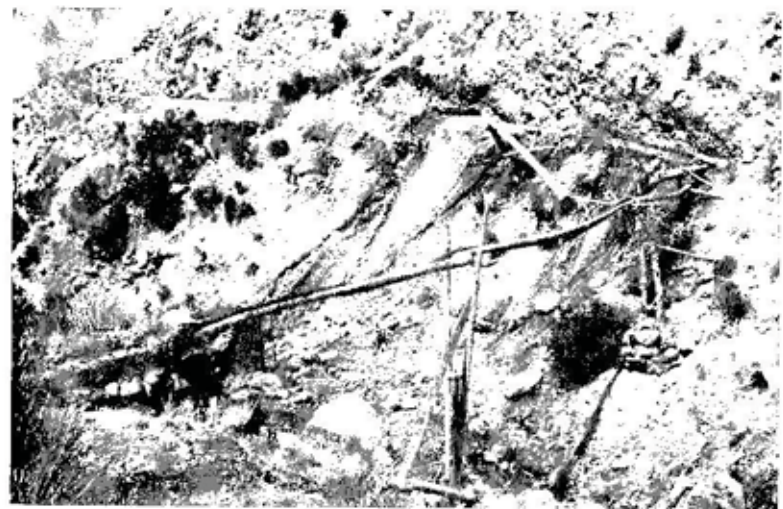


Figure 2 *Traditional irrigation ditches aided by a modern hose to bridge a gully in the Tigarmansu Valley region east of Mt. Kongur, 1996*





Figure 3 *The Kaying Valley east of Mt. Kongur, showing walls, cultivated fields and huts, 1996*

were abundant and what the market was for them. He included statistics on fur trade (a relatively minor item among other kinds of economic activity) when he filed summary reports on the trade of Xinjiang, reports which were printed by the Government of India.<sup>18</sup> None of this information gives even a hint of a scarcity of fur-bearing animals, not that we necessarily should expect that in the 1920s.

4. *Mineral and petroleum resources.* As part of his intelligence-gathering activity, Skrine paid close attention to sources of valuable minerals. He comments on the trade in jade (and the way that the local Chinese officials tried to control the best of it).<sup>19</sup> He described gold extraction (one might hesitate to call it "mining") in the mountains on the southern fringes of the Taklamakan.<sup>20</sup> In one of the mountain valleys near Kongur there was a small copper-mining operation, which the local Kyrgyz had tried (unsuccessfully) to keep hidden from the Chinese authorities.<sup>21</sup> One of his most interesting

<sup>18</sup> "Trade of Chinese Turkistan with India and Adjacent Countries for the year ending the 31st May, 1923," Supplement to the *Indian Trade Journal*, Vol. LXX, No. 899, September 13, 1923.

<sup>19</sup> BL OIOC, MSS EurF 154/8, C. P. Skrine to Helen Skrine, Khotan, November 26, 1922, p. [2]; C. P. Skrine to Helen Skrine, Keriya, December 4, 1922, p. 2.

<sup>20</sup> BL OIOC, MSS EurF 154/10, C. P. Skrine to Helen Skrine, Kutaz Langar, 20 m[iles] S.E. of Khotan, April 27, 1924, pp. 8-10. In writing his mother about the presumably unlimited riches of the gold fields, Skrine was carried away to the extent of imagining this region might become part of the British Empire and he the "Governor of British Turkestan." I think the comment was rather tongue-in-cheek, since elsewhere he is pretty sober about the limits of British interest in the region.

<sup>21</sup> BL OIOC, MSS EurF 154/43, p. 77, diary entry for July 29, 1924; p. 80, diary entry for July 31, 1924.

official reports was a compilation of all the information he could find on petroleum extraction.<sup>22</sup> Given the interest in exploiting Xinjiang's petroleum resources today, his picture of the beginnings of such a process (at a time when indeed it was in its infancy) is quite striking. Skrine also has some scattered comments on the related fact that, because of the near cessation of cross-border trade with the establishment of the Bolsheviks in Central Asia, the importation of Caspian region petroleum products (by camel caravan!) had nearly ceased, thus making local supplies the more important.

5. *Population and patterns of settlement.* Skrine's writings include quite frequent references to where he found farms and herders' camps. As with any of his material about the environment, it is not always easy to pinpoint locations on a map. He illustrated some of his letters home with fairly detailed sketch maps of sections of his itineraries, and it may be possible to take those maps and his verbal descriptions to plot his exact routes on detailed modern topographical maps.<sup>23</sup> However, it was only in the region around Kongur that he undertook actually to draw a precise map which allows us to be pretty confident of where he was at any moment described in his writings.<sup>24</sup> The exceptions for other areas, of course, would be instances in which we have photographs and can determine from them where he was at the time they were taken.

His descriptions of herders in the mountains often tell us at least the precise number of households, if not the exact population of them. However, we do not, as a rule, learn numbers of their animals. Thus any calculation of possible human impact on the landscape would be, at best, an approximation. In many places where Skrine observed the Kyrgyz living in yurts whose location may have shifted from one summer to the next, thus perhaps reducing the environmental impact, today one sees permanent huts which are occupied during much of the summer season in the high pastures. There is ample evidence of scars on the environment in the vicinity of such camps. Skrine's data also may be used for comparisons of how patterns of winter settlement and administrative jurisdictions have changed, since there seems now under Chinese rule to have been a substantial consolidation of small scattered settlements.

In certain circumstances, even in his time, there was evidence of dislocations of the local population with the result that the carrying capacity of the

<sup>22</sup> BL OIOC, MSS EurF 154/39, "Occurrences of Oil in Chinese Turkestan" undated but presumably 1924; copy also in BL OIOC, L/P&S/11/247, file P2511/1924, with dates 28 Mar. 1924-18 June 1924.

<sup>23</sup> Examples of his sketch maps are BL OIOC, MSS EurF 154/9, C. P. Skrine to Helen Skrine, Camp Kaying Bashi, July 12, 1923, p. 18; C. P. Skrine to Helen Skrine, Garden of Abdus Sattar Haji, Aksu (Old City), undated, but ca. Oct. 18, 1923, p. [1].

<sup>24</sup> His Kongur map was first published to illustrate his "The Alps of Qungur." I used it quite successfully to navigate along some of the same routes when trekking alone in those mountains in 1996. On my trek, see my "Exploring the 'Kongur Alps.' Unknown Side of Mustagh Ata," *Himalayan Journal*, 54 (1998), pp. 25-32.



mountain pastures was exceeded. He reported how refugees from what is today eastern Kyrgyzstan had fled the Bolsheviks and temporarily settled on the Chinese side of the border, taking over the pastures of the inhabitants there (Kazakhs?) and driving them destitute since there was not enough grazing for all.<sup>25</sup> Even after the refugees went back, the local pastoral economy did not recover, since too many of the animals had died.

Even if Skrine's material does not give us much for quantification, it has descriptive value, especially since some of the areas he visited had not been previously (or, it seems, subsequently) described.<sup>26</sup> Even in areas he visited, which had previously been described by European travellers (e.g., Hedin, Deasy and Stein) or where there has been some modern study (e.g., by Hoppe), the amount of information we have is quite limited. Systematic study in some of the mountain regions Skrine visited has yet to be undertaken.

6. *Communication, routes of travel and the travel experience.* Popular perceptions of travel through Inner Asia tend to make of the experience something nigh humanly impossible given the difficulties of terrain, the lack of roads and so on. Of course there is ample evidence through millennia to disabuse us of that impression, which is not to say that travel was easy. One cannot but be impressed by the regularity and reliability of the Consulate's "pony-express" weekly mail service, which ran on schedule most of the time even in winter, taking the riders from Kashgar through the snows of the 15,000 ft. Mintaka Pass and down along the perilous cliffs of the upper Hunza Valley. When connections went smoothly, it would take little more than forty days transit for a letter to or from London.<sup>27</sup> If anything, in Skrine's estimate, the problems with the postal service were less ones of geography than they were ones of petty bureaucracy. It is worth noting that his reports from Kashgar also include a substantial amount of information on the twentieth-century communications revolution there, with the construction of a wireless station by the Marconi Company, which had a contract with the Chinese government.

One of Skrine's significant contributions was to update for the British General Staff the classified route books for Xinjiang, which are a valuable but largely ignored source of information for anyone who would wish to trace historic routes of travel in Inner Asia.<sup>28</sup> These are itineraries along any and all

<sup>25</sup> BL OIOC, MSS EurF 154/43, p. 2, diary entry for September 7, 1923. For more on what Skrine heard about the economic impact of Bolshevik policies on those who went across the frontier from Semirech'ia and then returned to the Russian-controlled side, see *ibid.*, p. 9, information of Sept. 21–25, 1923.

<sup>26</sup> I have discussed in some detail where Skrine's material complements what we know from Stein and the scant recent literature for the specific example of the Karatash Valley and Kyrgyz areas around Kongur; see my "The 'Mysterious and Terrible Karatash Gorges': Notes and Documents on the Explorations of Stein and Skrine," *The Geographical Journal*, 163 (3) (1999), pp. 306–320.

<sup>27</sup> Skrine systematized his information on the various routes to Kashgar in his "The Roads to Kashgar," *Journal of the Central Asian Society*, XII (1925), pt. III, pp. 226–250.

<sup>28</sup> General Staff, India, *Routes in Sinkiang* (Simla: Government of India Press, 1926). There are subsequent supplements; also there is an equivalent guide for Russian/Soviet Central Asia.

routes which the British military could document on the basis of whatever sources might be available. In some instances, information was drawn from Russian travel accounts, which the British were quite diligent in trying to obtain and translate, but more often the sources were the British consuls, explorers and sportsmen who went north through the passes. Typical route book entries would describe camping places, sources of water and grazing along the way, distances, heights of passes, and quality of the trail. Skrine was able to correct some of the earlier information and also provide new material for routes not previously known.

His travels remind us how much the western travellers depended on local sources of information and support. One tended to negotiate for transport and lodging as one proceeded; often one's success depended on finding a knowledgeable local guide. The same pattern is true today if one ventures off the beaten track into some of the same mountains Skrine explored. Skrine is always careful to qualify his statements when he talks about exploring new country—it is not as though he is the first person to have seen some of it, but merely the first European.

Skrine's travels frequently took him along the edge of the Taklamakan desert, where the use of wheeled vehicles (the local two-wheeled *mapa* carts but also the four-wheeled Russian *tarantass*) was common, and one could move with amazing rapidity except in places where sand had drifted over the road. He expressed particular appreciation for the quality of public works projects such as bridges and *sarais* which had been built under Yakub Beg during his brief period of control in Xinjiang in the 1860s and 1870s.<sup>29</sup> In Skrine's opinion, once the Chinese re-took control in the province the construction was of a distinctly inferior quality.

In comparing travel today with that in Skrine's time, there are obvious examples of how modern technology and politics have changed certain things, but not so much others. The Karakorum Highway that today connects Xinjiang with Pakistan is a major example.<sup>30</sup> When Skrine and his contemporaries were attempting to traverse the Gez River gorge where the highway runs today, high water in the summer prevented passage [Fig. 4]. This forced him to seek alternative routes, known at that time only to the local inhabitants. In his time the main routes between Western Xinjiang and India were either over the Karakorum Pass and through Leh (in Ladakh) or over the Mintaka Pass to get to Hunza. Now both of those routes are closed, and travellers drive down

<sup>29</sup> BL OIOC, MSS EurF 154/8, C. P. Skrine to Helen Skrine, Pinalma, November 11, 1922, fol. 2v 3r.

<sup>30</sup> The impact of the building of the Karakorum Highway on the mountainous regions of Northern Pakistan has been the subject of serious study by a multi-year Pakistani-German research project. The German geographer Hermann Kreutzmann has published extensively results of this project's activity, for example, "The Karakoram Highway: The Impact of Road Construction on Mountain Societies," *Modern Asian Studies* 25 (4) (1991), pp. 711–736. It would be valuable to have an analogous project for the areas along the highway in southwestern Xinjiang.



the highway across the Khunjerab Pass. In the upper Hunza Valley in northern Pakistan, Skrine's party proceeded along treacherous, narrow paths suspended high above the river where today the highway has been blasted out along a lower route (although it is still not secure from being blocked by landslides).

If one goes into the more remote mountain valleys—an example would be the Karatash River Valley, which had been traversed for the first time by Stein and only for the second by Skrine (amongst Europeans)—conditions today are much closer to those of 80 years ago. However, there too one can see now unused *rafiks* clinging to cliffs [Fig. 5], and at least some of the traditional cantilever-style bridges (such as existed in Skrine's time and long before) have been reinforced with steel rods and concrete so as not to be swept away in the summer floods.

As the foregoing overview suggests, Skrine's materials offer a great deal for those who would wish to study physical and human geography and ecological issues in Xinjiang in the early 1920s. Some of this information has long been available in his book, although often in truncated form. Not all of it would merit publication in the kind of edition I am planning, but those with a particular interest in a timeline of changes in the natural and human environment of Inner Asia may well benefit from consulting Skrine's unpublished writings and photographs.



Figure 4. At the edge of the Karakorum Highway in the lower Gez River gorge, 1996



Figure 5. Rafik clinging to cliffs above the raging torrent of the Karatash River, 1996

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