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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). “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. 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 Queska, 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. Like Etherton, he was very concerned about the Bolshevik threat and devoted considerable attention to gathering intelligence information and, where possible, probing the local Chinese authorities to combat any efforts at Bolshevik infiltration of...
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. 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. 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 files of Stein and other reading, Skrine knew much of the area before he himself went there. While he was by no means as thorough as Stein, 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. 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 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. 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 and 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 written it, he insisted that the value of the book would be mainly for its photographs, although he argued that the book would be of interest in the full range of photography, although he argued that the volume would not produce. 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.

His book does provide a rather limited idea of the overall value of Skrine’s materials concerning his time in Xinjiang. Honoring the obligation 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 tract on 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 might 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. 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

4 For example, British Library (hereafter BL) Oriental and India Office Collections (hereafter OIOC), MSS Euf 154/9, C.P. Skrine to his mother, Helen Skrine, Kashgar, August 30, 1923, p. [2], where he notes that his consul would spend six months of the year on the road. While one might dismiss such assertions as simply post facto justification for his not spending most of his time 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.

5 On his interaction with the Survey of India staff and on the equipment he was provided by them, see BL OIOC, MSS Euf 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 Euf 154/10, C.P. Skrine to Helen Skrine, Simla, November 27, 1924, pp. 2–4.

6 See the appended bibliography for details on the several editions.

7 See, for example, BL OIOC, MSS Euf 154/10, C.P. Skrine to Helen Skrine, Kashgar, January 1, 1924, p. [2].


9 For example, in BL OIOC, MSS Euf 154/10, C.P. Skrine to Helen Skrine, Yangzi Bashi, August 8, 1924, p. 17, he explains why he called one of the small valleys “Cleg Scotland,” and noted that “7 things also found in Scotland”, among them the mist and rain. His admiration for the Karakum mountains in some instances was expressed is 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 home sick for the hills of Persia.
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 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 Kashmir are on permanent deposit in the Oriental and India Office Collections (OIOC) of the British Library (BL) (MSS Eur F/154). Prints of some 200 of his Kashmir 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. Once the work 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 was a reasonably accomplished artist and did various portraits of people in the places where the Skrines traveled).11

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. 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 Kongar (especially in the Kazing 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 Skrinei) but was disappointed to learn that all were previously documented.12 He was particularly interested in the extent of forestation in the mountains. In cases such as the Kazing Valley, which he extensively photographed, there would be some value to comparisons with photographs taken today. While he noted little change, 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 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

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11 The file numbers for the catalogued prints in the RGS are: X38/0218241-0218292 (a few photos here are not from Central Asia), N99/024935, X75/025316, X92/025646-025650 (plus one unnumbered print), X93/025796 (and possibly 025797), and in the collection of small format prints, 88927-8866. 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 Xining he was anticipating lecturing on the Kongar 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.

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

13 OIOC, MSS Eur F/154/43, Skrine's field diary, pp. 512ff.

14 OIOC, MSS Eur F/154/9, C. F. Skrine to Helen Skrine, Camp Kazing Bashi, 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 distribution 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. 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 herdsmen 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 Nazaroff bagged a wild boar, which the Russians particularly relished. He also attempted some trophy hunting (although with little success). Quite often British army officers came up into Central Asia to hunt for sport. In particular the Skrines hosted a General Pigott, 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. 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

Figure 1 The Chini Bogh, the British Consulate in Kashgar, as it appeared in 1906

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

14 To give one obvious example, the British Consulate (Chini Bogh) in Kashgar in Skrine's time had extensive grounds, some of which were planted as a formal garden and orchard, 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 Bogh [Fig. 1] is crowded behind a modern hotel; presumably any trace of the former gardens and fields has disappeared.

15 See BL OIOC, MSS 165/1, C. P. Skrine to Helen Skrine, Kashgar, November 22, 1923, pp. 3-4.

16 BL OIOC, MSS 165/49, C. P. Skrine to Helen Skrine, Camp, Yangi Art Jila, Southern Tian Shan, September 17, 1923, pp. 3-4; C. P. Skrine to Helen Skrine, Bayan Ulan, October 11, 1923, pp. 1-2; C. P. Skrine to Gen. Pigott, Bayan Ulan, October 11, 1923.

17 He picked up occasional tidbits of information about subjects such as hawks and falcons and the trade involving them; see BL OIOC, MSS 165/43, p. 23; diary entry for November 6, 1923.
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. 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). He described gold extraction (one might hesitate to call it “mining”) in the mountains on the southern fringes of the Takhlamakan. 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. One of his most interesting official reports was a compilation of all the information he could find on petroleum extraction. 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. 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. 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

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19 BL, OIOC, MSS EurF 154/8, C. P. Skrine to Helen Skrine, Khotan, November 26, 1922, p. 2.
20 BL, OIOC, MSS EurF 154/10, C. P. Skrine to Helen Skrine, Khotan, April 27, 1924, p. 8.
21 “Occurrence of Gil in Chinese Turkistan” undated but presumably 1924; copy also in BL, OIOC, L/P&S/1/247, file F2511/1924, with dates 28 Mar. 1924–18 June 1924.
22 Examples of his sketch maps are BL, OIOC, MSS EurF 154/9, C. P. Skrine to Helen Skrine, October 26, 1923, p. 18; C. P. Skrine to Helen Skrine, Garden of Abdul Sattar, Alasai (Old City), undated but ca. Oct. 18, 1923, p. 11.
23 His Kongur map was first published to illustrate his “The Alps of Ongur.” 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, 34 (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.\textsuperscript{25} 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.\textsuperscript{26} Even in areas he visited,
which had previously been described by European travellers (e.g., Hedin,
Desay 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 percep-
tions 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
disburse 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.\textsuperscript{27} 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 gov-
ernment.

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.\textsuperscript{28} These are itineraries along any and all

\textsuperscript{25} II. OIOC, MSS Eur F 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 Semirechensk and then returned to the Russian-controlled side, see ibid., p. 9, infor-
mation of Sept. 21-25, 1923.

\textsuperscript{26} 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 Karakoram and Kyrgyz
areas around Kongur, see my "The Mysterious and Terrible Karakoram Gorges: Notes and
Documents on the Explorations of Stein and Skrine," The Geographical Journal, 163 (3) (1999),
pp. 306-320.

\textsuperscript{27} Skrine systematized his information on the various routes to Kashgar in his "The Roads to

\textsuperscript{28} 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.

\textsuperscript{29} II. OIOC, MSS Eur F 154/8, C. P. Skrine to Helen Skrine, Peshawar, November 11, 1922, flt.

\textsuperscript{30} The impact of the building of the Karakoram Highway on the mountainous regions of Northern
Pakistan has been the subject of serious study by a multi-year Pakistani-German joint research project.
The German geographer Hermann Kreuzmann has published extensively on 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 Karakash 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 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 Gyz River gorge, 1996

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