

The 'Mysterious and Terrible Karatash Gorges': Notes and Documents on the Explorations by Stein and Skrine

DANIEL C. WAUGH

Department of History and Jackson School of International Studies, University of Washington, Seattle, Washington 98195 USA

E-mail: dwaugh@u.washington.edu

This paper was accepted for publication in June 1998

This paper is a discussion of the exploration of the Karatash River valley in the 'Kongur Alps' of Xinjiang (China), south of Kashgar. The paper quotes at length unpublished documents concerning the explorations by Aurel Stein in 1913 and Clarmont Skrine in 1922–23, the first Europeans to pass through the forbidding Karatash Gorge. This material is juxtaposed to contemporary observations from August 1996, which illustrate how poorly known the region still is and how in many ways the life of the indigenous Kyrgyz herders has little changed. Several photographs are provided, among them two previously unpublished ones taken by Skrine.

KEY WORDS: China, Karatash River, Xinjiang, Stein (Aurel), Skrine (Clarmont), Kyrgyz.

A FEW HOURS' DRIVE south of Kashgar on the Karakoram Highway is Lake Karakul (Fig. 1). On a typical summer day at the lake, tourist minibuses come and go, stopping long enough for their patrons to eat at the restaurant and perhaps be photographed sitting on a camel, against the backdrop of 7546-metre Mustagh Ata. The Kyrgyz who live in Subax and the other nearby villages enjoy the benefits of electricity (one house even sports a satellite TV antenna), may try to sell polished rocks or other trinkets to the tourists, and may even know a few words in various foreign languages. Their primary occupation is largely traditional – animal husbandry which involves generally short migrations to mountain pastures above the lake and on the flanks of the great mountain – but some of them clearly make a good living transporting climbers and their gear to the base camp on its north-west ridge. Accessible as it is, this area north of Mustagh Ata was visited by Thomas Hoppe in 1990, when he was collecting field data on the Kyrgyz for his study of the ethnic minorities of Xinjiang (Hoppe, 1995). The Chinese have even produced a superb, detailed topographical map with inscriptions in English, encompassing the region from Mt Kongur, on the one side of Lake Karakul, to Mustagh Ata on the other (Mi Desheng). In short, the area it covers would now seem to be well-known and easily accessible.

However, to generalize from such an impression can be misleading. In fact there is surprisingly limited outside knowledge of many long-inhabited mountain regions in Xinjiang, among them the jumbled peaks

and narrow valleys east of Kongur and Mustagh Ata and within two days hike from Lake Karakul. In the 1950s, the Soviet ethnographer S.M. Abramzon relied heavily on emigré information for his study of the Kyrgyz in Xinjiang (Abramzon, 1959). In 1980 the British expedition planning a first ascent on Kongur could not obtain, in advance, detailed topographic information (Bonington, 1982; Ward, 1983). Even more recently, ethnographers studying the Kazakh and Kyrgyz nomadic pastoralists in Xinjiang have been able to gain only limited access for fieldwork, and then not always in the areas that had been visited by Europeans earlier in the twentieth century (Hoppe, 1988; 1995). As a result, we still know too little about possible changes over time in patterns of settlement, economic life and communication among the herders.

The author discovered, in 1996, how difficult it is to obtain sufficient information even to plan a trek into the mountains drained by the Karatash River (Koshan, Ku'shan Ho) east of Kongur and Mustagh Ata (Waugh, 1998). In response to initial queries about the route, the China Xinjiang Mountaineering Association, from whom a permit was obtained, was uncertain as to whether it was possible to cross the Karatash Pass to reach Lake Karakul. They informed the author only *after* a 19-day trek that in recent memory they had abandoned as too dangerous a guided trek up the Karatash. The author found himself relying primarily on material published by Clarmont P. Skrine, who as British Consul-General in Kashgar had explored and mapped in this area in 1922–1924.

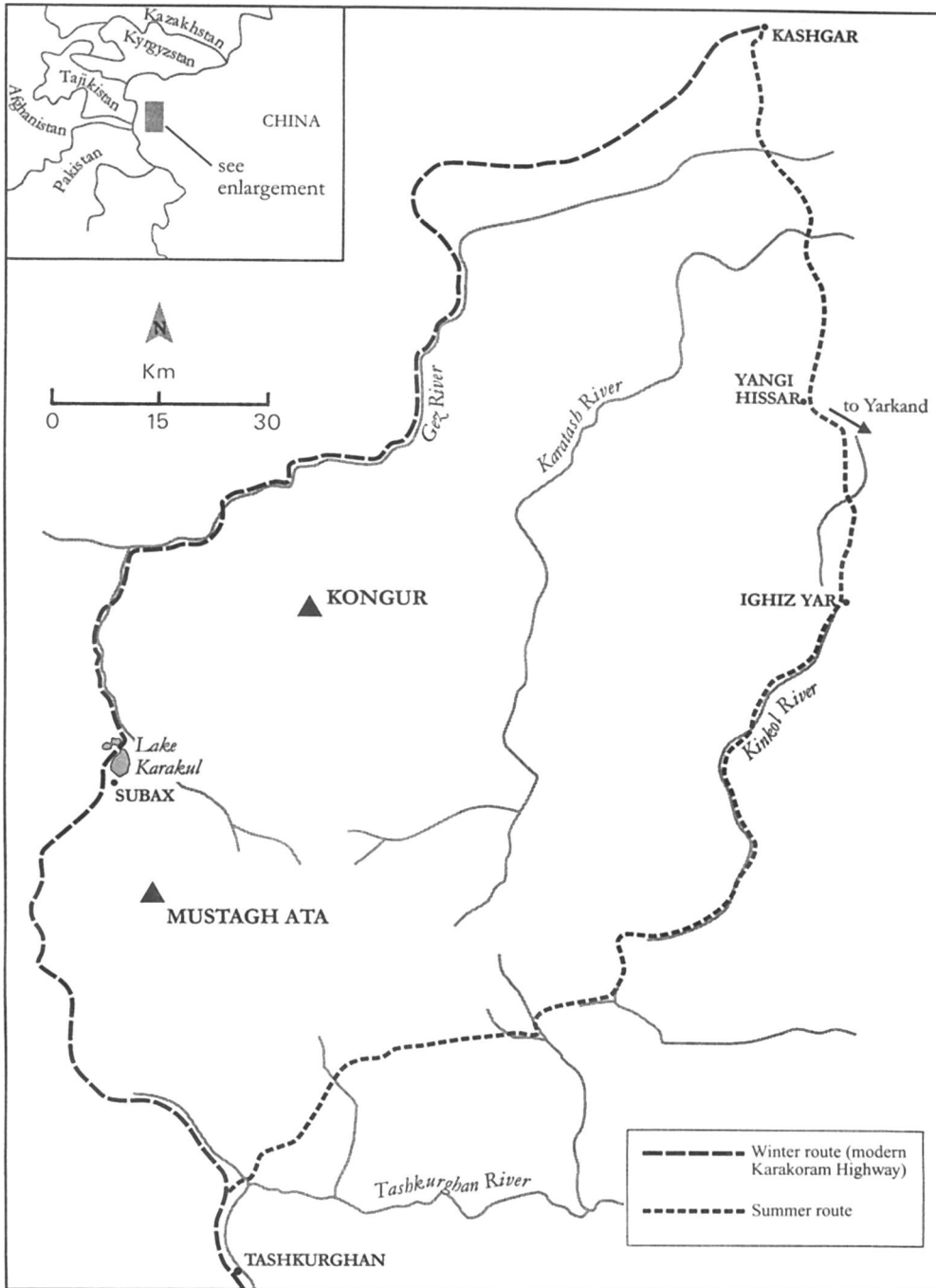


Fig. 1. The Winter and Summer routes from Tashkurghan to Kashgar

In instances such as this, indeed early explorers' observations – not all of them published – often are the most detailed source of information, although even retracing their routes can be difficult.

In a sense, the Karatash was very well-known historically, but only in its upper reaches. These lie on what seems to have been a standard trade route from Yarkand to Lake Karakul and beyond. Probably the

first European to follow this route was the British explorer and agent Ney Elias in 1885, who crossed the Ghijak Pass to Chat (Qat) on the Karatash, followed the river to its source near the Karatash Pass, and went on to the lake (Fig. 2). It was the unexplored and treacherous lower reaches of the Karatash which interested Sir Aurel Stein. He became the first European to traverse that part of the river in 1913, probably one of his more dangerous undertakings, but when he first published about his extended and rewarding Third Expedition, he merely summarized the feat in a paragraph (Stein, 1916; 1923). His lengthier description 15 years after the event admitted the difficulty of the undertaking and included a number of photographs (Stein, 1928). With Stein's encouragement, in 1923 Skrine became the second European to complete the traverse, while undertaking to extend his predecessor's surveys into the heart of the 'Kongur Alps'. On his return to England, Skrine lectured to the

Royal Geographical Society on the Kongur Alps; his description of both his and Stein's exploration of the Karatash appeared in *The Geographical Journal* of November 1925 (Skrine, 1925a). His book, *Chinese Central Asia*, contains additional material on his explorations, and he helped revise descriptions in the India General Staff book on routes in Xinjiang (Skrine, 1926; General Staff, 1926). In 1996, the author took with him copies of Skrine's article and its accompanying map.

Subsequently, an examination has been made of Skrine's unpublished correspondence (Skrine, 1922; 1923) and uncatalogued photographs, and more importantly Stein's correspondence and field diary for 1913 (Stein, 1913a and 1913b), where there is considerable detail that he did not publish on his venture into the Karatash. In order to provide a sense of the way they learned about the Karatash and help provide a base-line for further, systematic study of the

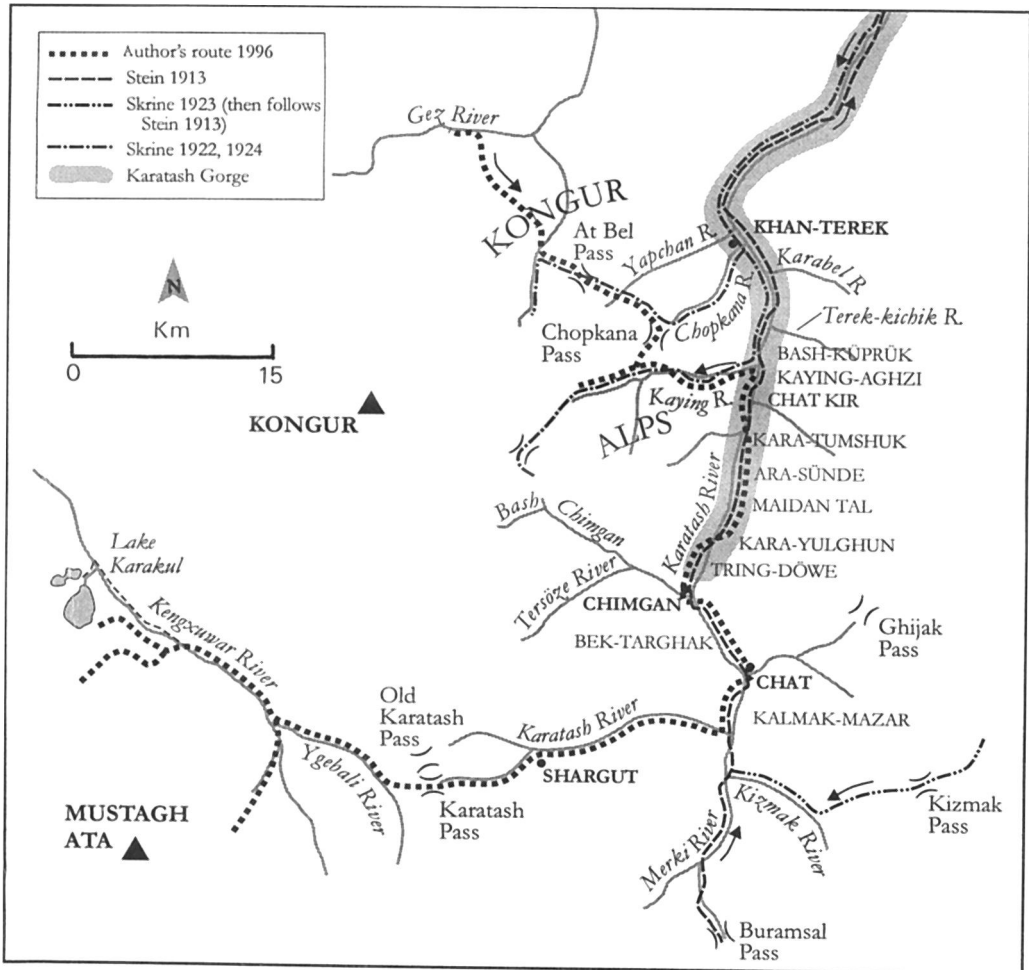


Fig. 2. *The Karatash River and the Kongur Alps*

area, portions of the documents are reproduced here, and comment is made on their observations. It is striking how little conditions of travel and, in many respects, patterns of settlement and economic activity have changed in the more than 80 years since Stein first entered the Karatash Valley.

Where Stein tended to understate difficulties he overcame, in contrast Skrine did not hesitate to emphasize that the gorges of the lower Karatash were 'mysterious and terrible'. In a letter home dated 3 October 1922, he provided a vivid impression of the obstacles to the passage of the river (heading upstream) on his initial, unsuccessful attempt:

Our next march was to Kaying Aghzi ('mouth of the Kaying [glen]'), not long but distinctly difficult. The road lay almost continuously over the stones and boulders of the river banks & the swift relentless green flood had to be crossed 8 or 9 times. The reason why the Karatash River is practically unknown is that while in winter and spring it is blocked with ice and snow, in summer the river is swollen by melting snows & the increased volume of the glacier streams makes the passage of baggage animals up or down impossible. Only the Kirghiz find their way along appalling 'paths' along the cliff face, tracks which make you dizzy merely to look at them from below. Once I noticed, high up on an apparently sheer, smooth-faced precipice a tree-trunk which looked as if it had been glued to the rock face. I was wondering how on earth it had got there, when the Beg who accompanied us told me that it had been placed there by Kirghiz to help them over a bad bit in summer! The last few miles of the march were through the Tügene Tar, a nasty bit of winding gorge down which an icy wind swept continually. The river was only just fordable, it being mid-October – a fortnight earlier we would not have got as far as we did. As it was, we had to give up our idea of penetrating right up to Chimgan, 10,250 ft. up & a flourishing Kirghiz settlement... The march between Kaying Aghzi and Chimgan was found to be quite impossible even for ridden horses, such was the force of the stream. We were too early, the Kirghiz told us. It was not possible for animals to get up to Chimgan till November or early December. The river is crossed 16 times in this section, and the walls of the gorges, many thousand feet high, almost meet overhead in some places.

Skrine, 1922

Images such as these were in the author's mind in late July 1996 when crossing the Gez River on a foot-bridge next to the Karakoram Highway and heading up into the mountains. The first section of the route largely followed Skrine's on the trails frequented by the Kyrgyz in the Tigarmansu, Chopkana and Kaying Valleys (Fig. 2). At one point in the early going, owing to a silly mistake in interpreting the map, the author was in a precarious position above an impassible cliff – it was a sharp reminder of the dangers of venturing alone. In fact in some ways distinguished predecessors had an easier time of it. They travelled with a caravan of pack animals and attendants and used local guides all along the way. Not a believer in 'toothbrush travel', as he called it, Skrine even included in his camp kit 'a tin-lined wooden bath-tub of immense solidity' with hot and cold water tanks (Skrine, 1926). Except for a short stretch noted

below, the present author was alone and largely unsupported. The journey nearly met a tragic end a second time, in an incautious attempt to ford the Kaying at a point where a bridge had been washed out. Shaken from having been swept against the boulders of that glacial stream, the author arrived with misgivings at its junction with the unfordable torrent of the Karatash where he hoped to head up into the narrowest part of the 'mysterious and terrible gorges'. Passage was to be from north to south, the opposite direction to the traverses of Stein and Skrine. No visit was made to the lower Karatash, but, unlike on their journeys, the river was followed practically to its source near the Karatash Pass. Using Stein as the primary source, his route from south to north will now be followed, beginning with his preparation for the trip.

Stein's accomplishments rested to a considerable degree on meticulous advance planning. As he was preparing to return to Central Asia for his Third Expedition, on 8 July 1913, he wrote to George Macartney, the British consul in Kashgar:

The other points about which I should be very glad to obtain preliminary information through your friendly help are the following: Will it be practicable to travel down the Kara-tash or Beshkan Valley from the side of Chichiklik, by [?] Kara-kul L. by the middle of September? The route does not appear to have ever been properly surveyed, but would suit me particularly well. In June 1906 Ram Singh found it closed lower down by the summer flood. The difficulty is probably in the lowermost portion, not higher up. Consequently reliable information is more likely to be obtained from Yangi Hissar than from the Kirghiz. Of course I should send all heavy baggage via Ighizyar...

Stein, 1913a: Fol. 151v

In fact Stein seems to have been less interested in the Karatash than he was in two potential archaeological sites west and north-west of Yangi Hissar that had been mentioned by Forsyth.

What Stein planned was to explore a new route from Tashkurghan to Kashgar. Although there were some variants, the normal Summer route (Figs 1 and 3) traversed several passes, crossing the Shindi River valley south of Mustagh Ata to the Chichiklik Plateau, past the settlement of Toile-bulun and on to the Kinkol River. The route emerged from the mountains above Ighiz Yar and met the Kashgar-Yarkand road at the regional administrative centre of Yangi Hissar. The Winter route was that followed today by the Karakoram Highway, west and north of Mustagh Ata and then north of Kongur through the Gez River gorge, where high water in Summer prevented passage. It was on his way back to India in 1924 that Skrine discovered alternative routes, known only to the local Kyrgyz, which circumvented the Gez during high-water season (General Staff, 1926; Skrine, 1925a; 1925b; 1926).

On 2 August 1913, Macartney responded to Stein's request for information:

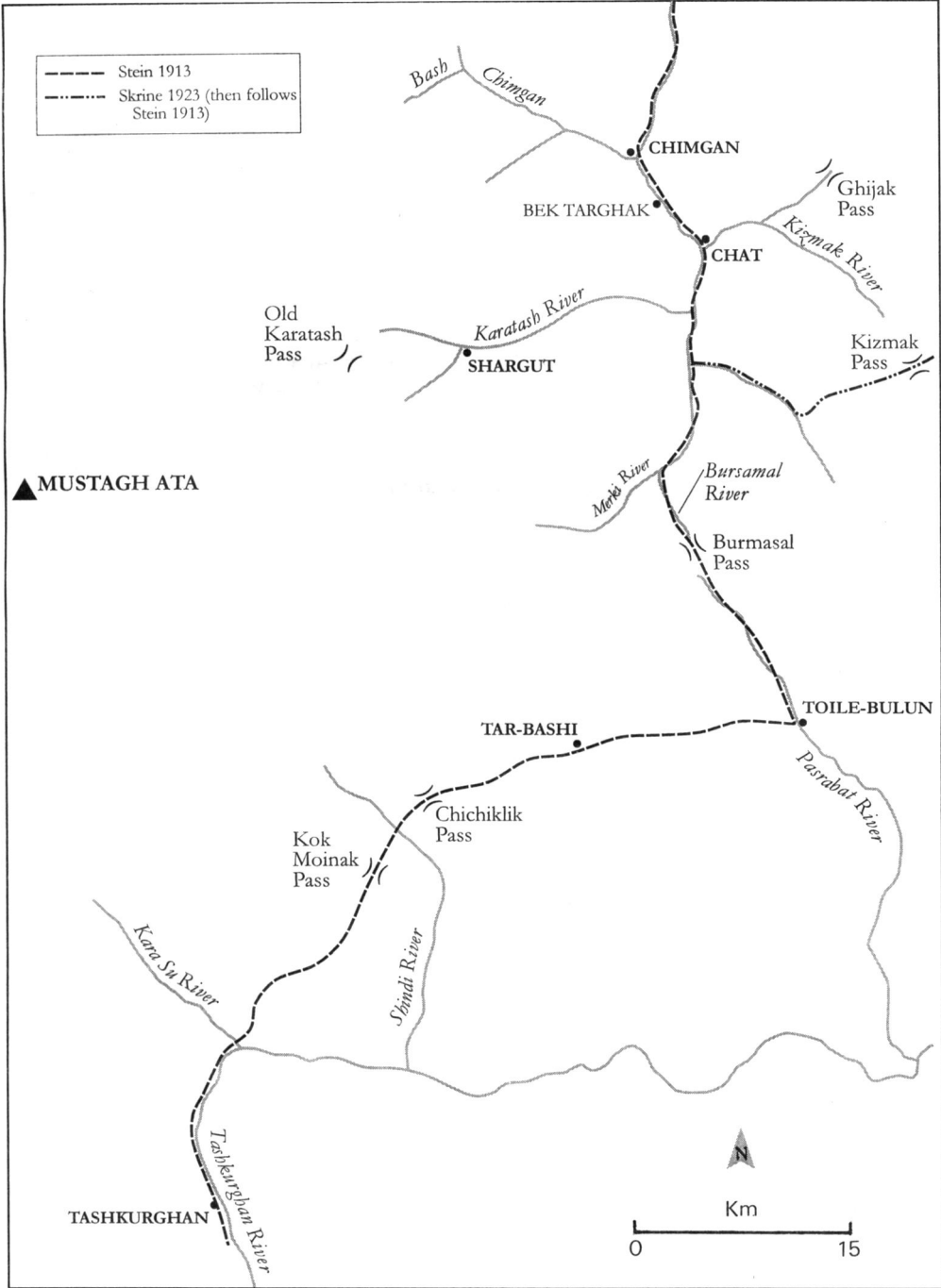


Fig. 3. The Karatash River and its southern approaches

Karatash Route. So far I have been unable to get precise information as to whether you can penetrate to the plains by following the valley of the Karatash River, down. One of my late dakmen, Rozi Akhun Ladakhi, tells me that he once went to Sarikol by the following marches:

- 1 Kitchik Karaul to Ghajik Pass.
- 2 Cross Ghajik Pass to Karatash River.
- 3 Cross Karatash river, follow it up, cross Karatash Pass to Shwakte.
- 4 Shwakte to Tagharma.

There is evidently some difficulty in following the Karatash River lower down; but what that difficulty is, I don't know. According to Rozi Akhun, there is a place called Khoja Pakhlan Khoja Mazar situated at the spot (presumably half in the hills & half in the plain?) where the Karatash River emerges from the hills. I have just sent Rozi Akhun to that Mazar to inquire if, by the beginning of Sept., it is possible to travel all the way from Karatash Pass down the Karatash Valley to the Mazar. I shall let you know further when Rozi Akhun returns in 5 or 6 days...

P.S. (dated 8 August):...Rozi Akhun has just returned from Khoja Pakhlan Khojam. He tells me that he saw there Mohamad Khalik, the Kirghiz Beg of Aktu Bazar & got the following information from him: Owing to the volume of water & the narrowness of the Valley, it is not possible just now to follow the Karatash River down to Khoja Pakhlan Khojam. But this can be done after 40 days (15th Sept.?) but his ponies will have to be unloaded. The valley is more or less cultivated by Kirghiz. Mohamad Khalik has his own cattle in it, & knows the road. The accompanying sketch [now lost—DW] was made by him.

Stein, 1913a: Fols. 167-171v

Such information offered encouragement, but it was not until he approached the Karatash that Stein could learn whether conditions would permit passage. After exploring previously uncharted valleys on his way north from India to the Mintaka Pass, he arrived in Tashkurghan on 12 September. The next day he crossed two passes to Tar-bashi Karaul on the Chichiklik Plateau but noted he was unable to obtain information there about the Karatash route. By previous arrangement, fresh yaks from Buramsal were waiting for him at Toile-bulun, where there was a Chinese resthouse. There he parted with his assistants Lal Singh and Jasvant Singh, who were to take the standard route to the east on through the Kinkol. Stein turned north, and below the 4420-metre Buramsal Pass at the *ak-oi* (yurt) of a local beg, Yüzbashi, he was able to obtain a guide to Chimgan (Qimgan), the upper terminus of the Karatash Gorge.

Five days out of Tashkurghan, Stein reached the Karatash. On 17 September his party descended along the Buramsal, passing at 12.8 kilometres the Kizmak Jilgha, which leads to the pass of that name and beyond to the Kinkol Valley. When Skrine finally managed to retrace Stein's journey in 1923, he crossed the Kizmak (the first European to do so) to get to the Karatash. About six kilometres below Kizmak, Stein noted 'mouth of Kara-tash J[ilgha] in view & behind snow covered range which forces river to make

large bend to W.' (Stein, 1913b: Fol. 83). He reached the Karatash in another 3.3 kilometres, where 'water appar. less than that united [Buramsal-] Merki drainage' (Stein, 1913b: Fol. 83). At that intersection there were two yurts, presumably on the spot where today there is a single mud-brick hut.

Stein considered the route from there up the Karatash to its source to be 'well known'. In fact, the most detailed description today is in the little-known 1926 route book (General Staff, 1926), which leaves some confusion about the Karatash Pass. Before following Stein *down* the Karatash then, comment will be made regarding the route *up* it to the pass which the locals call Karatash Davan (Fig. 2). The entrance to the upper valley is deceptive, for the Karatash indeed contains less water than the Buramsal-Merki and seems to lead directly to an impassible wall. There, unexpectedly, the Karatash turns sharply south, rising gradually in a narrow but flat valley. After the initial bend to the south, within one kilometre it turns west (as Stein observed) and thence continues largely in a westerly direction. Along the way in the lower sections are fields protected by stone walls, and then occasional herder huts scattered in the starker and rocky sections higher in the valley. At least in August 1996, none of the bridge crossings and fords posed particular obstacles to a person on foot. A day's hike from Chat brings one to a large Kyrgyz encampment (about a dozen yurts and huts), apparently the Shargut of the 1926 route book (General Staff, 1926).

The maps, descriptions, and current observations about the route have what at first appears to be contradictory information regarding the Karatash Pass. Just above this settlement, the valley forks. It is likely that the route straight ahead leads to the difficult pass (labelled on Figures in this paper as 'Old Karatash Pass') described by the Russian Colonel Kornilov:

Its height is 16,500' and the steepness of its slopes makes it one of the most difficult passes in the Kashgarian hills. The ascent from the side of Karakul is especially difficult, being covered with rubble and fragments of rocks.

General Staff, 1926: 169

The way to the Karatash (Kalatax) Pass of the modern map (Mi Desheng) is different: via the lush pastures above the left fork one heads south-west and then swings west again, traversing old glacial moraine (the trail becomes indistinct on the hard ground) and then once more turning south-west just before the pass. The modern route involves a gradual ascent and smooth footing, except for a bit of rubble right at the top (Plate I), and its altitude is some 300 metres lower than that recorded by Kornilov and Skrine for what the author assumes is indeed a different crossing. The descent to the Ygebali valley is steeper but with good footing on easy scree. The Kyrgyz at Shargut, who apparently winter in Chat, were pasturing some 50 of their yaks in the Ygebali and cross the pass on a regular basis to check their herds. A



PLATE I *Approaching the Karatash (Kalatax) Pass from the north-east, August, 1996*

well-defined path leads down the Ygebali to its intersection near the upper end of the Kengxuwar (Konsivar) River (note, General Staff, 1926, calls this the Gez). There is frequent traffic on this trail, which leads to the settlements in the vicinity of Lake Karakul.

Since his goal was not to follow this 'well known' route up over the pass, Stein turned down the Karatash; his diary describes the approach to and route beyond what is now the 'modern' town of Chat (i.e. 'Ghijak' Chat):

Valley continues easy with ample pastures to Kalmak-mazar, 5 1/2 m., where a considerable area is cultivated in spasmodic fashion. Below route crosses a low spur to long-stretched plain, Karugach-Kechu, where fields abound. Reached junction with valley leading to Ghijak Pass at 17 1/2 m. Sarai built by Karim-shah Beg whom I met in 1900 at Kara-kul & who now lies buried at Ghijakning chati [=Ghijak Chat]. Valley turns sharply to W. tow. Chinghan.

Reached Yalghuz-Kaying Mazar beyond junction with Ghijak stream at 18 1/2 m. To NE of it tombs, incl. Karim Shah Beg's Gumbaz. Ground open & widely cultivated. Marched down through fields to fan, 19 1/2 m., where succession of defiles extending to Chinghan -aghzi clearly visible...

Stein, 1913b: Fol. 84

Located at the intersection with the route over the Ghijak Pass, the modern Chat (Plate II) is the largest village on the upper Karatash. It contains perhaps three dozen mud-brick houses, a school and a sizeable 'club' whose veranda is decorated with wall paintings.

While some of the buildings have windows, the typical house is still the traditional windowless structure, with dirt floors and a raised sleeping platform on one side of the main room. The town is surrounded by wheat fields and on its outskirts, in the direction of Chinghan, are tombs decorated with yak tails on poles, presumably the 'mazar' noted by Stein. While these observations are not systematic, it would seem that the current town consolidates some of the settlements to which Stein gave separate names and which are inscribed on the Survey of India maps. Most notably, in his time there had been two separate 'Chats', on either side of the current town (the name is a generic Kyrgyz one meaning a place above the intersection of two rivers [Kirgizsko-russkii, 1965]). Probably what is seen here is analogous to the process that can be seen in the Hunza Valley in Pakistan, where to the outsider's eye (but not the locals' consciousness) in modern Karimabad there is no separation between what had once been distinctly separate villages of Altit, Baltit and so on.

When Skrine reached Chat in April 1923, he elected to spend an extra day there photographing and surveying from one of the ridges above the town. This work provided him with important triangulation for the mapping of the Kongur range and produced the striking panorama which he later published in his book (Skrine, 1926) and which provides an excellent

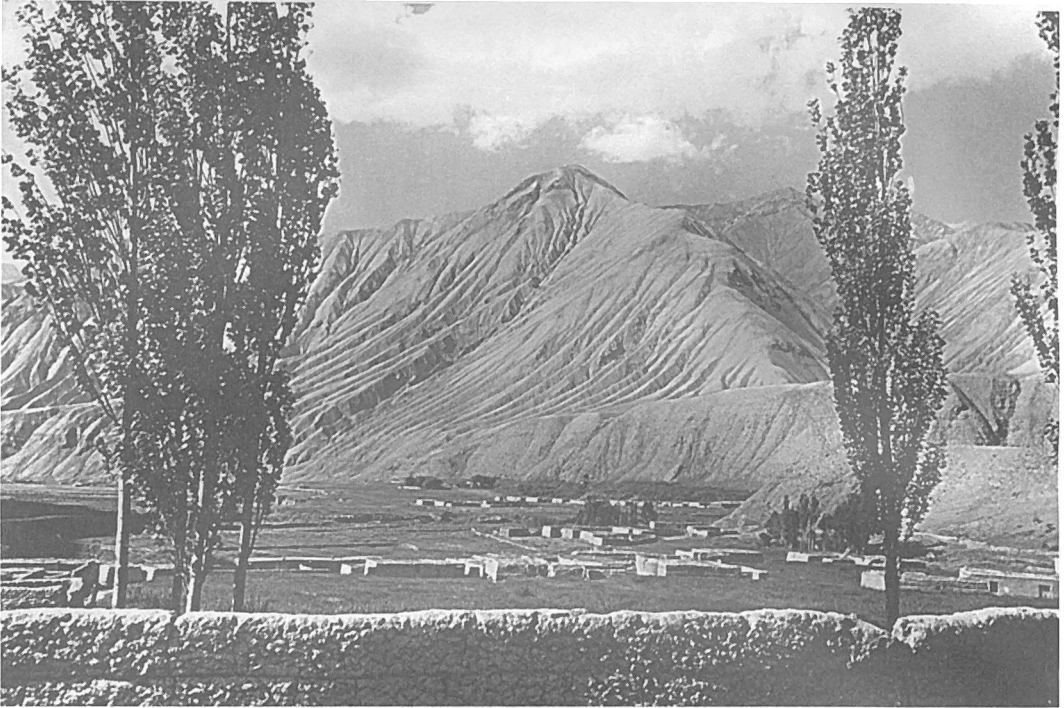


PLATE II *The village of Chat ('Ghijak' Chat) on the Karatash River, August, 1996*

sense of the topography of the region. Included here (Plate III) is a previously unpublished telephoto he took at this time, which is the only photograph known to the author that shows with some detail Kongur from the south-east. In his book he also published several photographs of the 'Kirghiz of the Karatash', including two of a wedding party to which he and his wife Doris were invited en route downstream from Chat to Chimgan.

Travel in this part of the Karatash Valley is not difficult. The valley is quite wide, and the river is easily fordable just above Chat. Below the town, en route to Chimgan, the trail in places clings to cliffs above the river on the traditional rafiks of brush and stones. At one such precarious stretch in 1996, the path was crumbling away, forcing riders to dismount and lead their horses across the dangerous section. Unlike in the day of Stein and Skrine though, the Karatash had to be crossed just once before Chimgan, and that on a bridge whose abutments have been reinforced with concrete.

Stein continues:

Arrived at cultivation of Chimghan-aghzi 25 1/2 m. A mud-built house with two Ak-ois reached at 8:15 P.M. Usual trouble about transport. Quartered in dirty Kirgha, relieved only by fresh air & clear moonlight through roof. Chimghan said to contain fifty oiliks, all away on pastures. 8500 ft.

Sept. 18. Up by 5:30 A.M. but animals did not turn up in batches

until 7:30. Loading completed by 8:30. While I looked after it Y. K. [? (Muhammad) Yakub Khan—DW] sent to fix position. Mistakes Chimghan Valley for our route of last night having asked for direction of Tash-kurghan! Rectification of silly error took me an hour. Open Chimghan V. extends for at least 5 m. with width of 1-1 1/2 m. Branch to W. called Bash-Chimghan, other due S. or S.W. Tersöze. In both grazing grounds and glaciers.

Latter must drain Shiwakte Range & account for abundance of water. Cultiv[atio]n in main valley as far as eye reaches.

Stein, 1913b: Fol. 85

The Chimgan River, which flows out of the glaciers on the yet unexplored south-east side of Kongur, indeed is broader than the Karatash and might easily be mistaken for the main route in the direction of Tashkurghan. Even in early morning, water in the Chimgan at the ford near the intersection of the rivers comes up to a horse's belly. Familiar as the crossing is, the Kyrgyz gauge the depth of the water by throwing rocks and listening for the sound of their striking the bottom.

Where Stein, Skrine and even Bonington (as late as 1980) noted relatively few permanent houses in the Summer encampments of the Kyrgyz or in their Winter residences, today the number of stone or adobe-brick huts seems to have grown substantially. Many of the Kyrgyz still live in their yurts in Summer, but others move from one permanent hut to another as they go higher into the mountains. Thus Chimgan itself now



PLATE III *The east ridge of Kongur, telephoto from above Chat.*

Photo by C.P. Skrine, April 1923. Collection of the Royal Geographical Society with the Institute of British Geographers (temporary number Skrine No. 2).

See note on photographs.

consists of more than a dozen mud-plastered houses of some substance. As in Stein's day, there is extensive cultivation. The village is surrounded by wheat fields, watered by small irrigation channels and protected from animals by stone or mud-brick walls or by fences of brush cuttings.

It was with obvious pride that the author's hosts in Chimgan showed off a new house that was nearing completion. It had a decorative carved frieze around the ceiling boards in one room, and in the adjoining room there were several pillars with muqarnas-style capitals. Frames for the windows were being transported from Chat on donkey-back. The standard construction of roofs is to lay a few large beams, which normally are not carved or shaped and not covered with boards, place across them numerous poles of small diameter, lay branches or a reed mat on top, and then put down a layer of mud mixed with straw. Timber is brought down from the higher mountain valleys on donkeys, but it seems likely that the reed mats come from the bazaars in the market towns below. The relative prosperity reflected in this new house in Chimgan seems to have been the exception: in the adjoining house, where the author was invited to breakfast, those present squatted in the dirt in a windowless room, and the wok containing the rice (mixed with a little meat and greens) rested on some embers on the floor next to the door.

Although otherwise the author carried all his food and gear, both at Chimgan and Chat he negotiated to hire a pack animal and guide, in the first instance to ensure surviving the ford and in the second because of concerns about the vagueness at the edge of Skrine's map. Both Stein and Skrine hired their animals and guides in stages and frequently complained about how difficult it was to get away on schedule in the morning. Just as in their day, the author discovered that European/American impatience does little to ensure a prompt, early departure. The local Kyrgyz obviously know the routes all along the Karatash, but still seem willing to hire for only short segments of the journey. The owner of the horse ridden to Chat insisted that his son, who was to accompany the author, could go no further, since he had to return and head downstream through the gorges to Khan-terek. The guide from Chat to the Karatash Pass was initially reluctant to commit himself to more than the day's journey to Shargut, although with time on his hands (and probably feeling flush from having negotiated the sum he did for his services) he then seemed more than happy to travel with his friends or relatives from there over into the next valley to help herding the yaks.

The easy fords and broad valleys were soon behind, as Stein's expedition headed north from Chimgan into the narrow Karatash Gorge (Fig. 2):

Started for Khan-terek at 9:40 AM. Cultivation & arbours for 1 1/2 m. Then beyond hamlet of Tring-döwe route ascends cliffs to ca. 200 ft. above river. Fixing at 3 m. Kara-yulghun.

In narrow gorge with patches of vegetation (Suket, myrtle, roses) to Ortang, a cultivated fan, 4 1/2 m. Then path drops to riverbed & skirts difficult Parri over boulders. For footmen a cantilever bridge of 2 poplar trunks at 6 m. Whole known as Baku chak. Before fixing first greeted by distant dust haze in gap of valley.

Crossing to r. bank about 1/2 m. below bridge. River c. 40 yds. wide and 2-3' deep. Got thoroughly wet in feet. After some hundred yards l. bank regained for about 1 m. Difficult track under banks of conglomerate. Projecting spur forced us to cross third time to r. bank at 8 m. Water up to saddle flaps. Halted to dry myself & for hasty lunch at 2 P. M. and started down by Maidan-tal. Small patch of cultivation followed by steep cliffs along the foot of which the reduced water level has left an extremely difficult track over rock ledges & boulders. The rock-couliasses seemed to close passage completely when camels appeared ahead moving unloaded over a real Rafik. This spur known as Ara-sünde proved most difficult bit of march. Photos. [Stein, 1916, fig. 4, reproduces one of these, which provides an excellent sense of the difficulties of the gorge—DW.] Our errant guide had proved so unreliable that I greeted sight of baggage with relief.

Remarkable skill in construction of Rafiks with tree trunks & brushwood, strong enough to carry camels. How the latter managed to get along slippery boulders, heaped up in confusion, seems a mystery. Also risks of quicksands.

Stein, 1913b: Fols. 85-86

This section of the route seems to be much easier today. As one approaches the first, very small, settlement north of Chimgan (presumably Stein's Tring-döwe), there are small irrigation channels extending in

some cases for hundreds of metres along the valley. The cluster of huts stands right at the point where the valley narrows; the modern trail drops to the river and at one rock outcrop disappears briefly in a moderate current of water up to the hips. It continues to a cantilever bridge, perhaps at the same location as the one Stein describes but rather more substantial, being reinforced with steel rods and concrete. Once across the river at that point, the trail remains on the east side until the next bridge, below Kara-tumshuk (see below). The author camped near some sizeable trees in a narrow cultivated area where there was one hut (Stein's Maidan-tal?). Such patches of cultivation (in the given instance probably no more than two-tenths of a hectare) generally are found only where there is a side stream bringing clear water down into the river. Unlike in Stein's day, there were few places where the path was on a rafik attached to the side of a sheer cliff. There were traces of that kind of construction in one or two sections where the trail had washed out at river level, but otherwise, much of the trail was a solidly beaten path well above water level and on relatively level ground.

About midway between Chimgan and the junction of the Karatash with the Kaying, the trail climbs high above the river; one can look across to a lush farmstead with a mud-walled dwelling complex and fenced wheat fields next to the intersecting stream, the Kara-tumshuk (Plate IV). In low water, the river is probably fordable



PLATE IV *The farmstead at Kara-tumshuk, view from the south, August, 1916*

here, as it was in Stein's day, although just beyond, the rapids once again become deep and treacherous. Stein described this section of the route as follows:

Beyond Ara-sünde spur, 9 m., route ascended a series of steep-edged plateaus from which view opened tow. easier portion of defiles. The camels had crossed to l. bank & did not return to our side until below the isolated cultiv[atio]n. & farmhouse by debouchure of Karatumshuk J[ilgha], 9 1/2 m. Here fixing. The look of valley below raised hope that worst lay behind us. But we had scarcely proceeded for a mile along easy slope when we were met by camels returning. Two loads had been taken across to l. bank, but the ford proved so risky that Musa & the intelligent Yüz-bashi of Khan-terek who fortunately had met us last night & agreed to guide us, decided to take the other camels back to ford at Kara-tumshuk. Our own half-crazy Kirghiz guide had decamped & when discovered by Khabil, attacked with stone and knife.

Marched back to Kara-tumshuk ford, 12 m., & found it c. 50 yds. wide & 2 1/2' deep at average. Crossed small stream of side valley, descending over steep talus fan, & climbed plateau with striking rock pinnacle of Kara-tumshuk, 13 1/2 m. Descent to fan where the camels were waiting proved troublesome & when at 14 m. fresh Parris faced us ahead, decided to pitch camp. Found pleasant tree-ringed terrace & halted by 6 PM. Yüzbashi offers to go ahead for fresh transport, but rain & darkness prevent start. Elev[atio]n. circ. 7400 ft. [in margin: c. 7150]. First evening with comfortable temperature since Yasin.

Stein, 1913b: Fols. 86-87

The author's experience in approaching the rock pinnacle of Kara-tumshuk (Kyrgyz, 'black beak' or 'snout') from the opposite direction, on the west side of

the river, was somewhat analogous. In coming along the very dry plateau to its north, back away from the gorge of the river, the bridge on which to cross to the east bank was never seen (had it been there in Stein's day, he would not have had to backtrack). So the author followed the well-trodden trail up behind the pinnacle (see Skrine's previously unpublished photograph, Plate V) and descended to the farmstead across the side-stream. There, fortunately, two young informants were found. With his few words of Kyrgyz (the key one being *köprük*, bridge) and by sketching on the ground, the author learned from the boys that it was necessary to backtrack to the bridge and cross. Conversation with them established that the bridge was one of four between the Kaying and Chinggan. Three of the four are constructed purely in traditional cantilever fashion, using logs, rocks, and brush; only the bridge nearest Chinggan had modern reinforcement.

Stein was obviously mistaken in thinking that the worst was over once past Kara-tumshuk:

Sept. 19. Light rain fell all night; but when I awakened my men at 5 A.M. Tordukol, the energetic Yüzbashi, & Kabil had already started for Khan-terek. The baggage moved off by 8:15 A.M. but trouble was encountered already after a few minutes in descending to riverbank owing to rocks overhanging path. After less than a mile camels had to cross to r. bank & then to regain us oppos. to Chatkir cliffs (photo).

Some cultivation passed below Pitlik-aghzi. But after 1 1/2 m. from camp track took to rock ledges & Rafiks & we had to part again



PLATE V *The Karatash River gorge, with the rock spire of Kara-tumshuk, view from the north. Photo by C.P. Skrine, April 1923. Collection of the Royal Geographical Society with the Institute of British Geographers (temporary number Skrine No. 1). See note on photographs*



PLATE VI *Cantilever bridge, Karatash River valley, south of confluence with Kaying, August, 1996*

with baggage. The river here was too deep & rapid to be forded. So the ponies were left to swim across while we had to ascend the steep spur dividing us from Kaying-aghzi. Up to 2 m. track led along precipitous cliffs of slatey rock, 50-100' above river. In places Rafiks just as bad as in Hunza. Then followed to 3 m. a very steep zigzag climb along slopes of decomposed rock & shale, risky in places. Height above river prob. 700-800'.

The descent to N was fortunately safer, leading over earth slopes. Reached triangular plateau of cultivation at mouth of Kaying J[i]lgha after 3 1/2 m., by 11:30 A.M. Elev. 6850 ft. River c. 15 yds. wide, 1-1/2' deep, much clearer water than that of main river.

Stein, 1913b: Fols. 87-88

The modern trail in this section only hints at Stein's difficulties. Much of the time it is on broad terraces along the west bank and only once or twice drops to near water level on loose scree. About the only reminder of how dangerous the route may once have been is a rafik clinging precariously to a cliff above the rapids on the opposite bank. A bridge that apparently did not exist early in this century (Plate VI) now enables one to avoid climbing the major spur Stein describes. Another two kilometres or so of hiking on the east bank brings one to the intersection with the Kaying, just below which is a bridge at the location noted by Skrine (General Staff, 1926). The narrowest sections of the Karatash Valley were now behind (Plate VII), although the challenges of the route ahead were still substantial.

Here the author's route diverged from that of Stein,

who continued downriver. The author had entered the Karatash Valley by descending the Kaying, which Skrine had ascended in 1922 when unable to proceed further up the Karatash. Nowadays, the cultivation Stein and Skrine reported at Kaying-aghzi, the intersection of the rivers, seems to have been moved two kilometres up the Kaying, where there is a cluster of huts on its north side. The lower Kaying shows few signs of recent Summer traffic though, and it is possible that the settlement has been abandoned owing to the significant gulleying that has occurred from flooding of the stream where it is located. The main access to the upper Kaying Valley is principally over the Chopkana Pass from the Chopkana Valley, the route which Stein's Kyrgyz guides took to Khan-terek in order to avoid difficulties in the Karatash below Kaying-aghzi (see below).

Khan-terek, at the mouth of the Chopkana, is now the Winter residence for many of the Kyrgyz who summer in the Karatash, Kaying and Chopkana. As seems to be the case at Chat, it may now consolidate what had been separate Winter settlements at the mouth of each of the main side valleys. If the author understood correctly from one of the Kyrgyz passed in the Karatash, the administration at Khan-terek has the responsibility of keeping the trail through the Karatash in repair. Skrine published an excellent photograph of the cantilever bridge at Khan-terek, which



PLATE VII *The Karatash River gorge from the north, taken 3-4 kilometres above the confluence with Kaying, August, 1996*

is the more interesting because of the water pipe which is suspended above it across that narrow part of the river (Skrine, 1926: facing 146). As noted in one of the neighbouring valleys, the Kyrgyz still very skilfully engineer their water supplies in traditional fashion, although using modern tubing instead of the hollowed logs of Skrine's day to bridge gulleys.

For the last of the Karatash traverse, beginning from the Kaying, Stein relates:

After 4 m. along left bank passed Bash-küprük [= 'Bridge head'], a well-made cantilever bridge, 21 yds. long, of 4-5 trunks. It spans a narrow part of bed & gives access to Terek-kichik J[ilgha], 4 1/2 m., through which large grazing grounds & a pass tow. Yangihissar are reached. Here we forded a wider stretch of river and continued over easy terraces on r. bank to bold spur, 5 m. which camels could just skirt. Beyond the riverbed widens to 1/4 m. Brought up by another gorge at 6 m., with almost perpendicular cliffs rising to c. 3000' on l. bank.

Here the river had to be crossed & recrossed within 6 1/2 m. Moving along beds of boulders on l. bank we cleared the last forbidding rock gate of the valley, known as Tügine-tar, 7 1/2 m. Marks of old Rafik (Yaskak) along impossible looking cliffs.

At last, at 7 1/2 m., we emerged with relief into open valley where it is joined by Karabel J[ilgha]. We were about to do our fifth crossing when fresh ponies were brought up by Yüzbashi & Khabil. Ford 60 yds. wide, 3' deep. 6450' elev. 3:30 PM.

Further passage easy. Over flat broad riverine plateaus, partly cultivated, we got to our 6th crossing, oppos. to Khan-terek, 10 m.

Scanty supply of water from Chopkana J[ilgha], head of which dimly visible through dust haze. Wide alluvial fan, 10 1/2 m.

Change of scenery very striking after leaving Tügine-tar. Instead of bold scarps & pinnacles, much-eroded valleys on both sides. The slopes streaked red & grey show same excessive erosion as I remembered from Tokuz Davan & lower Gez-darra. It seemed as if the very skeleton of these hills had been laid bare. Instead of slate & a reddish stone resembling trachite, sandstone takes now the chief place.

Tordukol & Khabil had come to Khan-terek by a pass which leads from Kaying J. to top of Chopkana valley (Khan-terek). Thus the worst part of the river gorge avoided. It appears that there is a continuation of this upper route also to Chimghan by a pass, practicable for yaks....

Sept. 20...paid off brave camels & ponies from Chimghan, with rewards to Kirghiz Abdul Kadir, Abdu Saiyid, Yomush & Tila Bai, jolly fellows....

Stein, 1913b: Fols. 88-90

A decade after Stein, Skrine struggled with the lower Karatash, abandoned his attempt to go beyond Kaying-aghzi, and headed instead into the then still unexplored Kaying Valley. When he finally made it through the Karatash Gorge the following April, it was from Chimghan. In a letter home, 19 April 1923, he reported:

This time there was only about half as much [water] as then [in October]: even so, we had to cross a river averag[ing] 40 ft. in width, 2 1/2 ft deep & flowing at 6 miles an hour over rough stones twenty-

six times in 2 days. Once it took us two hours to do one mile, the ponies having to be unloaded and reloaded one by one four or five times & the kit manhandled along ledges or among boulders. It was huge fun & we both enjoyed it thoroughly, though that day we didn't pitch our tents till nearly 8, when it was quite dark, & then it was on a narrow bit of land with mighty dark cliffs on one side & the foaming river & even mightier & darker cliffs on the other!

Skrine, 1923

His formal description of the Karatash was used to update the official route book (General Staff, 1926). Just before he left Kashgar for good, in 1924, he spent more time in the Kaying and adjoining valleys and became the first European to cross the Kepek Pass, about which Stein had heard (although clearly it is not negotiable by yaks; see photographs in Skrine, 1925a).

When the author approached the Karatash in August 1996, fresh from a violent dunking in the Kaying, he expected to find a dark gorge hemmed in by forbidding cliffs. In all likelihood, steps would have to have been retraced because of an impassible ford or washed-out bridge. The reality proved to be otherwise – even at its narrowest, the gorge does get the sun, in many places there are trees and other vegetation, and the bridges were all in place. Now during the Summer the Karatash seems to accommodate regular traffic between Khan-terek and Chimgan. The modern world is encroaching, even though to a considerable degree the older patterns of settlement and pastoral economy have been preserved. Although they may still be relatively isolated in the Summer when in their mountain pastures, the Kyrgyz presumably no longer rely on entrepreneurial peddlars to bring them goods but can readily access urban markets from their Winter settlements. Clothes are store-bought; if any of the costumes Skrine photographed still exist, they must be tucked away in family chests. A few of the younger men sported mesh hats inscribed 'World Cup', and there was even the occasional cheap digital wristwatch. Yet items as simple as stainless steel spoons or plastic water bottles seem to be very much in demand, and although medical care apparently is available, even those who undoubtedly needed them had no spectacles. A young wife could write; her older husband apparently could not.

At the same time, there seems to be little active curiosity about the world beyond the next pass. In Chat, one of the younger men did know about Kyrgyzstan and its president Askar Akayev and requested that the author take Akayev a message to help arrange a visa to visit. The Kyrgyz of the Karatash are very insistent in reminding the outsider that they are Kyrgyz (i.e., not to be confused with Chinese); few, if any, in Chat could read a permit in Chinese. They fingered the stamped seal (in Kyrgyz, *tamgha*) assuming it did provide some assurance the author had official sanction to be there. The best informed of those met in Chat was a genial older man,

Turdi Ali, probably in his sixties. He knew a bit of world geography – though he had to be reminded that the Atlantic Ocean separated the continents – and could cite the names of some of the Soviet leaders. He even listened patiently as the author tried to explain with diagrams and his few words in Kyrgyz how an e-mail message from home being carried in hard-copy had originally been transmitted.

Just as information about the outside world must be rare in the Karatash and presumably would not always be comprehensible there, for those who would wish to know its Kyrgyz, their world is as remote. Not having any information in Kashgar, Macartney had to make a special inquiry of the Kyrgyz at the mouth of the Karatash concerning conditions along the river. A day out of Tashkurgan, Stein still could not learn details about the lower Karatash, and he was greatly relieved to have the Kyrgyz from Khan-terek to guide him through the gorges. Eighty-three years later, the author could best learn about the Karatash Pass by having a local guide lead him to it. It was indeed 'huge fun' to be following, albeit timidly, in the bold footsteps of Stein and Skrine. More significantly, the trek offered an opportunity to step back in time in an area that has been visited by few outsiders since they were there.

Note on photographs by C.P. Skrine

The two unpublished photographs reproduced here with the permission of the Royal Geographical Society are from previously unidentified glass negatives in the RGS collection. The view of Kongur from above Chat (Plate III) is a telephoto version of the portion of his panorama (Skrine, 1926: facing 116) under the inscription 'Qungur II', taken 11 April 1923. In the panorama, the peak is quite indistinct. The author knows of no other photograph showing this view of the east ridge, which in the picture apparently hides the true summit. See Bonington, 1982: facing 136, for what is essentially the reverse of this view – looking *down* from high on the south ridge of Kongur to what is apparently the upper part of the Chimgan Glacier; in other words, approximately in the direction of Chat.

Skrine's photograph from within the Karatash Gorge (Plate V) looks south toward the rock pinnacle of Kara-tumshuk and was taken apparently on 12 April 1923, the same day he had departed from Chat. About six kilometres below Chat, at a place he called Bek Targhak, he had been an honoured guest that morning at a Kyrgyz wedding. Two of his published photographs of the 'Kirghiz of the Karatash' (Skrine, 1925a: facing 393, topmost picture; Skrine, 1926: facing 132, bottom picture) are apparently the ones he notes taking there.

Skrine's photographs are largely uncatalogued. The Royal Geographical Society has most of his surviving negatives and many of the fine enlargements which he made himself in Kashgar and displayed at the RGS

around the time of his lecture on the Kongur Alps. A large collection of his Central Asian prints and a few of the negatives are in the Oriental and India Office Collections of the British Library, Photo 920/1.

REFERENCES

- Abramzon, S.M. 1959 Kirgizskoe naselenie Sin'ts'zian-ugurskoi avtonomnoi oblasti Kitaiskoi narodnoi respublikii. *Trudy Kirgizskoi arkhologo-etnograficheskoi ekspeditsii*, Vol. II. Moscow: Izdatel'stvo Akademii nauk SSSR: 332-69. Translated as *Ethnographical information on the Kirgiz population in the Sinkiang-Uigur Autonomous Oblast of the Chinese People's Republic*, JPRS 24,572/1964: 1-54.
- Bonington, C. 1982 *Kongur: China's elusive summit*. London: Hodder and Stoughton.
- General Staff, India 1926 *Routes in Sinkiang*. Simla: Government of India Press.
- Hoppe, T. 1988 Kazak pastoralism in the Bogda Range. In Benson, L. and Svanberg, I. (eds) *The Kazaks of China: essays on an ethnic minority*. Studia Multiethnica Upsaliensia, 5. Uppsala: Centre for Multiethnic Research, Uppsala University: 201-39.
- , 1995 *Die ethnischen Gruppen Xinjiangs: Kulturunterschiede und interethnische Beziehungen*. Mitteilungen des Instituts für Asienkunde Hamburg, 258. Hamburg: Institut für Asienkunde.
- Kirgizsko-russkii, 1965 *Kirgizsko-russkii slovar'*. K.K. Iudakhin, comp. Moscow: Izdatel'stvo Sovetskaiia entsikopediia.
- Mi Desheng. *Kongur Tagh - Mustag Ata* (1:100 000 scale topographical map). Lanzhou: Xi'an Cartographic Publishing House.
- Skrine, C.P. 1922 Letters to his mother. British Library, Oriental and India Office Collections, MSS Eur. F. 154/8. Quoted by permission of Mr J.W. Stewart.
- , 1923 Letters to his mother. British Library, Oriental and India Office Collections, MSS Eur. F. 154/9. Quoted by permission of Mr J.W. Stewart.
- , 1925a The Alps of Qungur. *Geogr. J.* **66**(5): 385-411, with appended topographical map.
- , 1925b The roads to Kashgar. *J. Cent. Asian Soc.* **12**(3): 226-50.
- , 1926 *Chinese Central Asia*. London: Methuen.
- Stein, A. 1913a Correspondence. Bodleian Library, Oxford, MS Stein 96; for exchange with Macartney, fols. 150-151v, 165-171v. Quoted by permission of the Bodleian Library, Oxford.
- , 1913b Field diary 1913, July 31-Nov. Bodleian Library, Oxford, MSS Stein 207, 215. Quotations are from the typed transcript, MSS Stein 215, by permission of the Bodleian Library, Oxford.
- , 1916 A third journey of exploration in Central Asia, 1913-1916. *Geogr. J.* **48**(2): 97-130; **48**(3): 192-229.
- , 1923 *Memoir on maps of Chinese Turkistan and Kansu* (Records of the Survey of India, 17. Dehra Dun: Trigonometrical Survey Office.
- , 1928 *Innermost Asia. Detailed report of explorations in Central Asia, Kan-su and Eastern Iran carried out and described under the orders of H.M. Indian Government*. Vol. I. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Survey of India, 1906-1908 *Map of portions of Chinese Turkistan and Kansu to illustrate the explorations of Dr M.A. Stein C.I.E. and his assistants, surveyors R.B. Lal Singh and R.S. Ram Singh*. Dehra Dun: Trigonometrical Survey Office. Sheets 2 (Kashgar), 3 (Kara-Tash River), 4 (Tashkurghan River), 7 (Yangi-Hissar).
- , 1922 *Maps of Chinese Turkistan and Kansu from the surveys made during Sir Aurel Stein's explorations 1900-01, 1906-08, 1913-1915*. Dehra Dun: Trigonometrical Survey Office. Sheets 2 (Kashgar, Muz-tagh-ata), 3 (Sarikol).
- , 1925 - 1926 Quarter-inch (1:253 440) Topographical Map Series. Dehra Dun: Trigonometrical Survey Office. Sheets 42M (1925) (Kashgar), 42N (1925) (Mustagh-Ata), 42O (1926) (Tash-Kurghan).
- Ward, M. 1983 The Kongur Massif in southern Sinkiang. *Geogr. J.* **149**(2): 137-52.
- Waugh, D. 1998 Exploring the 'Kongur Alps' and the unknown side of Mustagh Ata. *Himalayan J.* **54**: 25-32.