

CHINESE CENTRAL ASIA

BY

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INDIAN CIVIL SERVICE, BRITISH CONSUL-GENERAL IN
CHINESE TURKISTAN 1922-1924

WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY

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51 ILLUSTRATIONS

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PREFACE

THIS book is an account, compiled during a spell of home leave, of a very happy two and a half years spent by my wife and myself partly at Kashgar, partly on the road in Northern Kashmir and Chinese Turkistan. I did not seriously entertain the idea of writing a book about our experiences until three or four months before we left Kashgar; consequently, most of the letters and desultory notes on which I have relied for my material have had to be edited from memory far from the scenes described. The book does not in any sense, therefore, purport to be a treatise on the countries described. I have, however, thought it worth while to devote two or three chapters to such ethnological and other observations as my study of the Eastern Turki language and the experience gained in the course of my official duties suggested. It is hoped that the result of my amateur efforts will at any rate indicate the variety and interest of the different fields open to the student of man and Nature in Chinese Central Asia.

As a travel-book, on the other hand, I fear this work will be considered old-fashioned. Neither aeroplane, nor caterpillar-wheeled car, nor cinema, nor wireless, nor oxygen apparatus, nor any of the other adjuncts of up-to-date travel figure in its pages. The fact simply is that my wife and I, being confirmed nomads with a strong distaste for the beaten track, welcomed my appointment as Consul-General at Kashgar as a Heaven-sent opportunity for the gratification of our tastes; and for the benefit of the many who share those tastes I have tried to give a matter-of-fact account of the experiences and impressions of two average Britons wandering among the highlands and lowlands of "Innermost Asia." Though it has sometimes been difficult to maintain a due sense of proportion among scenes beautiful and rare, I have tried throughout to eschew exaggeration; and in particular I have done my best to avoid the trap into which so many travel-writers fall—over-

emphasis of such difficulties and dangers as they may have experienced. The reader will find few of the "adventures" (most of which could probably, if the truth were known, have been avoided with a little more care and foresight) that loom so large in many popular accounts of travel.

In the collection of material for chapters XII and XIII, I was loyally assisted by my friend Murad Qari of Yarkand, who also helped me with the transcription and translation of most of the Turki songs, proverbs and popular sayings quoted. I would also like to acknowledge a debt of gratitude to my father, Mr. Francis H. Skrine, for many useful hints and for an invaluable final correction of the proofs.

With the exception of the plate representing certain Takla Makan antiques, for which I am indebted to the British Museum, the photographs were all taken and developed by me in camp or at Kashgar. The frontispiece is a reproduction of a sketch made by my wife at Yambulak on our journey to Kashgar in 1922.

C. P. SKRINE

1st July, 1926

Preface to New Edition

Forty-four years have passed since the above preface was written. Since 1926 other barriers, more difficult to overcome than mountain ranges, have been erected and very few travellers from the Western world have been able to visit Central Asia. Indeed, it was not until 1960 that doubt about the relative heights of the two main peaks in the Qungur massif was finally resolved. In September of that year the Royal Geographical Society Journal reproduced my unpublished photograph of Qungur II (described but not included in this book), identifying it with Qungur Tagh as the highest mountain in China.* As far as I know it is still unclimbed.

The fact that this book is now being republished is an indication of the enduring fascination of this part of the world to the English-speaking peoples. I hope that many of my new readers will live to see all man-made obstacles to travel removed and will be able to experience at first hand the incomparable scenery of Central Asia and the friendship of its diverse inhabitants.

C.P.S.

December 1970

* "The Qungur Massif: The Highest Mountain of China," Royal Geographical Society Journal, Vol. 135, September, 1969.

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