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Through the Torugart Pass

TASHKENT, Uzbekistan

August 7, 1996

By Adam Smith Albion

At the far end of the compound a baby-faced soldier, still an adolescent, waved to us sternly. Even at a distance, he looked hopelessly unthreatening and inadequate in his oversized uniform, the military green of the Chinese People's Liberation Army. Nevertheless, that peremptory gesture of command momentarily belied his age and made us jump like Prussians. For it was the long-awaited signal that our turn had arrived.

I mounted the Land Cruiser and gazed over the short stretch that divided us from the exit. My jangling impatience to set upon it, to eat up those last yards, had almost become a physical hunger. But the driver showed no signs of haste. He shifted into first gear and edged the vehicle forward at a walking pace, working the accelerator gingerly. Best to approach the checkpoint at a cautious, respectful speed. We passed a crumbling wall on our right, attracting the curiosity of half-a-dozen workers in overalls, seemingly the only other animate beings in the compound. Baked dark as the bricks they held in their hands — they were Uighurs, not Han — they stopped what they were doing to observe our cortege-paced procession. They watched us with that keen, silent abstraction one associates with prairie-dogs or (more appropriately in this context) Central Asian marmots standing sentinel over their burrows. Their bodies remained stationary but their heads swiveled as we went by. An incongruous encounter in the middle of a strictly controlled border post.

Beyond them lay an empty building, the recently-abandoned customs house. We motored by in slow motion and halted before the barrier gate with its concrete pillbox. It was the final threshold to be crossed, the *ne plus ultra* of no-man's-land. Above our heads hung a metal sign reading "Tu Er Ga Pe." It meant nothing special to the driver, to whom the words only expressed a place-name. But for me, they signified the crucial moment of my journey, and my itinerary's weakest link. A week of planning, two days of traveling, and now four hours of checks and negotiations with border guards — neatly summarized in those four enigmatic characters.

The teen-aged soldier stretched out his hand for my documents. I surrendered them to him, while his comrade scrutinized us from the pillbox. It was the seventh examination of my passport that day. "Now this is overzealous," I said to myself, "unless he imagines that something crucial — an expiry date, a missing stamp — might have escaped the notice of *every* one of his comrades thus far? That is extremely improbable. So I'm safe; I'm through. On the other hand, who knows? He may invent a regulation of his own and turn me back on a whim, two yards from the finish line. To be the ultimate authority wielding the sword of judgement over helpless travelers is heady stuff. But is it really *possible* that someone could get so far, only to be turned back at this point?"

The answer to this last, rather sickening question I knew to be, *Yes*. I suppose that other people might have dismissed such reflections, finding comfort in the small number of inches separating the exit-barrier from the Land Cruiser's front fender. But my own experiences have made me once bitten, twice shy. Very many borders throughout the former Soviet bloc are still governed by the caprice of frontier officials as much as by international treaties. I have been "bitten" by the vagaries of border police more than the proverbial "once," in fact. On one occasion last year, I had an engaging plan to enter Ukraine: I would cruise down the Danube on a Romanian riverboat to the Ukrainian port of Izmail, and hop off. It proved to be a pleasant ride. I was ushered through all the checks along the way without incident, until I was stopped by the last possible

policewoman at the Izmail control-point, the town's market-square already being visible through a set of glass doors. I was detained in Izmail for ten hours and then dispatched unceremoniously down-river in completely the wrong direction. The reason for this treatment, in the self-righteous words of my principal captor — that corpulent, greedy policewoman whom I refused to pay off — was that "I had failed to render her a suitable account of my reasons for desiring to enter Ukraine." (The only explanation I deigned to offer was that "I was going to Odessa to hear the opera," which she took to be facetious and impertinent.)

Recalling this ill-fated adventure of a year ago I fell briefly into a gloom. When my passport wasn't returned immediately, I began wondering whether "Tu Er Ga Pe" would have to be added to my personal blacklist of border-crossings (Izmail, Macedonia-Kosovo, Slovakia-Ukraine) where I had been rebuffed and sent packing. "Curse this boy-soldier," I thought miserably. I was convinced my luck was about to change and I would inexplicably stumble at this final hurdle. These reveries were interrupted by sudden activity, as if a balloon had popped in my head. The next thing I knew my papers were being thrust through the jeep's window, my passport was back in my hand, an order was being shouted. We were moving forward. The last formal or physical impediments had fallen away after all. The gate had been swung open and we drove through, picking up speed. I corkscrewed in my seat, eager to glimpse the barrier one last time through the mud-encrusted rear-window. As the buildings receded I experienced a surge of relief. That emotion was quickly overwhelmed by a more powerful wave of elation. I was jubilant, pure and simple, thanking my luck, ready to crack open champagne right there in the Land Cruiser. Some sluice-gate inside me must have been coupled to the border-gate and opened in parallel with it. Adrenaline was flowing as if the Yangtze river had burst its dams.

My watch read 14:10. I excitedly set it two hours ahead to Beijing time, as a sort of tangible confirmation of my having successfully come through the Torugart Pass into China. Now those moments of uncertainty vanished from memory, replaced by the heady bliss of having *come through*. Despite all the worries and frustrations, it was finally joyously clear that the whole game of touch-and-go had been worth it after all.

Such were my feelings driving over the Kyrgyz-Chinese frontier. Is it surprising that I have mentioned relief, elation, gratitude? Does the account seem overdone? Can something as prosaic as clearing a checkpoint really be an occasion for "jubilation"?

Intense emotional experiences are not what most Western motorists associate with driving across a border. More often than not, it is a right they take for granted — especially in Western Europe where, since the Schengen agreement came into effect, most internal checkpoints have been abolished altogether. As a result, crossing into

a neighboring country is as unlikely to induce exultation and a sense of achievement as a stroll to the newsagent's. Travelers are the poorer for it. They dully ply their way between France and Germany, the United States and Canada via friendly border-posts, incognizant of the emotional rewards those passages *could* be affording them if only the inspections were *more hostile*. Imprisoned in a culture of convenience that prioritizes simplicity and efficiency, motorists are denied many memorable moments of high drama such as being interrogated, intimidated, marched from spot to spot, interned, kept waiting or pumped for bribes, and they never know the excitement they are missing.

In their world, movement has become too easy. Frontier officials are too courteous and helpful. All sense of *challenge* has been lost, sacrificed on the altar of rational border regimes that are implemented in a predictable manner with a view to saving time. The culture of convenience has stolen something from these people. It has cheapened their experiences — and experiences are only worth what you pay for them. As a result they have become blasé. They do not know the cut-and-thrust of sparring with mendacious policemen demanding bribes in the form of imaginary taxes and tariffs. They can never experience the satisfaction of emerging from a customs hall, triumphant at having fought off the jackals without surrendering a single possession to their "confiscations." Their hearts have never leapt at the sound of a passport being stamped, for they are unaware that that is the sound of victory. In short, they have been robbed of a whole register of emotional fulfillment. They have never tasted certain rewards that only struggle can bring.

Fortunately, there is another principle of social organization, an alternative to the culture of convenience, that refuses to cheapen and pauperize human experience by making life too simple. It is called the *culture of complication* and remains the guiding principle behind most rules and regulations in the ex-USSR. Struggle is not reduced, it is amplified. By making routine operations as difficult as possible — getting a document notarized, opening a bank account, crossing a border — the culture of complication allows life to be lived more fully, because the tiny victories of daily existence are thrown into high relief and thereby magnified. Achievements are savored that under different circumstances might be considered too trivial to mention. Beating the system, when it has been rigged against you, is sweet. In the final analysis, the culture of complication functions like a casino: the House always wins in the end, but in the short run it affords the gambler the periodic thrill of winning against the odds. The elation at winning is proportional to the risk of failure. The culture of convenience makes the risk of failure too low, the probability of success too high. Driving into Canada from the United States is as predictable and tedious as playing a slot-machine that always pays off...

... Yes, of course the foregoing paragraphs are heavily charged with irony. Yes, their sardonic tone is intentional. No, I do not advocate barbed-wire fences between Buffalo and Toronto. But let the reader not conclude

therefore (in company with the policewoman in Izmail) that I am only being facetious and impertinent. The irony is interlarded with an important truth about living under the (post-) Soviet system.

Black humor aside, one really *does* get addicted to adversity. Adversity is an unlikely drug to get hooked on, to be sure, save for masochists and gamblers. But the compulsive challenge-seeker is part masochist, part gambler. One comes to require a daily quota of obstacles and annoyances, otherwise one feels a little empty. One dreads the inevitable ordeals, yet secretly welcomes them, even though a regular diet of them sets one howling with frustration. Any outsider whose interest and involvement in the (ex-) Soviet bloc countries is serious — I have lived in them for almost six of the last seven years — contracts this type of well-rounded, love-hate relationship with them. If one seeks a charming, frictionless existence, I warmly recommend Zurich. *Here* one gets out of bed in the morning *not* because life is delightful but because it is difficult, and negotiating difficulties brings its own rewards. What kinds of rewards? But I have already mentioned them. *Relief, gratitude, elation, jubilation...* All the improbable emotions I experienced coming through the Torugart Pass.

For much of this century, the politics of the Sino-Soviet frontier have overshadowed its geography. Its formidable reputation for being one of the world's most inaccessible and impassable places was the result of politics. During the Cold War it became a byword for international tension and danger, especially after diplomatic winter set in between the USSR and China in the 1960's.

However, long before the advent of opposing communist camps, Eastern Turkestan (as this area was called) was primarily known and feared for the challenges presented by its geography. *Formidable, inaccessible, impassable* are descriptions that might have fallen from the lips of Chang Ch'ien, Marco Polo, Przhevalsky, Ualikhanov and other explorers of the Central Asian marchlands, but not for reasons in any way connected with politics. It was the region's fearsome terrain that excited and terrorized their imaginations. It was a part of the globe that inspired awe for the vertiginous mountain ranges and indomitable deserts with which Nature had endowed it, and not the incidental rivalries of the people who happened to live there.

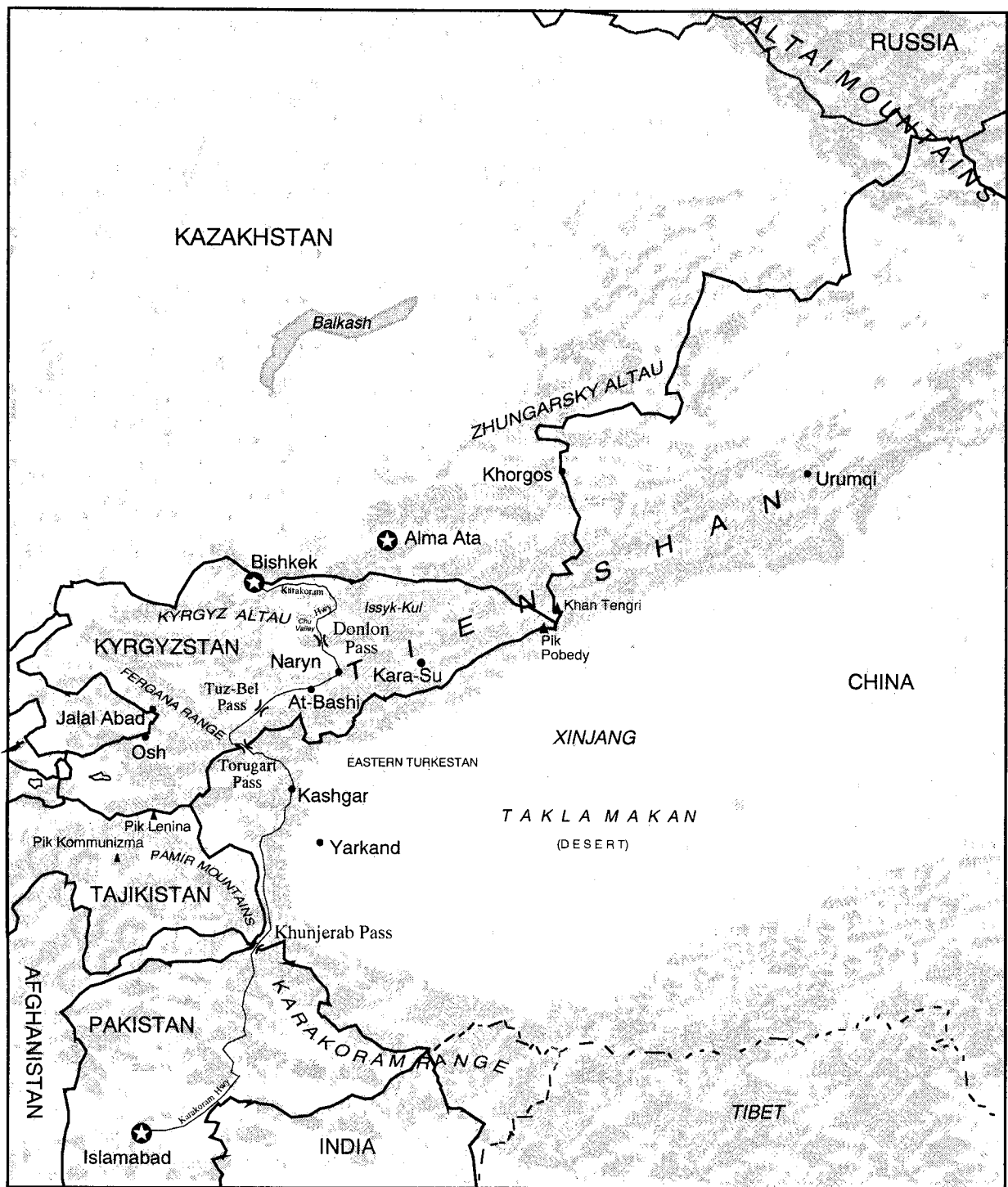
The Sino-Soviet frontier has vanished from the political map, splintering into four new borders. China's new sovereign neighbors are Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. China and the Newly Independent States (NIS) profess friendship toward one another, eager on paper to mend relations and advance trade. Nevertheless, a glance at a relief map will serve as a reminder that regional traffic and commerce still face a very uphill struggle — literally. For the geographical barriers are rather less transitory than the shifting amities and animosities of nations. There was a physical backbone buttressing the Sino-Soviet frontier that cannot be abolished by

political goodwill and a handshake, the way that more artificial demarcations like the inter-German boundary, the Green Line, the Blue Line, or the Thirty-Eighth Parallel could be. That backbone is an imposing series of mountain chains.

Run a finger from north to south along the Chinese-NIS borders on an embossed relief map, and just feel all the bumps. (*see* unembossed map, next page.) First the Altai mountains (over 4,000 meters high), then the Zhungarsky Altai range (over 5,000 m.) interrupt Kazakhstan's border with China. At the country's southeast tip, practically where it touches Kyrgyzstan and China, there is a spike. That is Mt. Khan-Tengri ("Spirit-Khan") soaring to a height of 7,010 m. Starting from that point, the Tien Shan (Heavenly Mountains) extend along practically the whole of the Sino-Kyrgyz frontier. The Tien Shan are a mighty system of Alpine-type ranges with steep slopes, running southwest to northeast for 3,000 km. They reach a maximum height of 7,439 m. in Pik Pobedy (Victory Peak), also in Kyrgyzstan.

Lay a hand over the whole of Kyrgyzstan and feel it pressing up into your palm. It will be instantly clear why the Kyrgyz endlessly repeat that their country is "the Switzerland of Central Asia." So much of their land is mountainous that only eight percent is cultivated and seventy five percent of it is under permafrost, *i.e.* the ground never thaws. Fully three percent of its territory consists exclusively of glaciers that are pressed up against the Chinese border. Directly south of Kyrgyzstan, most of Tajikistan is separated from China by a gigantic wall, the Pamir range. The USSR's first and third highest peaks were to be found here: unsurprisingly they were named Pik Kommunizma (7,495 m.) and Pik Lenina (7,134 m.).

Taken together, these mountain systems have always isolated Central Asia from Western China (Xinjiang), whatever the ideologies of the day. They will continue to impede communication and contact, although modern engineering obviously allows more scope for tackling natural obstacles than in the past. The ultimate proof that no terrain is insuperable nowadays is the 1,200-kilometer long Karakoram Highway, opened in 1982, connecting Islamabad with Kashgar across the highest mountain range on earth. (The Khunjerab Pass, linking China and Pakistan at an altitude of 4,730 m., must surely be the most elevated border crossing in the world.) It was built as a political gesture, a "Friendship Highway" between the two countries. After such a feat of engineering, no mountains can be said to be logistically insurmountable, not even the Tien Shan or the Pamirs. The extreme underdevelopment of transport infrastructure across the Sino-Soviet frontier has to be chalked up to the lack of political will. Today someone wishing to travel between the NIS and Xinjiang on the ground has few choices. There is only one rail cutting and five roads connecting China and the whole of Central Asia, many of which will be snowed in during wintertime. By all accounts, the most dramatic of all the crossings is the Torugart Pass.



My destination was Kashgar in Xinjiang. I met the jeep that was to transport me as far as the Torugart Pass in the early morning in Bishkek, the Kyrgyz capital. It was a GB-registered Land Rover with a guide, Sergei. The driver turned out to be the son of one Shchetnikov, a professional climber with the right to append the honorific "Snow Leopard" (*Bars*) to his name. He had earned the title by scaling the four highest mountains in Central Asia — Pik Kommunizma, Pik Lenina, Pik Pobedy and Mt. Khan-Tengri — each over 7,000 meters.

Our starting point, Bishkek, was already 750 meters above sea level, and much of the 550-kilometer journey across central Kyrgyzstan to the border followed spectacular roads reaching altitudes above 3,000 meters. Exiting the capital, we drove parallel to a wall of green, snow-clad mountains on our right, the easternmost end of the Kyrgyz Alatau range. The streets were lined with small whitewashed houses with window-frames painted usually blue or green, uniformly topped with corrugated-iron roofs. Boys wielding scythes were cutting grass to

feed their goats by the roadside. Our first stop, immediately outside Bishkek, was on the outskirts of Luxembourg! — a village so named for the community of ethnic Germans forcibly resettled here during the war by Stalin. Since 1991, every last inhabitant has taken advantage of Germany's 1913 nationality law that grants citizenship on the basis of ethnicity, taken German passports and emigrated. (I initially assumed that the first city beyond Luxembourg also had German associations, since it was called Kant. In fact, "kant" is Kyrgyz for "sugar"; the town is home to the country's largest sugar refinery. Under the USSR, four percent of the Kyrgyz SSR's precious cropland was given over to sugar beets, earning this part of the country the Russian nickname *Sakharnaya*, or "Sugar Valley.")

Our stop was for petrol, the gas station being a rusty old tanker parked beside the road. Despite appearances, it was selling the last decent petrol available on our route, according to Sergei. One liter costs between 2.9 and 5 Kyrgyz som (\$0.23 - \$0.40), depending on the octane content (the most expensive is 95 octane). However, the farther one strays from Bishkek, the more likely the petrol is to be watered down. I heard from a man who had ridden the intercity bus to Naryn that the driver filled up in Bishkek, then sold the high-quality petrol in each of the villages along the way, transferring it from tank to tank with a piece of hose-pipe he had brought specially, and pocketing all the proceeds.

We were passing through the Chu valley which has been, by all accounts, a favorite wintering spot for nomads since the invasion of Genghis Khan. During the summers, though, they pasture their animals in the mountains, so it was not until we had climbed 3,030 meters that we encountered the first flocks and settlements. They spread below us as we stood at the midpoint of the Dolon Pass, the passageway through the Central Tien

Shan range. For some time already the roads had been deserted, since the moment we had emerged from the Boonskoye (or "Shoestring") Gorge and turned south at the tip of Lake Issyk-Kul. Traffic had continued eastwards along the shores of this gigantic salt lake, perched high in the mountains like Titicaca, leaving all of Central Kyrgyzstan to us. The interior mountainous region of the country is still practically uninhabited.

We stopped to eat *forel'*, mountain trout, from the Kochkorka river while a nomadic family stirred a pot nearby outside their wool-and-felt home. Waiting for his lunch, the man strummed a *dombra*, squatting beside a brown wineskin made from a goat. In fact it held not wine but kumiss (Kyrg. *kymys*), a sour drink made of mare's milk. A couple magnums of kumiss and you are tipsy in the saddle. If wine is light held together by moisture, to quote Galileo, then kumiss is fermentation dissolved in viscosity. I cannot say it is my favorite.

The two horsemen pictured below were grazing their flocks in a soft, green valley in the At-Bashi mountains, 3000 m. above sea level. A third horseman galloped up a little later to join them, and we talked. He said they brought their sheep to *zhailoo*, high-altitude summer pasture, from June-August. They also had 50 mares, which people would buy for transport, for draught, for milk, or to eat. For the summer months they lived in a yurt, which he called *bozui* ("free house" [?]).

A finely-constructed yurt is a wonder to behold. I slept that night in one. It was 6.5 m. in diameter. Its skeleton was a cylindrical trellis wall made of wood that was foldable into sections and pinned with thongs. The wall was girt with woven cloth to prevent it from collapsing. The roof was made up of curved poles lashed to the top of the trellis-wall. These formed a dome, engaging into slots along the rim of a wooden hoop that held the structure



firm. Over this conical frame were draped white sheep felts — four rectangular pieces to cover the trellis sections, two semicircles for the roof, and a square flap over the top that could be retracted to let out smoke. The floor was laid with colorful felt rugs (*shyrdak*) on top of reed matting. It must be said that most *bozui* are much poorer affairs, dingier, less solid, covered in grey-brown blankets or skins. But they are extraordinarily practical, and can be dismantled and packed away in thirty minutes.

When they were not aestivating in the mountains, these men lived 8km away in a *kyshtak* (herders' village) outside the city of At-Bashi. There in the market they expected to sell a sheep for 200 som (\$16) and a mare for 2,000 som (\$160). [An average month's salary for a teacher or a doctor in Kyrgyzstan is 400 som (\$32).] One of them had worked under the old regime 50 km away as a shepherd at the Kara-Su *kolhoz*, or collective farm. All *kolkhozi* and *sovkhozi* (state farms) have been disbanded in independent Kyrgyzstan. Now he, together with the 600 families who had worked at Kara-Su, was obliged to fend for himself.

At sundown we reached the *Tash Rabat* ("Stone Caravanserai") — a lonely, fortified building about 35 m. square, situated 18 km up the valley from the main road. Over a thousand years old, it once had been a stopping point on the trade route between the Fergana valley and Kashgar. Since it was remote and isolated, we expected it to be deserted. A surprise awaited us.

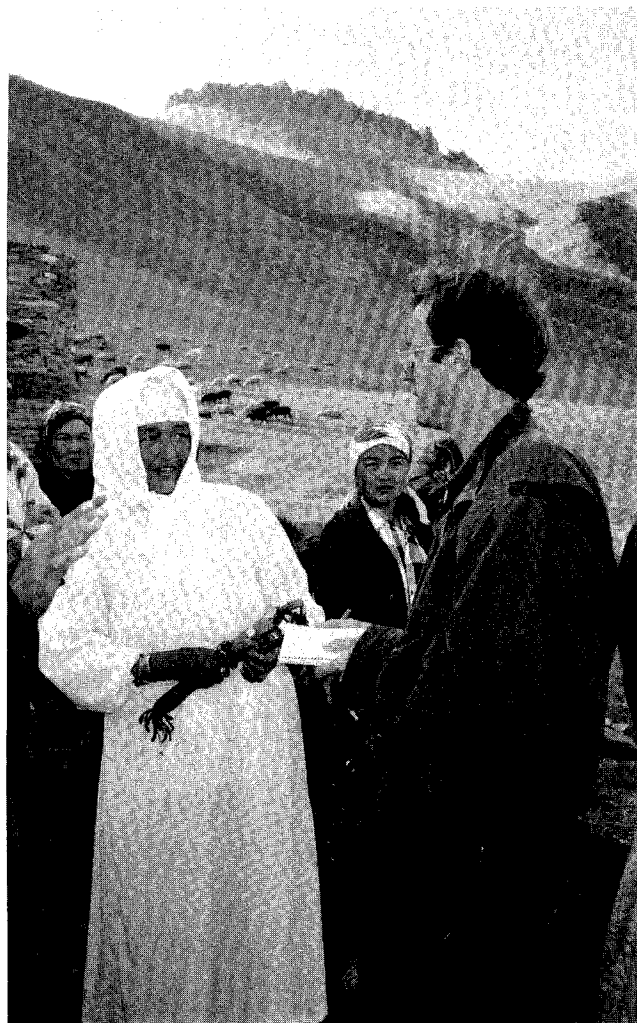
Kneeling on the lawn in front of the entrance, hands cupped before them in the manner of muslim prayer, twenty men and women were participating in a most peculiar ritual. They were listening to prayers being recited by the lady in the photograph at right, swathed in white and holding a *kamchy*, or camel-whip. I was assured she was speaking Arabic — "Allah" and the formula "Bismillahirrahmanirrahim!" were sounded occasionally — but overall the language sounded a mish-mash to me. The aim of the session was to rid the man beside her of "bad spirits." He was impelled by incubi to drink heavily, beat his wife and be a waster generally. In a way, she was exorcising them. Between incantations, she strode around the circle, flicking the company with her camel-whip as a mode of blessing.

As twilight enveloped the *Tash Rabat*, she disengaged the man from the group, led him a short distance away and made him kneel down. Shoulder to shoulder, they prayed to Allah in the direction of the disappearing sun's disk. She enumerated the improvements he needed to effect in his life, threatening him (on Allah's behalf) with condign punishment if he remained refractory. The onlookers on their knees — myself now among them — joined her in a last prayer, the amen was said, and we got to our feet.

One could hardly have asked for a better example of "parallel," folk Islam in Central Asia. All the congrega-

tion were active Muslims. Some of them had actually heard about the excursion from the mouth of the mullah in the mosque in Naryn. They saw nothing un-Islamic about the ceremony they had just performed despite its shamanistic/exorcist overtones. The fact that the ceremonies were conducted by a woman would have startled Turks and Arabs, but struck these Kyrgyz as normal. Both sexes pull their weight in nomadic society, so it is impossible to keep females secluded. I asked whether the woman was a *moldo*, a traditional Kyrgyz medicine-woman. No: she preferred to call herself an *eldik daryger*, or "people's healer." Others referred to her as a *gozu-achik*, "one whose eye has been opened." The mullah himself had identified her power, singling her out as a *gozu-achik* after she had had "many near-death experiences." Her thaumaturgical healing power was a blessing of Allah. Moreover, a part of the blessing bestowed on the sinner would accrue to the bystanders. Their prayer outing lasted two days in all and had focused on different errant individuals in the group in turn. The next morning they were returning to Naryn and Bishkek.

I enjoyed this taste of syncretic religion, Kyrgyz-style. Probably purists will condemn such a mongrel, grab-bag form of Islam as heresy. But I was cheered to think that the Kyrgyz, remote in their high-altitude pastures, iso-





lated in their mountain citadels, had remained individualists. In the crepuscular light, I piously prayed that modern encroachments would not erase that spirit. A little later, our muslim-shaman-exorcist friends passed by in the back of a truck, waving and talking loudly like *bons vivants*, on their way to Kara-Su where they would celebrate their day by slaughtering a sheep and toasting one another with kumiss.

We passed the first Kyrgyz security post early the next morning. It is situated 57 km from the border, and marks the beginning of a controlled military zone. The first reminder of the vigilance with which the Sino-Soviet frontier was guarded had actually appeared the previous evening. Twenty km before the turn-off to Tash Rabat we had been bouncing along the ill-tended road. Suddenly all the jolts ceased and we seemed to be running on rails. The road had become 20 m. wide, straight as an arrow, and surfaced with tarmac: an impromptu Soviet military airstrip in case of emergencies, a mere 70 km from the Chinese border (say, six minutes' flight time). After a few kilometers it ended as abruptly as it began, quickly succeeded by gravel.

We were headed toward the Ferghana Range. The road tipped up into a 12 percent gradient. The photograph above is the view from the Tuz-Bel Pass (3,574 m.), 28.5 km into the military zone. Two electrified fences, two meters apart, begin on the right from this point and continue all the way to the border. The landscape is strewn with camouflaged machine-gun emplacements. That explains the enormous rabbit burrow made of concrete in the foreground of the picture. The mountains on the right are rather steep and rocky, but 19.7 km down the road they become much greener and smoother, and uncoincidentally, a second tranche of bunkers begins. These defensive outcroppings date from 1982, after the Chinese army

crossed into the USSR at this point and were turned back.

I took the photograph on page 8 surreptitiously through the jeep window at the Kyrgyz border post, while Sergei was arguing with a policeman in the next room. Sergei was explaining that, according to the Kyrgyz Foreign Ministry permit he was carrying, he had the right to deliver me to the Chinese side and then return without technically exiting Kyrgyzstan. All that was necessary was that he pay a vehicle customs tax (*gosposhlina*) of 150 som (\$12). The official retorted that the permit was (mysteriously) no longer valid. Sergei pointed out that the outer checkpoint would have halted us if our papers had not been in order. The policeman grunted. He was not defeated, though, only staking out his bargaining position. Soon he acknowledged the document *was* sound, but he broke the news that the customs tax had suddenly risen to 900 som (\$72)... Around then I wandered into the corridor, dismayed but not surprised by these goings-on, and took my picture.

In conclusion, Sergei paid only 150 som, an acknowledgement that the permit was what he said it was. But, as a punishment, he was required to present a customs declaration *as if* he were exiting the country, and to pay the same 15 som (\$1.20) fee for processing the papers as everyone else. "What's my 'country of departure' — Kyrgyzstan?" Sergei asked, filling out the declaration.

"Yes," said the customs official.

"But I'm not leaving Kyrgyzstan! So what's my 'country of arrival'?"

"Well... write 'Kyrgyzstan'."

"I'm exiting and entering Kyrgyzstan simultaneously,



then?" Sergei said sarcastically to the official, who avoided his eye.

The border was surprisingly dead. A few veterinarian doctors strolled around aimlessly. They were civilians who performed medical checks both on animals and on anyone who looked suspiciously ill trying to enter the country, and adjudicated quarantine questions. They served ten-day shifts, living *in situ* in a guest house, interspersed with four-day holidays at home. They were housed with the customs officers, who worked only one week per month, as they served in four shifts of seven days each. The Kyrgyz border detachment (KPP — *Komandno-Propuskoi Punkt*) were a different story altogether. They lived permanently in separate barracks and were exchanged on no fixed schedule for soldiers at the military base in Naryn.

Inside the security point I had to produce proof, in the form of a telex, that I had arranged for transport to pick me up on the Chinese side. This was checked, and a telephone call was made across the pass to establish that my ride was waiting at 10 a.m. as agreed. It was a bad moment when I was informed it had not. Sergei speculated that the Chinese driver may not have been cleared at the military checkpoint on the Kashgar side. Not until a stressful 75 minutes had passed were we told a Land Cruiser had arrived. I spent the time reading the bulletin boards. Conspicuously posted everywhere were signs, dated May 1996, strictly forbidding the import from China of "spirit" (i.e. grain alcohol) by either individuals or firms ("*professional'nimi litsami ili yuridicheskimi litsami*").

It was a shock to see Russian uniforms at passport control. The Kyrgyz are in charge of their own customs and the entrances to security stations. But the power to decide who may come and go rests ultimately with Russians. I must underline that I am not referring to ethnic Russians carrying Kyrgyz citizenship. These were professional Russian soldiers serving in the armed forces of the Russian Federation but functioning as border guards (*Pogranichnye voiska*) on Kyrgyz territory. A state that has ceded responsibility for its own frontiers no longer has total control over its own security, foreign policy or strategic development. A glance at frontier arrangements is a rough but reliable method to judge whether a state's sovereignty is real or nominal, especially in former Soviet-bloc countries. By this criterion Kyrgyzstan fails the test as an independent country.¹ Russians still patrol the Sino-Kyrgyz boundary because, whatever the new maps might show, Russia does not end at its borders. Incidentally, Moscow ensures loyal service from its servicemen in Kyrgyzstan by paying them handsomely by local standards. After some persistent questioning, I ascertained that a Russian private standing guard at Torugart earned a monthly salary of 1,200 som (\$96) and a Russian corporal earned 1,900 som (\$152). In contrast, a Kyrgyz First Lieutenant serving as a customs official earned 850 som (\$68).

I was apprehensive that there would be vast lorry-jams on either side of the Torugart Pass, but there was nothing of the sort. In the picture, only three trucks are waiting behind the outer gate. I had heard about lines two kilometers long. One explanation for the reduction in traffic is that customs procedures have been streamlined on the

1. Kyrgyzstan was the quickest of all the NIS to appreciate it was incapable of protecting its borders adequately against flows of weapons, drugs, illegal immigrants, etc. From the beginning it balked at creating its own army. Its projected force structure calls for 5,000 - 10,000 men in a country of 4.5 million, i.e. 0.1 - 0.2% of the population, a tenth of the European norm. Unable to guarantee its own internal/national security, it must rely on CIS collective-security treaties. The bilateral agreements on the status of Russian servicemen active in Kyrgyzstan were set in place by 1993. For more on the "border guard acid-test" as a guide to independence from Russia, see ASA-5, "Spies, Free Trade and Borders," February 1995.

Chinese side. Other reasons were offered by a very sharp Kyrgyz businessman-smuggler who proudly detailed his activities to me. He began by pointing out that the number of trucks had fallen precipitously after customs duties had gone up two weeks before, on July 1. Previously they used to be 10 percent on the value of goods in both directions across the border. Now they were 15 percent going from Kyrgyzstan into China, and 30 percent going the other way.

He imported cotton from Jalal-Abad, in the Ferghana valley, into Kashgar. He brought one truck at a time over the border, loaded with 40 tons of cotton. Driving across Kyrgyzstan, the truck would be flagged down by policeman twenty to thirty times. The total sum he expected to spend on bribes between Jalal-Abad and Torugart — to prevent his goods being delayed, impounded or confiscated — was between \$1,800 and \$2,200. Once at the customs post, he had to run the gauntlet of mammon-calloused officials, but he had established relations with them and knew whose palm to grease in order to avoid the customs taxes. Their peculations averaged around \$500. The Russians set up a separate ambushade and skimmed him for \$200 - \$300. The Chinese, in contrast, never took a penny. Hence the total lucre he expected to surrender to the bandits before even reaching Kashgar came to between \$2,500 and \$3,000.

He would spend fifteen days in Kashgar selling off his cotton to the state firm. He bought in Jalal-Abad for \$1.30/kg and sold for \$1.70, a profit of 40 cents/kg. Thus his profit for one truckload of cotton came to \$16,000.

Meanwhile he would load up two trucks in Kashgar with a total of 25,000 liters of Chinese "spirit" — precisely the substance singled out by the notices at Torugart as forbidden to import. It is apparently 96 proof, the kind of stuff to make a billygoat yell; one liter makes five bottles of vodka. It costs \$1/liter in China, and sells for thrice that at home. My friend carried false order forms from firms in Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, so he could maintain that he was not importing the spirit but was in transit to those countries. Although face was saved in this way, all bribes going from China into Kyrgyzstan were doubled, i.e. \$10,000 - \$12,000 for two trucks. The last element to this equation were his overall miscellaneous expenses (petrol, lodging, truck maintenance) that came to \$800 there and back. The bottom line using these numbers is that his profit per round trip was \$50,200 to \$52,700.

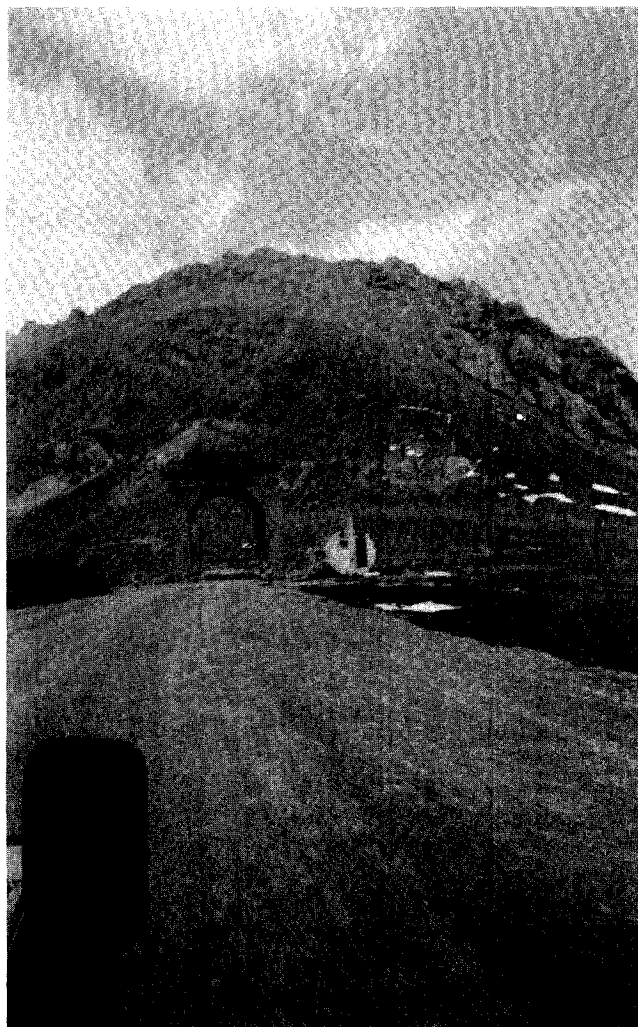
He didn't trade only in cotton. Other profitable exports into China were cloth, copper, aluminium and silkworm cocoons. Would I like to hear the numbers for those variations? I politely declined.

The red-brick arch in the photograph at right stands in the middle of the no-man's-land (11.8 km wide), marking the division between the Kyrgyz and Chinese zones. Lady Macartney, whose husband was British Agent and later Consul-General in Kashgar, passed this way in

1908. In her book *An English Lady in Chinese Turkestan* she notes, "The Russians have made a good zigzag road over the pass, so it was quite easy-going. On the top there is a pile of stone to mark the frontier between Chinese and Russian Turkestan." (She also mentions that Russian customs were handled by three Cossacks, who lived in a house in "Karasu.")

Since the Torugart Pass is 3,752 m. in elevation I expected it to be cold, and as I took the picture it began to hail! Guarding the arch were Chinese soldiers, who checked my passport rather perfunctorily, perhaps because they were shivering as they stood beside the jeep. At the Chinese border post, also made of brick, I said goodbye to Sergei and the Land Rover and was delivered into the hands of a Uighur driver and his Land Cruiser, who had come 175 km from Kashgar to meet me. Now this newsletter has come full circle, since I opened by describing our exit from this security station.

Torugart is classified by the Chinese as a Class 2 crossing: open, but with restrictions. It is closed for most kinds of international buses and private vehicles, unlike for instance the crossing into Pakistan (which is Class 1), where traffic flows freely to and fro. Moreover, it is open



in only one direction at a time: Kyrgyzstan-China in the mornings, China-Kyrgyzstan in the afternoons. These Class designations, thought up in the Ministry of Transport in far-away Beijing, are not an infallible guide to what really happens on the ground here. Sino-Kazakh crossings are Class 1, but the Khorgos checkpoint closes anyway at noon on Saturday for the weekend. There are other roads into China farther north from Kazakhstan, but the Chinese embassy in Tashkent apologetically advised me that frontier officials "were reluctant to allow foreigners use them."

The new Chinese customs and immigration building opened in October 1995. It is situated 106.5 km from Torugart on the way to Kashgar. I saw no other vehicles the whole way, save for two trucks. The road ran beside a mostly dry river bed, winding through stony canyons. Some turns were so sharp that they were advertised with a blue road sign showing a white bugle, meaning "Honk!" (In Chinese towns I saw its negation, a yellow sign showing a black bugle struck out with a gold stripe, meaning "Don't honk!") The landscape was barren and desolate, and we threw up a choking cloud of chalk-like dust behind us. In contrast, the Kyrgyz side looks lush: the moist winds blowing from the south-west cannot surmount the mountain crests, leaving the Chinese side arid. They are blocked by the Tien Shan range, and are then blown down the mountainsides back into Central Asia's valleys and foothills as foehns, like the warm chinook that comes off the Rockies.

This sterile part of Xinjiang is the Kyzylsu ("Red Wa-

ter") Kyrgyz Autonomous County. The villages were poor mud-and-brick affairs — the largest looked to be Tuo-Yun, a settlement of about 200 people — where the inhabitants wore Kyrgyz clothes and hats and buried their dead in unmistakable Kyrgyz-style cemeteries. The area is a military zone, unfortunately, so it was impossible to stop, or even enter it without a permit. In fact, I have heard it is now possible to ride from the Chinese customs post to Torugart on public transport through the county, but an armed guard rides along on the bus to ensure no unauthorized passengers get off.

Customs and immigration was a shiny new building, all white tiles and blue glass. Long and low, it was set impressively at the foot of a red cliff. It reminded me, of all things, of Queen Hatshepsut's temple at Dayr al-Bahri in Egypt. It was built so far from the frontier so that it would be at the fork of *two* routes into Kyrgyzstan: the road to Torugart, and a second road to Osh that would cross the border further south. Chinese truck drivers had expected the second road to be opened by March 1996, but at the time of writing it was still closed. I thought at first the road in question was the existing one to Irkeshtam, but it appears they meant a new road that presumably will hook up with the Kyrgyz A370 near Kok-Art.

I pipped the post, clearing Chinese formalities just before they closed for the day. I arrived in Kashgar in the evening, thirty-two hours after setting out from Bishkek. Kashgar, Xinjiang, and the curious peoples who live there, are the subjects of the next newsletter. □

Institute Fellows and their Activities

Adam Smith Albion. A former research associate at the Institute for EastWest Studies at Prague in the Czech Republic, Adam is spending two years studying and writing about Turkey and Central Asia, and their importance as actors the Middle East and the former Soviet bloc. A Harvard graduate (1988; History), Adam has completed the first year of a two-year M. Litt. degree in Russian/East European history and languages at Oxford University. [EUROPE/RUSSIA]

Christopher P. Ball. An economist, Chris Ball holds a B.A. from the University of Alabama in Huntsville and attended the 1992 International Summer School at the London School of Economics. He studied Hungarian for two years in Budapest while serving as Project Director for the Hungarian Atlantic Council. As an Institute Fellow, he is studying and writing about Hungarian minorities in the former Soviet-bloc nations of East and Central Europe. [EUROPE/RUSSIA]

William F. Foote. Formerly a financial analyst with Lehman Brothers' Emerging Markets Group, Willy Foote is examining the economic substructure of Mexico and the impact of free-market reforms on Mexico's people, society and politics. Willy holds a Bachelor's degree from Yale University (history), a Master's from the London School of Economics (Development Economics; Latin America) and studied Basque history in San Sebastian, Spain. He carried out intensive Spanish-language studies in Guatemala in 1990 and then worked as a copy editor and Reporter for the *Buenos Aires Herald* from 1990 to 1992. [THE AMERICAS]

Sharon Griffin. A feature writer and contributing columnist on African affairs at the *San Diego Union-Tribune*, Sharon is spending two years in southern Africa studying Zulu and the Kwa-Zulu kingdom and writing about the role of nongovernmental organizations as fulfillment centers for national needs in developing countries where governments are still feeling their way toward effective administration. [sub-SAHARA]

John Harris. A would-be lawyer with an undergraduate degree in History from the University of Chicago, John reverted to international studies after a year of internship in the productivity department of a Chicago law firm and took two years of postgraduate Russian at the University of Washington in Seattle. Based in Moscow during his fellowship, John is studying and writing about Russia's nascent political parties as they begin the difficult transition from identities based on the personalities of their leaders to positions based on national and international issues. [EUROPE/RUSSIA]

Pramila Jayapal. Born in India, Pramila left when she was four and went through primary and secondary education in Indonesia. She graduated from Georgetown University in 1986 and won an M.B.A. from the Kellogg School of Management in Evanston, Illinois in 1990. She has worked as a corporate analyst for PaineWebber and an accounts manager for the world's leading producer of cardiac defibrillators, but most recently managed a \$7 million developing-country revolving-loan fund for the Program for Appropriate Technology in Health (PATH) in Seattle. Pramila is spending two years in India tracing her roots and studying social issues involving religion, the status of women, population and AIDS. [SOUTH ASIA]

John B. Robinson. A 1991 Harvard graduate with a certificate of proficiency from the Institute of Kiswahili in Zanzibar, John spent two years as an english teacher in Tanzania. He received a Master's degree in Creative Writing from Brown University in 1995. He and his wife Delphine, a French oceanographer, are spending two years in Madagascar with their two young sons, Nicolas and Rowland, where he will be writing about varied aspects of the island-nation's struggle to survive industrial and natural-resource exploitation and the effects of a rapidly swelling population. [sub-SAHARA]

Teresa C. Yates. A former member of the American Civil Liberties Union's national task force on the workplace, Teresa is spending two years in South Africa observing and reporting on the efforts of the Mandela government to reform the national land-tenure system. A Vassar graduate with a *juris doctor* from the University of Cincinnati College of Law, Teresa had an internship at the Centre for Applied Legal Studies in Johannesburg in 1991 and 1992, studying the feasibility of including social and economic rights in the new South African constitution. [sub-SAHARA]

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