

advantages offered by the position of Kuchā in regard to both if we compare the corresponding conditions in the case of Khotan. The K'un-lun range above this counterpart of Kuchā in the south of the Tārīm basin, with its extremely barren slopes and its narrow deep-cut gorges, provides only the scantiest resources for settled or pastoral existence. The few very difficult passes by which the range may be crossed east of the Kara-koram could never have been used for regular traffic. Beyond it extend for many marches the high and barren plateaus of north-western Tibet, where the rigour of the climate precludes human occupation of any kind, and makes mere travel arduous.

Far more favourable conditions prevail in the T'ien-shan north of the territory of Kuchā. Agricultural settlements of some size are to be found among the foot-hills (Maps Nos. 12 and 16); mines of copper, lead, and iron attest valuable mineral resources; the presence of conifer forests at the head of several of the valleys draining the southern slopes⁵ affords striking evidence of the effect that atmospheric moisture, carried across the range from the north, has produced, by clothing the higher slopes with more abundant vegetation and thus favouring grazing. More important still is the fact that north of the watershed there extends along this portion of the main chain of the T'ien-shan a series of wide lateral valleys—those of Yulduz and of the Tekes and Kunges rivers—which provide not only rich grazing grounds but also, in their lower portions, large areas suitable for cultivation. We know that in Han times these fertile hill tracts were included in the territory of the powerful Wu-sun nation, and that in later times they were always favourite haunts of the great migrating tribes that in succession held the present Dzungaria.

Channels for profitable trade between these attractive valleys and the oases included in the ancient kingdom of Kuchā are provided by a number of passes. Of these the Muz-art pass, situated on the flank of the great Tengri-khān massif, at an elevation of about 11,400 feet (Map No. 11. A. 4), is the westernmost and best known. Others lead from the head-waters of the Kuchā and Bugur rivers to the plateau-like top portion of the Great Yulduz. All of them, though closed by snow during part of winter and early spring, are practicable with laden animals during the rest of the year. These routes provide adequate openings for the trade which is the natural outcome of the abundance of products on both sides of the range. Yet owing to their height, and the narrowness of the valleys by which they debouch southwards, they are far easier to defend against nomadic inroads and domination than the corresponding routes from the north into the territories of Kara-shahr, Turfān, and Hāmi, all farther to the east.

The position of Kuchā with regard to the Taklamakān desert in the south is equally favourable. The broad riverine belt of the Tārīm, stretching from west to east, acts as a natural fosse or fence against that advance of the drifting sand with which the proximity of the great dune-covered area of the Taklamakān threatens outlying cultivated areas in the Khotan region, whenever the irrigation of these is reduced from physical or human causes. The width of this riverine belt is considerably increased by the branching beds, not only of the Tārīm, but also of the terminal course of the Muz-art-daryā (see Map No. 17. C, D. 2). This accounts for the ample winter grazing which the flocks of Kuchā find here. Incidentally it may also be noted that the deltaic spread of flood water from this river accounts for that prevalence of subsoil moisture which explains the poor preservation of remains at outlying sites of ancient occupation in the south of the Kuchā area. For the same reason evidence of wind-erosion is very scanty at these sites.

Among the advantages assured to Kuchā by its geographical situation, special mention must be made of those which the territory has derived since ancient times from being the nodal point of important routes converging upon it from different directions. Kuchā must always have been a considerable trade nucleus upon the great Central-Asian high road which passed through it,

Advantages
of climate
N. of
Kuchā.

Trade
routes
across
T'ien-shan.

Kuchā
protected
by riverine
belt in
south.

Routes
converging
at Kuchā.

⁵ See Maps No. 12. B, C. 1; 16. B. 4.