

I allowed to choose whether he would come or not, decided to stay behind. He explained that he had never done any great distance on foot and was afraid of not lasting out. It is typical of Russians as a rule that they love to rest and will curb their curiosity if its satisfaction entails physical exertion. Hsy also displayed great satisfaction over my allowing him not to accompany me.

The road leading up the valley was not breakneck, but very steep and tiring for long stretches. The local people put the distance at 40 li to Nan feng, the largest temple, from the village of Y tchyen yen. The effort required evidently plays some part in determining the distance, which cannot exceed 30—34 li. The climb took us about 10 hours, including some short halts. The descent, which went very rapidly, took 4 hours and 20 minutes, after deducting halts.

The gorge, at the bottom of which a little river forms numerous cascades, is charming. The steep mountains rise to a giddy height. One peak in particular at the end of the gorge, shaped like a sugar-loaf with two perpendicular sides, was beautiful. It rose above all the surrounding mountains. There was another steep peak in a side-gorge to the E. They were connected and woods of fir-trees were growing on them. The little temple of Nan feng stood among tall firs on the latter peak. Grass and small green bushes grew in every little crevice of the mountains. The bottom of the gorge was also green with plants growing between the stones. Small temples or shrines with curved tiled roofs could be seen practically everywhere, embedded in verdure. Some were blasted into the side of the rock and only a rectangular doorway could be seen of them. First we would pass a small niche carved in the rock with its altars and images, then simply some large characters carved in the mountain. Everywhere monstrous idols with rolling eyes, wildly brandished staffs, swords, brushes or other insignia of their dignity or office peer at you from the depth of these caverns. In a couple of niches I saw Buddha images, the indescribably calm faces of which, untouched by worldly turmoil, with half-closed eyelids, formed a wonderful contrast to these wild Chinese divinities. — Primitive stairs, mostly cut into the rock, led up the steepest places. Some consisted of several hundred steps and were almost perpendicular. Every projection of the mountain, however small, had been utilised. Where there were none, a rough step or a hollow in the shape of a horseshoe had been cut to afford a hold. In dangerous spots one, or sometimes two long, rough chains with large rings had been riveted into the rock to act as a handrail. They were threaded through loops fixed into the side of the mountain. In places where the road crept along the narrow crest of a bare ridge, remains were still left of low stone balustrades with carved figures similar to those you see on old Chinese bridges. Occasionally a stairway had been fixed in a crevice between a perpendicular wall of rock and a gigantic boulder torn from it, so narrow that you had to bend over to one side in order to advance. At other times you had to bend almost double under a fallen rock that almost closed a crevice. There must have been several thousand steps, but the way is not dangerous.

There are endless legends about the gorge, the creations of the superstitious fancy of the people or of the endeavours of the Taoist priests to exploit it. You hear tales of a fish pressed against the mountain, so that its shape can still be seen, or a snake imprisoned