

'Two hundred li, or so, to the west of the city [of Wu-sha],' thus the *Hsi-yü-chi* tells us¹⁵, 'there is a great mountain. This mountain is covered with brooding vapours which hang like clouds above the rocks. The crags rise one above another, and seem as if about to fall where they are suspended. On the mountain top there rises a Stūpa of a wonderful and mysterious construction. This is the old story: many centuries ago this mountain suddenly opened; in the middle was seen a Bhikshu, with closed eyes, sitting; his body was of gigantic stature, and his form dried up; his hair descended low on his shoulders and enshrouded his face.'

Hsüan-tsang goes on to relate how a hunter once caught sight of the Arhat and told the king, who came in person to see him and pay him worship. A monk of his following explained that it was an Arhat absorbed in that complete ecstasy which produces extinction of the mind, and indicated the means by which he might be safely roused from his trance. When these had been applied, the Saint, 'looking down on them from on high for a long time,' inquired about Kāśyapa, his master, and about Śākyamuni Tathāgata. On hearing that they had both long ago attained their Nirvāṇa, he remained for a long time with his head bowed. Then he rose in the air and miraculously created a fire which consumed his body. His burned bones, which fell to the ground, were collected by the king, who raised a Stūpa over them.

No one who has passed some time within sight of the great Muztāgh-Ata Peak, and has witnessed the superstitious awe with which its majestic ice-dome is regarded by the Kirghiz in all the valleys around, could fail to be reminded by Hsüan-tsang's story of the legends which cluster around that 'Father of ice-mountains'. According to the simplest form of the legend, which I myself heard from the Kirghiz with whom I came into contact during my brief surveying excursions around Muztāgh-Ata, a hoary 'Pir' resides on the glacier-crowned and wholly inaccessible summit. Long, long ago, the eyes of adventurous hunters beheld him. Other Kirghiz legends, which Dr. Hedin heard during his prolonged stay in the same region, in 1894-5, represent the sacred mountain as 'one gigantic Mazar or burial-mound of saints', in which dwell among others the souls of Moses and Ali, &c.¹⁶ Stories of mysterious help rendered by these sacred dwellers of Muztāgh-Ata are interwoven with what popular tradition remembers of the struggle between the Khwājas of Kāshgar and the Chinese which found its tragic conclusion on the Pāmirs (1759 A.D.). On the top of Muztāgh-Ata Kirghiz belief places an ancient city, whose inhabitants live on for ever in enjoyment of unblemished happiness, &c.

Story of
Muztāgh-
Ata.

The great height of Muztāgh-Ata (24,321 feet according to the latest triangulation), and the dominating position it occupies, make its glittering dome visible far away in the plains about Yarkand and along the road towards Yangi-Hisār¹⁷, whenever the dust-haze peculiar to the air of the plains clears away sufficiently. It is true that such occasions are rare, but this, perhaps, renders the vista of the distant icy peak all the more impressive to the imagination. Its direction as seen from Yarkand is almost due west—the same direction which Hsüan-tsang indicates for the great peak with its mysterious Stūpa in relation to the chief town of Wu-sha. The distance recorded by him, '200 li or so', is, indeed, beyond all proportion too small, seeing that in a direct line no less than 118 miles separate Muztāgh-Ata from Yarkand, or 65 miles from Yangi-Hisār. But it must be remembered that neither Hsüan-tsang's narrative nor his 'Life' indicates a personal visit to the chief town of Wu-sha or an actual sight of the Stūpa mountain. If the pilgrim heard the legend *en route*, while moving through the mountains relatively near to Muztāgh-Ata, so serious an underestimate of the distance would be less surprising.

¹⁵ Compare *Si-yu-ki*, transl. Beal, ii. p. 305; *Mémoires*, ii. pp. 217 sqq.

¹⁶ See Hedin, *Through Asia*, pp. 218 sqq.

¹⁷ Compare *Yarkand Mission Report*, p. 286.