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H. Tsuchiya

The Singal Valley as Fa Hsien's route from Pamir to Darel. Field Research in the Northern Areas of Pakistan 2001–2002*

This paper seeks to delineate the results of the fieldwork conducted in the Singal Valley (fig. 1) in the Northern Areas of Pakistan (fig. 2) in May 2001 as part of Tsuchiya/Amjad field research tracing Fa Hsien's route conducted over the last decade. Fa Hsien (317–c. 420 AD), a Chinese monk of Dong Jin Period, during the years 399–415 AD made a trip to India by way of present-day Chinese Turkistan, Pamir and Gandhara. In his travelogue, "The Record of the Buddhist Countries", he described his trip from Tashqurghan, through Pamir to Darel as follows:

From this (Tashqurghan), (the travellers) went westwards towards North India, and after being on the way for a month, they succeeded in getting across and through the range of the Onion Mountains (Pamir). The snow rests on them both winter and summer. [...] The people of the country call the range by the name of 'The Snow Mountains' When (the travellers) had got through them, they were in North India, and immediately on entering its borders, found themselves in a small kingdom called T'o-leih (Tsuchiya 2002, 5), where also there were many monks, all students of the hinayana (Legge 1965, 24).

The most important point in this record for our project is that Darel was the first country Fa Hsien reached after crossing Pamir. This means he did not pass any other renowned place such as Gilgit on his way to Darel, even though scholars have discerned that Fa Hsien came by crossing the Minkata or the Killik Pass from Sarikol Pamir, and travelled via Hunza and Gilgit to reach Darel. This route is well illustrated in the translations of the Records of the Buddhist Countries by A. Kiichi (Adachi 1936, map) and by N. Kazutoshi (Nagasawa 1979, map).

Had Fa Hsien visited Gilgit, it seems inevitable that he would mention Gilgit, since Gilgit was already known in Han Dynasty China as Nandou (Shiratori 1941, 387. 652) an important fortified city mentioned in the Han Shu. Gilgit is also well-known for the discovery of the Gilgit manuscript (Dutt 1939) the Sanskrit Buddhist sutras excavated

from Gilgit dated 7th century AD. It is quite likely that Buddhism was already known in Gilgit at the time of Fa Hsien. Therefore, it is most improbable that Fa Hsien would have omitted referring to Gilgit had he passed through it and besides, he clearly mentioned that Darel was the first place he reached after crossing Pamir. For these reasons, we believe that Fa Hsien's route can not be via Gilgit.

The reason why Fa Hsien directly reached Darel seems to have been motivated by the fact that Darel was known as the most important pilgrimage centre in the area between Central Asia and Swat/Gandhara. Darel was renowned at the time of Fa Hsien because it was home to a colossal image of the Maitreya Buddha. Fa Hsien visited Darel in 401 AD and wrote about Darel and about the Maitreya Buddha as follows:

In this kingdom there was formerly an Arhan, who by his supernatural power took a clever artificer up to the Tushita Heaven, to see the height, complexion, and appearance of Maitreya Bodhisattva, and then return and make an image of him in wood. First and last, this was done three times, and then the image was completed, eighty cubits in height, and eight cubits at the base from knee to knee of the crossed legs. On fast-days it emits an effulgent light. The kings of the (surrounding) countries vie with one another in presenting offerings to it. Here it is, – to be seen now (401 AD) as of old (Legge 1965, 24f.).

The description of the Maitreya Buddha statue in Darel is important because this statue is the first colossal Buddha image ever to be known in the history of Buddhist art. The creation of such a monumental statue of the Buddha must have had a great impact in the Buddhist world. In the time of distress and uncertainty, the concept of Maitreya

* The present field research was conducted by H. Tsuchiya and A. Ayub, Research Associate, assisted by Nizam-ud-dhin, Field Assistant, H. Ali Shah and R. Karim, field staff. Editorial assistance was provided by P. Fusillo and a map was prepared by T. Matsuda.

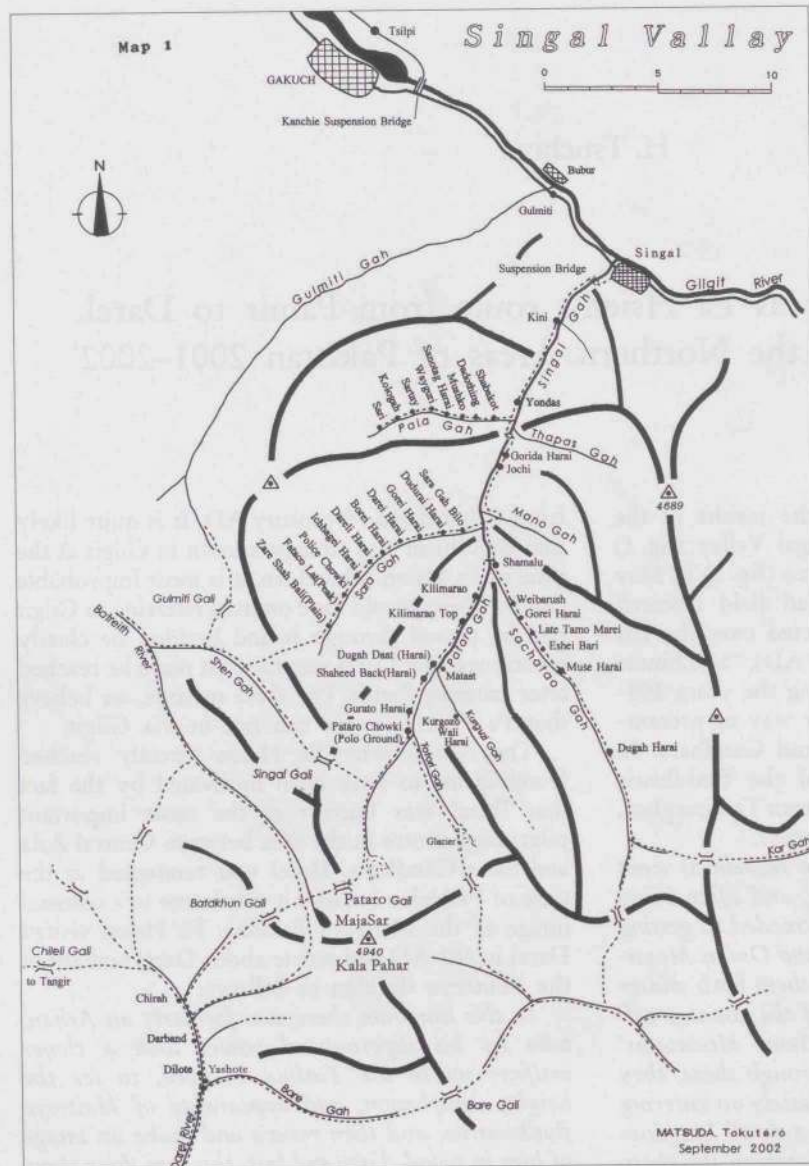


Fig. 1. Map of Singal Valley.

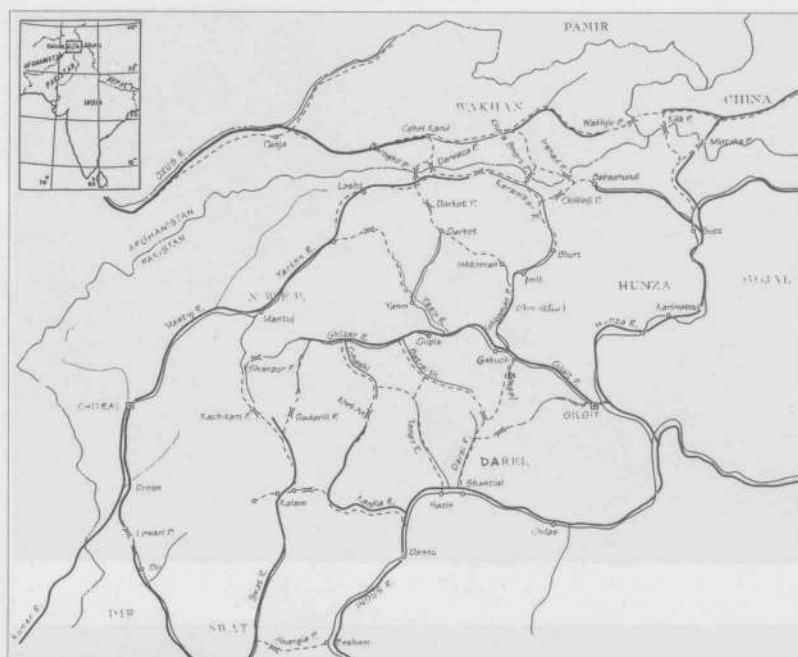
(Bodhisattva) descending from the Tushita Heaven as Maitreya Buddha, a great messiah, must have had immense appeal to the multitudes. The colossal image of Maitreya Buddha in Darel was the centre of adoration among the Buddhists at the turn of the 5th century AD, drawing worshippers from many corners of the Buddhist world.

Although it is not known whether Fa Hsien had already been informed of the Darel statue before he left Loyang, it is quite certain that the Darel Buddha image had been brought to Fa Hsien's attention before he left Tashqurghan. That is why we believe that Fa Hsien headed directly to Darel without touching Gilgit. From Fa Hsien's descriptions, cited above, there must have been a road directly connecting Pamir and Darel. Therefore, it can be discerned that the Mintaka/Killik route can not be Fa Hsien's route, since this route

would have inevitably led to Gilgit before reaching Darel.

Hence, the objective of our project was to find the direct route which Fa Hsien took from Pamir to Darel. As a consequence of our extensive fieldwork (Tsuchiya 2000a; 2001; 2002a) tracing all the sub-valleys of the Gilgit Valley, which lies between Pamir and Darel, we have discovered that the direct route from Pamir to Darel can be traced as follows: from Tashqurghan via Sarikol Pamir and the Wakhjir Pass, enter into the Little Pamir, then via the Khora Bhort Pass, the Karambar Valley and the Ishkoman Valley to reach the Gilgit Valley at Gahkuch. Then bypassing Buber Village and Glumti Village, the route goes through the Singal Valley, which directly reaches the head of the Darel Valley. Through interviews made with the people who have to traverse between the Darel

Fig. 2. A sketch map of Pakistan Northern Areas (drawn by T. Matsuda).



Valley and the Gilgit Valley, it became quite clear that the most suitable route is to take the Singal Valley.

Thus the Singal Valley has been singled out as the shortest and the most likely route connecting Pamir and Darel. The Singal Valley had never been scientifically surveyed and our field research, conducted in the Singal Valley in May 2001, is the first scientific fieldwork ever to be conducted in this valley.

The 35 km-long Singal Valley is a sub-valley of the Gilgit Valley and extends south and south/east from the right bank of the Gilgit River. The mouth of the Singal Valley lies 12 km east of that of the Ishkoman Valley, which links directly with Little Pamir through its sub-valley, the Karambar Valley, and with the Khora Bhort Pass. The head of the Singal Valley is linked with the Darel Valley. The Singal Village at the mouth of the Singal River, on its left bank, is the only permanent village in the Singal Valley. In order to ascertain that the valley is topographically possible for a traveller like Fa Hsien to cross, we travelled the Singal Valley from its mouth to its head.

Topographically, the Singal Valley was found to have easy paths. The much trodden path was limited to human and animal traffic only from its mouth, as the path was not appropriate for vehicle transportation. No vehicle could enter the valley. However, the valley was dotted with the scars of recent landslides. In this regards, the Singal Valley was volatile. Volatile in having both easy and precarious paths as well as in changing its nature from safe to dangerous, being subject to landslides or falling rocks. At some points, arduousness awaited us in crossing the heaps of boulders or

steep bare slopes completely smoothed by the sands of recent landslides. But these difficulties were not insurmountable. We also could observe that these obstructions did not stop the flow of cattle and villagers heading towards their summer villages located at the heads of the sub-valleys of the Singal Valley. Sheep, goats, cows, horses, and even laden donkeys could dexterously overcome the difficulties in these precarious spots (fig. 3).

The route of the Singal Valley could be divided into three sections, the first near the mouth of the valley to the mouth of the Topas Gah, the second up to Shamalu, and the third to the head of the valley. In the first section, the path remained close to the river, on a slightly higher level from a few meters to about twenty meters above the river. The river was always on the left side of the path (fig. 4) until beyond the mouth of the Tapas Gah (valley) a sub-valley of the Singal Valley.

In the second section, the valley became quite deep and narrow and the path started to climb on the right side of the river. It soon clung precariously to the side of steep slopes which descended a hundred meters straight down to the gushing river. The slippery path covered by sand at this point is not wide enough for two animals to cross or even just to put one step only. Remnants of landslides had to be negotiated. One occurred just before we reached the point, where a falling boulder killed a cow, belonging to a villager who had just passed.

However, there were two spacious flat lands, at Jochi and at Shamalu, where large caravans or flocks of animals could spend a night. We also stayed at these spots. Both areas seemed to have been used continuously for a long time. Jochi had



Fig. 3. Cattle and laden donkeys climbing in a landslide area.



Fig. 4. A path on the left side of the Singal River.



Fig. 5. A steep valley between Jochi to Shamalu.

Fig. 6. Looking south from the small oasis of Shamalu.

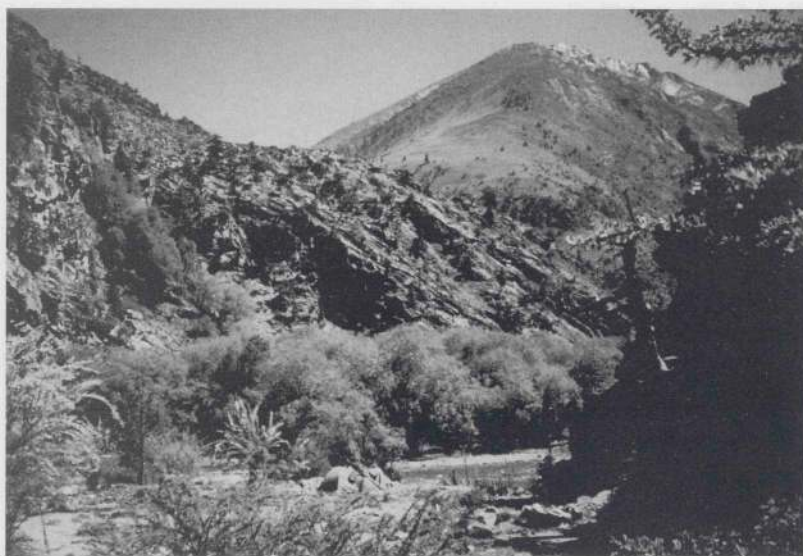
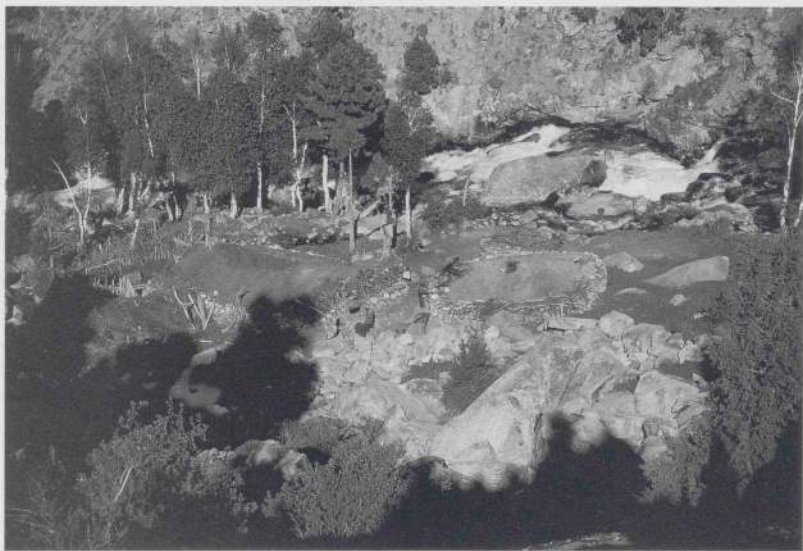


Fig. 7. Duga Harai, a summer village of Gujurs from Tsilpi.



a space very close to the riverside where water was readily available. From Jochi to Shamalu, the path through coniferous forests continued to climb the side of the steep valley (fig. 5), looking down the rapidly surging river several hundred meters below. The view from this section was beautiful, overlooking a deeply forested valley. Several small islands in the river, covered with trees, provided scenic views.

After hiking on a seemingly interminable, tortuous path, we reached Shamalu, which was not just flat land but was an incredible oasis, almost miraculously appearing at the end of the second section. This small oasis of Shamalu (fig. 6) about 500 m east/west and 200 m north/south, was half wooded but at its head had a spacious open space, an ideal camping spot complete with a quiet small sand beach, facing a relatively large inland, which was covered by a thick growth of

trees and shrubbery. The confluence of the Singal and the Shatachao River was just ahead of Shamalu. Abundant, clear water was washing the small, 20-meter-long beach, which was an ideal spot for washing and cleaning. Animals could get easy access to drinking water at this beach. An old makeshift hut, a traditional hut called "dukuri" with juniper trunks and leaves, loosely standing side by side and with a hearth and a space for two to three men to sleep, was built against a high cliff which stands east of the open ground. Dukuri showed signs of heavy use, as the sides were blackened by soot and the hearth covered with ashes. This small oasis in the middle of the valley must have been an ideal place to camp after a hard long day's walk, since it was the only oasis available in the whole valley on the way to Darel, and was spacious enough to keep a large herd of cattle.



Fig. 8. Dudo Khan ploughing with an ox at Shaheed Back.

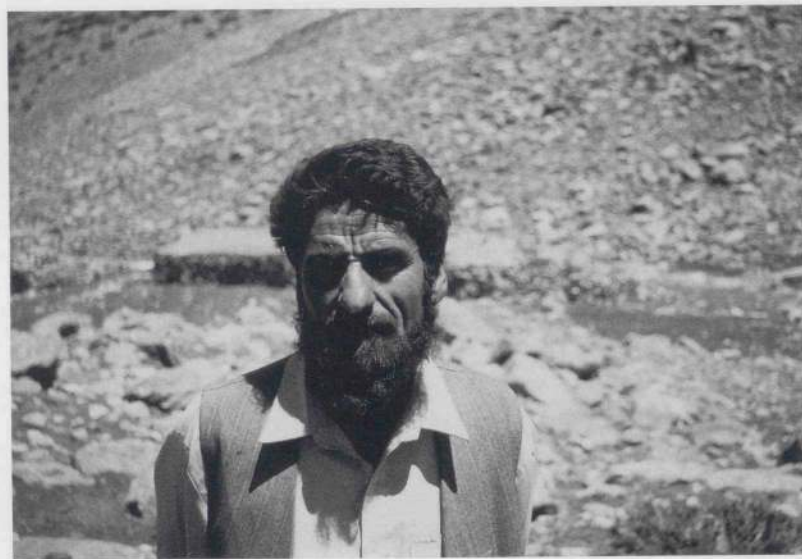


Fig. 9. Mustajab Khan, a policeman from Tsilpi Bala at the Pataro Police Chowki.

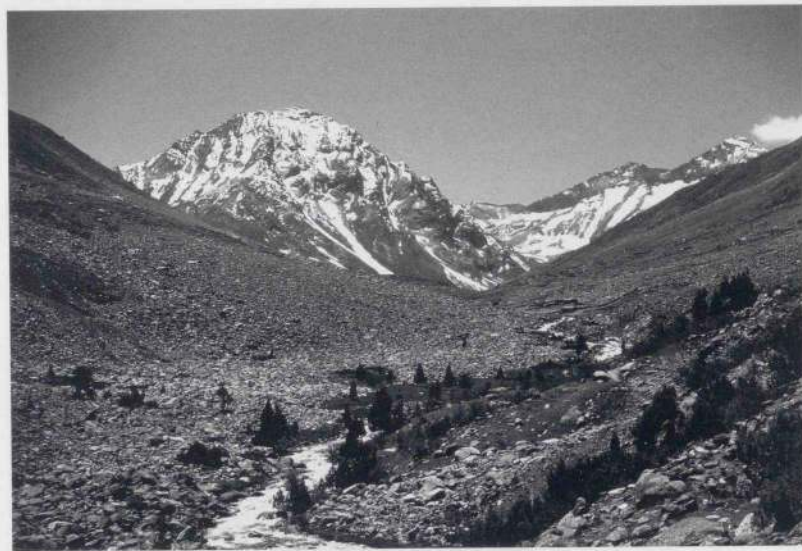


Fig. 10. A flat terrain at the head of the Singal Valley toward the Pataro Pass.

The third section from Shamalu to the head of the valley, which is called Pataro Gah, started abruptly with a continuous steep climb for about one and a half hours up to the Kilimarao Top. Then the path started to run on a wide ridge which looked almost flat but had an extremely gradual ascent. At this point, the Singal River was invisible from the path since it is flowing several hundred meters below the path. The path after a slight ascent started to descend until reaching close to the river at Dugah Harai (fig. 7), a summer village of a great number of Gujurs from Tsilpi. The Singal River, which at Dugah Harai is a small stream, was flowing nearby the path, slightly higher in elevation and fifty meters away from the river course. Across the stream was the wooded area, which is called Mataat, with birch trees and meadows at the mouth of the Kurguzi Valley, extending towards the southeast. After Dugah Harai the path started to ascend and was heading away from the course of the river. The river was about three hundred meters away from Shaheed Back. Here we met Dudo Khan from Tsilpi Pain with his family and cattle. He was ploughing a small field with an oxen in order to grow barley (fig. 8). A man helping Dudo Khan was Raji Gul from Phouguch in the Darel Valley. Raji Gul provided topographical information on the area lying between the heads of the Singal and the Darel Valleys, as given below.

The farthest point we were allowed to reach was the Pataro Police Chowki, where a policeman from Tsilpi Village was posted to prevent the Darel people from going further into the Ghizer territory to steal the cattle. Ghizer is the name given to the upper Gilgit Valley above Biarchi which includes Singal and Tsilpi villages.

At the Pataro Police Chowki, Mustajab Khan (fig. 9) from Tsilpi Bala was on duty, while his family members were staying just behind the police post at Gurato Harai, the last summer village in the Pataro area of the Singal valley. The police post, in front of the mouth of the Totori Valley, commanded a spectacular view towards the Pataro Gali (Pass) and the Batakhun Gali (Pass), which connect the Singal and the Darel valley and also of the Kala Pahar (Kinichish) Mountain, standing in between the two valleys. The terrain became very flat all the way to the Pataro Pass (fig. 10).

The two men we met at the head of the Singal Valley were Thok Khan from Dodooshal Valley, east of the Darel Valley, and Raj Gul, as mentioned before from Phouguch in the Darel Valley. From these men, we could obtain information on the paths connecting the Singal and Darel Valley. According to them, the path is very gradual and there is no glacier to cross. However, there are several small glaciers which feed a few lakes in the area called Majasaghar located in between the two passes, Pataro and Batakhun. The Majasaghar area

is said to be a most beautiful area with lakes, glaciers, flowers and meadows. In order to go to the Darel Valley from the police post, it would take four hours from the Pataro Police Chowki to reach Yashot village, one of the first villages at the head of the Darel Valley, or seven hours to Gumari, the centre of Darel.

ANALYSIS

The present field research revealed that the Singal Valley is heavily used as summer pastures for the villagers, even outside the Singal Valley, from the peripheral areas including the Ishkoman Valley.

The Singal Village at the mouth of the Singal Valley is the only permanent village of the entire valley. Kini, a small summer village between the Singal Village and Yondas, a harai near the mouth of the Pala Gah, is only used in the summer by the people of the Singal Village for harvesting almond oils, known to be the best in this region.

There are five sub-valleys stemming out from the main Singal Valley. These sub-valleys – Pala Gah, Thapas Gah, Mano Gah, Sara Gah and Satachao Gah – are heavily used as summer villages for grazing cattle, not only by the Singal Village, but also by the Tsilpi, Bubur, Damas and Haim Villages. These outsiders pay a tax to the Singal Village per the number of cattle. For grazing, the Singal Village people use the Pala Gah, Thapas Gah and Mano Gah which are closer to their village, while the outsiders are only allowed to have their summer villages in Sara Gah, Satachao Gah and Pataro Gah, which are actually the head of the Singal Valley requiring a longer journey to reach.

Our field research coincided with the time of transhumance or moving livestock seasonally from one grazing ground to another typically to lowlands in winter and highlands in summer. We could observe the transhumants taking their cattle and moving towards their summer camps. Actually at Jochi, we shared the camp site with the villagers from Tsilpi going to their Kilimarao summer village. When the transhumance takes place, the policeman from the original village of the transhumants has to accompany them and to guard them from any possible threats from the Darel side throughout the time summer villages are opened.

A small anecdote of our encounter with Thok Khan reveals the 'wild west' or lawless situation prevailing in this valley quite well. We came across Thok Khan from the Dodoshal Valley adjacent to the Darel Valley. He provided us with valuable information on the paths between the Singal and Darel valleys. Although we saw him with a goat, it never occurred to us that Thok Khan was running away with this goat, which he stole from a summer village. After we parted with Thok Kahn, we learned about the theft from two men who were chasing after him. After returning to the Singal Village we found out that the two men

arrived at the Singal Village too late to catch Thok Khan, who sold the goat and ran away.

This anecdote proves the necessity of those summer villages to be guarded in order to protect cattle from the raids frequently carried out by the people from the Darel Valley. It also indicates that the routes are easy enough to run away with the catch (the cattle they stole). The movement of people between the Singal and Darel Valleys is not too arduous, and it is necessary to station police to prevent access. This testifies that the route between the Singal and Darel do not have any physical difficulties to cross. At present there is no traffic from the Singal side to Darel since the Singal people are afraid of the Darelis and not the least interested in going to Darel. Some Darelis do traverse to Singal Valley if they can clear the check point at the police post.

We could discern that from Singal Village at the mouth, it would take two to three nights to reach the head of the Singal Valley, stopping at Jochi, Shamalu and at Gutaro Harai at the head. Then it would take seven hours to reach the center of the Darel Valley.

Our field research in the Darel Valley (Tsuchiya, in press a/b) in the year 2000, and the workshops on the Darel Valley held in Islamabad in February and October 2002, and in January 2003, verified the following: from the Darel side, it would take five to six hours to cross the two passes, Batakhun and Pataro, to reach the head of the Singal Valley. The time difference of one to two hours longer from the Darel side is due to the climbing needed to reach the top, while from the police post on the Singal side, it does not require a steep climb, rather, the terrain became very flat all the way to the base of the Pataro Pass, after which one reaches a flat meadow up to the Batakun Pass, then descends towards the Darel side.

CONCLUSION

Considering the above information collected at the Singal Valley, we are able to propose the following:

1. The Singal Valley is the shortest and most direct route from the Gilgit River Valley to the Darel Valley. Despite some recent topographical changes due to landslides, the path has proven to be well trodden by cattle and villagers heading towards their summer village. In general, the path could be discerned as an easy route, with occasional spots hazardous and arduous but not insurmountable.
2. There are two camping sites, Jochi and Shamalu, available and being used even at present, that seemed to have been utilized for centuries. Jochi and Shamalu were almost miraculous, considering they were located in the middle section of the valley, and the paths skirt around the high point along the steep slope, never

leaving space for more than two laden animals to cross. The presence of these camping sites suggests that it is possible for travellers to rest comfortably overnight. If one allows three nights to traverse the Singal Valley: Jochi, Shamalu and at the very head at Gurato Harai, the journey would not be rushed and it would be carried out with ease.

3. Having verified that the Singal Valley is highly populated during the summer-time because of the use of the summer villages, this might have created an environment of ease for travellers who would be able to ask for assistance if needed. For example, the travellers could find ways to obtain food, although not on commercial basis, from these summer villages which started to appear past the Mano Gah at Gorida Harai and in Pataro, Kilimarao on the way to the Darel Valley.
4. Hence, the Singal Valley has been proven to be physically possible for a traveller or a group of travellers to cross, with enough space to camp. Besides, being a route to the important pilgrim center, it is feasible that a commercial establishment, such as an inn with accommodation and provisions, could have been existed at Shamalu, which could be reached in one or two days from the Singal Village.

Going back to Fa Hsien, who wrote that he travelled from Pamir to Darel directly, we have already proposed that he must have travelled from Pamir, via Khora Bhort Pass, and through the Karambar Valley and Ishkoman Valley, to reach Gakuch on the Gilgit River. We discovered evidence of ancient traffic in these valleys such as numerous petroglyphs (Tsuchiya 2001, 83, 92f.) along the route, a Chinese seal (Tsuchiya 2001, 90) retrieved from Imit Nallah, a stream near Imit, and Khotanese jade cups (Tsuchiya 2001, 77) in the possession of Karam Ali Shah, the Pir residing in Chatorkhand, the centre of the Ishkoman Valley, as the treasures inherited from his ancestors.

Gahkuch located on the right bank of the Gilgit Valley, near the mouth of the Ishokoman Valley, has yielded a Buddha image (Tsuchiya 1999a, 41) and petroglyphs of stupas (Tsuchiya 1999b, fig. 14; 2000a, 103; 2000b, 898), though they probably are slightly later in date than Fa Hsien's time. However, it does not prevent us from considering the dissemination of Buddhism at an earlier time at Gakuch, which is the middle way between Pamir and Darel.

Bubur, a village on left bank of the Gilgit River, 8 km below Gakuch and 4 km above the mouth of the Singal Valley, seems to have had a Buddhist temple, from where a standing Buddha image (Tsuchiya 1999b, fig. 3; 2000a, 98) was excavated. The style with a round, full face, with child-like proportions, shows the proximity to that of the Kargah Buddha (Tsuchiya 2000a, 98) in Gilgit and

is considered to be from the 5th to the 6th century provincial style prevalent in the Gilgit Valley.

The Singal Valley lies in the middle of the Darel Valley and the Gilgit Valley. The head of the Singal Valley is linked with that of Darel, while its mouth is close to Bubur and not far from Gakuch. The importance of Darel as a Buddhist pilgrim center for a colossal, wooden Maitreya Buddha of 24 m is recorded by Fa Hsien. The importance of Bubur and Gakuch should be recognized here as the middle point between Pamir and Darel. This indicates the fact that both Bubur and Gakuch must have been on the route which is frequented by Buddhists and were exposed to Buddhism.

With this in mind, I would like to propose that the Singal Valley was the route by which Fa Hsien must have traversed in order to worship the colossal Maitreya Buddha in Darel.

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