

CHINESE EVEREST EXPEDITION, 1960

A FURTHER COMMENTARY

BY B. R. GOODFELLOW

THE Chinese official account of their assault on Everest from the north in 1960 has already been criticised at length in the *Alpine Journal*¹ on the grounds that, to Western readers, the description of the final stages of the climb is unconvincing and is not supported by photographs. Mr. Blakeney has drawn attention to, but had only time to comment briefly upon, the photograph reproduced in *La Montagne*, February 1961, p. 9. This photograph is stated by the Chinese to have been taken at the height of 8,700 m. on the descent. It was not among those sent to the *Alpine Journal* by the Chinese.

There has now been time to analyse this photograph thoroughly.

The Tibetan foothills of Everest have of course been very thoroughly surveyed by the many British Everest expeditions between the wars. Thanks to the magnificent map of the Everest area published provisionally in 1960 by the Royal Geographical Society on the scale of 1 : 100,000, there is no difficulty in identifying all the major peaks in the Chinese photograph; to proceed thence to the deductions made below is a matter of simple geometry.

To check the accuracy of the methods used, this geometry was first applied to the photograph taken in 1933 from Camp V (Ruttledge, plate 34). This gave a height of 7,900 m. for Camp V compared with the stated height of 25,700 ft. (7,833 m.).

The photograph in *La Montagne* analyses as follows:

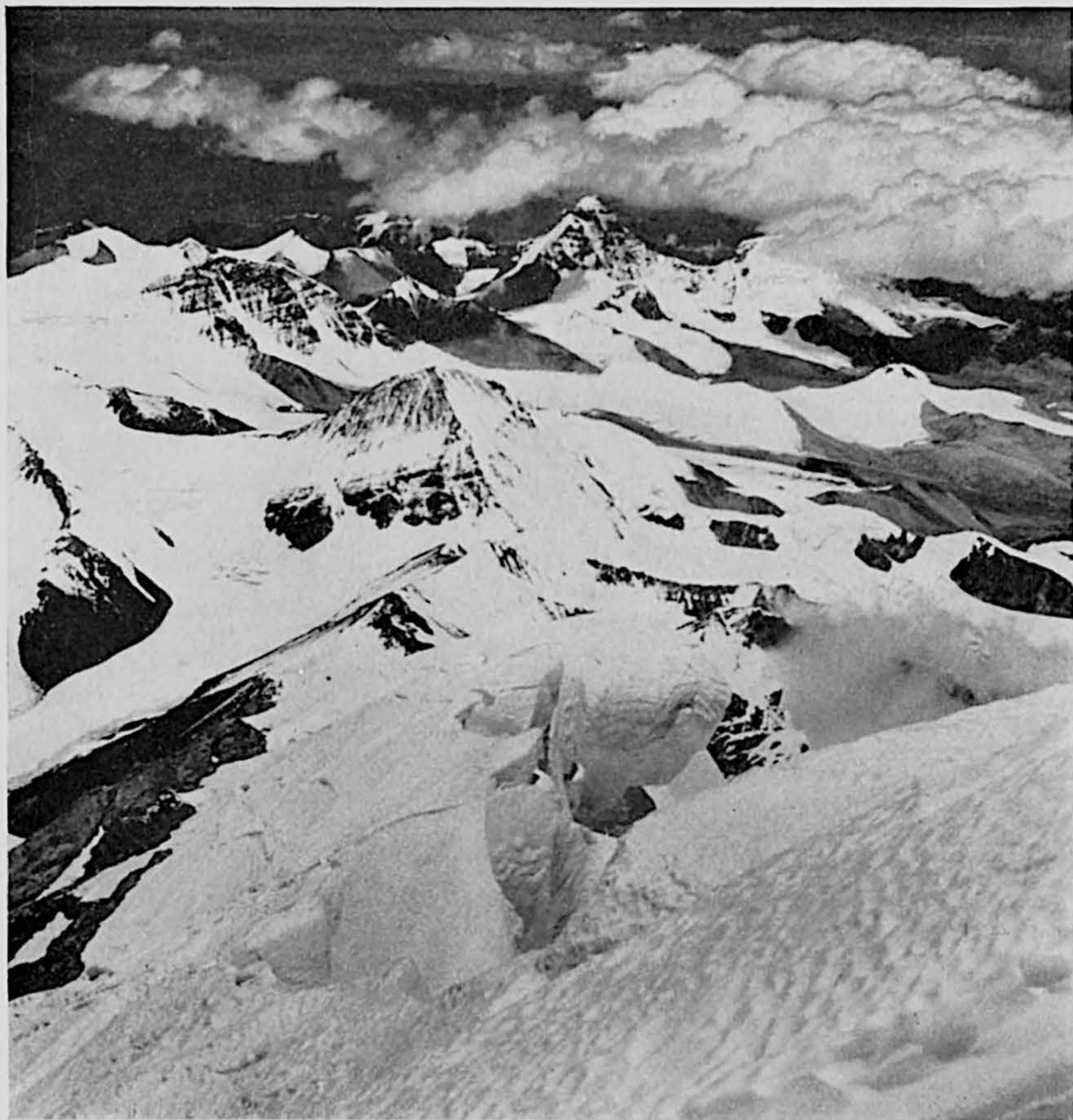
- (i) In the vertical plane three intersections suggest that the photograph was taken between the summit of Everest and a point 200 m. or 300 m. along the North-east ridge.
- (ii) In the 'horizontal' plane no less than eight levels can be drawn from which it is possible to calculate the height at which the photograph was taken, assuming the accuracy of point (i) above. Of these the most reliable is the coincidence of the summit of Kharta Changri (7,056 m.) with the lowest point of the ridge running north-west from the peak familiarly known as 'Dent Blanche' (6,766 m.), i.e. at the col south-east of point 6,309 m. This gives a height for the photographer of 8,600 m. or, allowing

¹ See notes by Editor and Mr. Blakeney, *A.J.* 61. 36 *et seq.*



Chinese Everest Expedition photograph]

LOOKING NORTH FROM 8,700 M. ON EVEREST.



VIEW NORTHWARD FROM THE SUMMIT OF EVEREST TAKEN
BY SIR EDMUND HILLARY IN 1953.

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for curvature of the earth but ignoring refraction, a height of 8,700 m.

The other seven observations depend upon calculations of the scale and slope of distant mountain faces where the lines of the summits of nearer peaks such as Kharta Phu, fall upon them. These less trustworthy observations lead nevertheless to figures of the photographer's height which all lie between 8,500 m. and 8,850 m.

Giving each calculation an arbitrary weight according to the reliability of each of the assumptions, the weighted average of all eight comes to 8,700 m.

This is exactly the height at which the Chinese say their photograph was taken.

- (iii) By studying the shadows it is possible to form a rough idea of when the photograph was taken. An intersection with a point on the glacier at the left-hand edge of the photograph suggests that the sun was about 5° South of East. On May 25 the sun in the early morning would be about 10° South of East. We cannot claim an accuracy for this observation within 5 per cent.

The average angle of the shadows in the vertical plane, at right angles to the direction of the sun, appears to be just over 30° . Assuming the photograph was in fact taken on the date claimed, this means that it was taken about two hours after sunrise, i.e. about 7.30 a.m. The Chinese state that the photograph was taken on the descent after they had left the summit of Everest at 2.35 a.m.

This photograph has been studied by the Royal Geographical Society and shown to Mr. E. E. Shipton. They have been good enough to tell us that in general they agree with our findings.

In the August issue of the S.A.C. monthly *Bulletin*, Dr. Jürg Marmet comments on the identification of the peaks as given by Professor Dyhrenfurth in the May number of the *Bulletin*. On reworking out his calculations as to the altitude at which the Chinese photograph was taken, Professor Dyhrenfurth considers that it was taken from a height of 150–200 m. below the summit of Everest at 10.20 a.m. (Peking time, about 8.0 a.m. local time), but whether from the North-east ridge or from an aeroplane it is difficult to decide.

The Chinese report mentions that they took with them a small cine camera. It is interesting to note that the angle embraced by the photograph corresponds exactly to the field of view of an orthodox 8 mm. or 16 mm. cine camera with a lens of standard focal length.

Finally, we have been able to examine also a photograph taken in the same direction from the summit of Everest by Hillary. This

leaves no doubt whatever that the Chinese photograph was taken a very little way below the summit on the north side of the mountain.

Those who are sceptical will no doubt claim that there is still no proof of the photograph having been taken by the climbers; it could have been taken by an unusually courageous airman flying 100 ft. or so above the second step.

It is significant that the Chinese are curiously reticent about the slowness of their descent. It seems that they took five hours to descend 150 m. from the summit, and over five days to descend 3,580 m. to the reunion with their companions at Base Camp. This descent is not described and no mention is made of bad weather.

Nevertheless, one might give the Chinese the benefit of the doubt in the matter of weather conditions on the final climb. They started from their 8,500 m. assault camp on May 24 and claim to have reached the summit at 2.30 a.m. local time the following morning. The Indian expedition report 'a perfectly calm day' on May 24 (*A.J.* 66, 25), and it was only in the early hours of the following morning that a high wind blew up; they turned back on account of extreme cold and driven snow. A real 'monsoon' deterioration did not set in until May 26 (*A.J.* 66, 26). In these circumstances of high wind it is not inconceivable that the Chinese could have fought their way down from the summit, nor is it inconsistent with the Indian weather report that the Chinese photograph should show clear sunshine on the lower peaks. It would be interesting to know how the weather on and after May 26 hindered their descent to the North col.