

MOUNT EVEREST: THE CHINESE PHOTOGRAPH

(The following notes by Mr. Merrick and Professor Wager on the position of origin of the highest Chinese photograph have been submitted quite independently. Mr. Merrick originally expressed his views in A. J. 67. 310-12; he has added these further comments in the light of the showing of the Chinese film at the Alpine Club on October 9, 1962—EDITOR.)

I

BY HUGH MERRICK

NOW that we have had an opportunity of seeing the Chinese ciné-film of their attempt on Everest, may I add the following brief comments to my paper and diagrams published in the last *JOURNAL*, suggesting that the 'Photograph' was taken at 8,500 and not 8,700 metres?

This contention would now appear to be reasonably well confirmed, for the general impression left by the film and supported by the remarks of almost all the Everest men in the subsequent discussion can, I think, be summarised as follows:

1. There can be little question that the photograph first published in *La Montagne* and subsequently reproduced in *A. J.* 66. 314—now so long under discussion and the subject of my previous paper—is, in fact, a 'still' reproduced from a frame in the latter part of this ciné-film. This was proved beyond reasonable doubt when the film was stopped on the second run-through and the Hon. Sec. pin-pointed the exact 'shot'. I do not think any experienced photographer would dissent from this view.

2. The climbing sequences in the film undoubtedly took the ascent up to the old 1933 Camp V (*c.* 25,700 ft. = 7,830 m.). The commentary then continues with a number of supporting shots past '8,100 metres' to a point where it claims: 'We are now at 8,500 metres'.

3. Except for long-focus shots (see next para.) from about this point up the face towards the summit, no higher picture than this was identifiable in the film. Indeed, since the commentary stated that, after

dumping their loads, this party returned to base from the 8,500 point, it seems certain that no higher ciné-photos were taken on this occasion.

4. The commentary then goes on to relate how a climbing party later came up, and from that point went on to reach the summit. This is done against an obvious background of the above-mentioned long-focus shots and a panorama sequence, intended to give a clear impression that they were taken either from the summit or close to it. The 'still' is taken from a frame of this panorama-sequence in the film. (See 1 above.)

5. It seems a fair conclusion, on all the above counts, that no part of this film was taken (nor do the Chinese claim so in the commentary) above *c.* 8,500 m. And that, since the 'Photograph' is a 'still' from this film, it can be accepted as having been taken at that height, but no higher.

It is, of course, encouraging to find that the entirely independent workings in my paper, done months before the showing of the film, had arrived at precisely this height—*c.* 8,500 m. Even more so is a letter I have just received from Professor Dyhrenfurth accepting my conclusions unreservedly.

II

BY L. R. WAGER

RATHER late in the discussion I have realised that evidence for the general height and position of origin of the critical Chinese photograph from the film can be obtained from a direct visual comparison of three photographs, the one from the summit taken by Hillary, one of mine from the North face taken at the First Step, and the Chinese photograph. The methods used by Goodfellow and Merrick both depend on heights derived from the map and, however good the map may be, there is a possible element of error, especially when the height of a col, not determined trigonometrically, has to be estimated from contour lines.

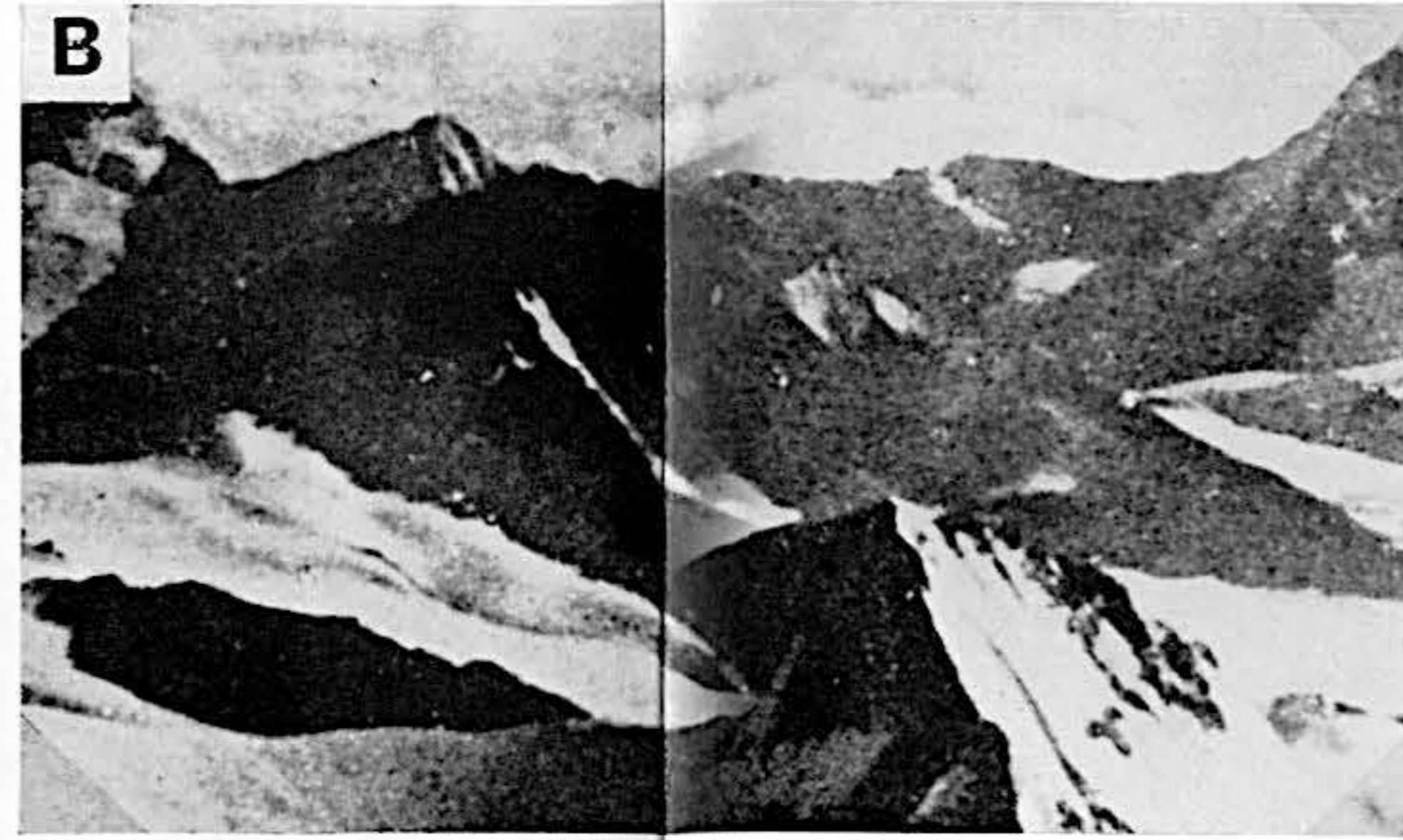
The photograph taken from the First Step in 1933 (Plate C) is part of a panorama reproduced as Plate 39 in Ruttledge's book on the 1933 expedition. It covers about 90° of angle from Khartaphu, on the extreme right, to the East Rongbuk glacier, North Peak, the main Rongbuk glacier and Lingtren. The photograph was taken at about 3 p.m. on May 30, 1933, during descent after the reconnaissance and attempt on the summit by Wyn Harris and me. In the complete panorama the steep North-west face of the First Step is seen on the extreme right with a narrow, almost level ledge below it on which we

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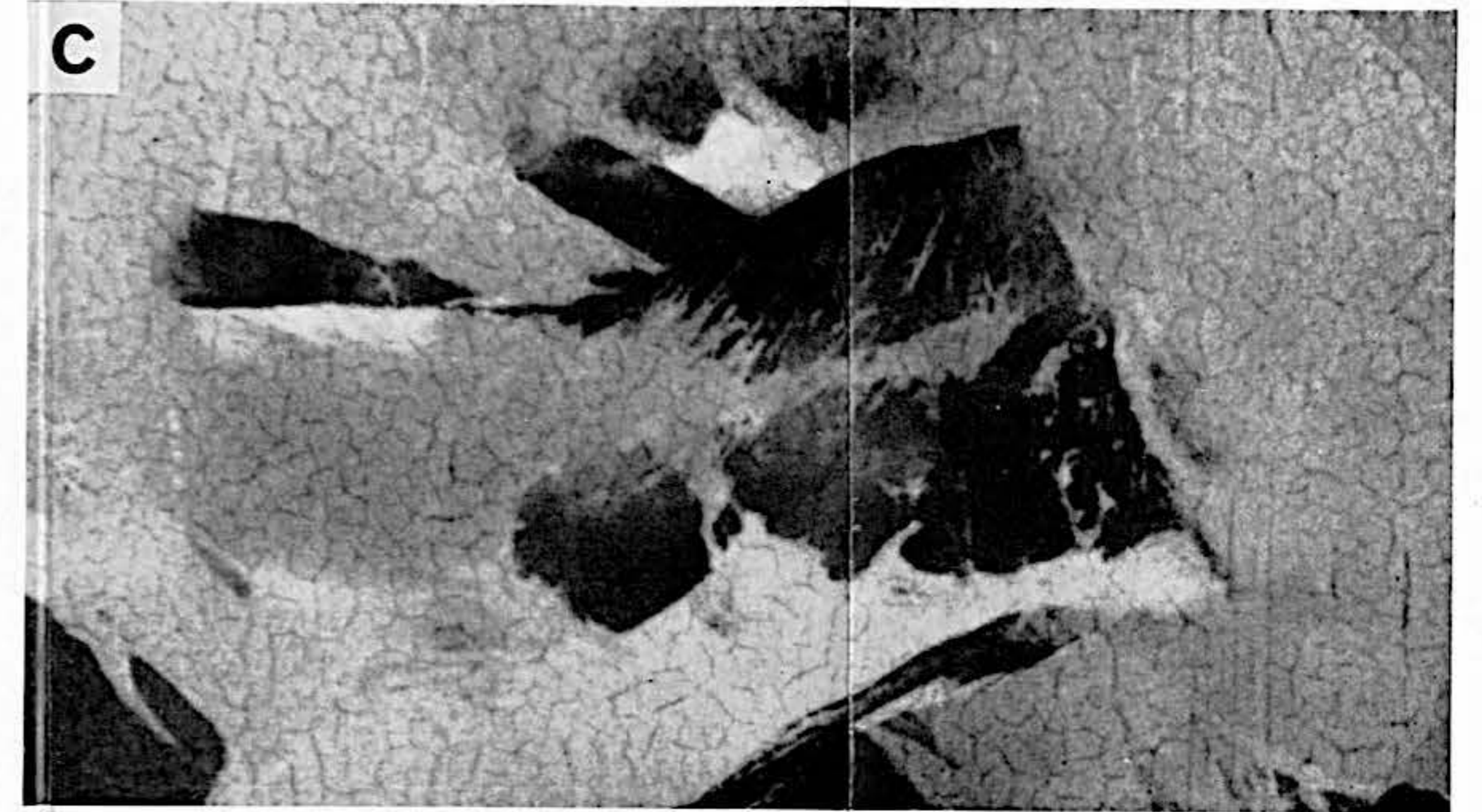
Tracings from part of the three photographs, showing Khartaphu and the col to the north. Q represents a slight rock bump on the col just visible on all the photographs. P represents a rock and glacier junction as seen on the photographs. Shading roughly indicates the position of the rock or shadow.



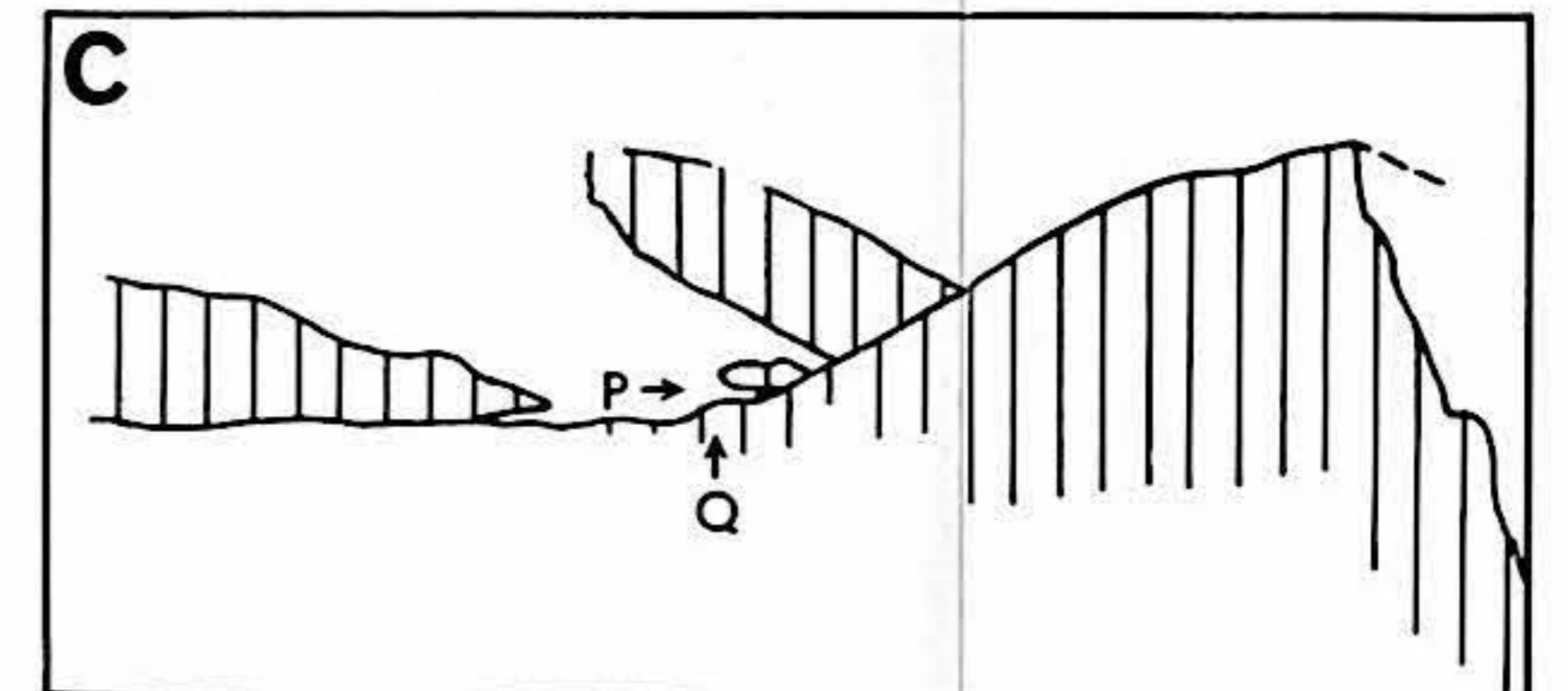
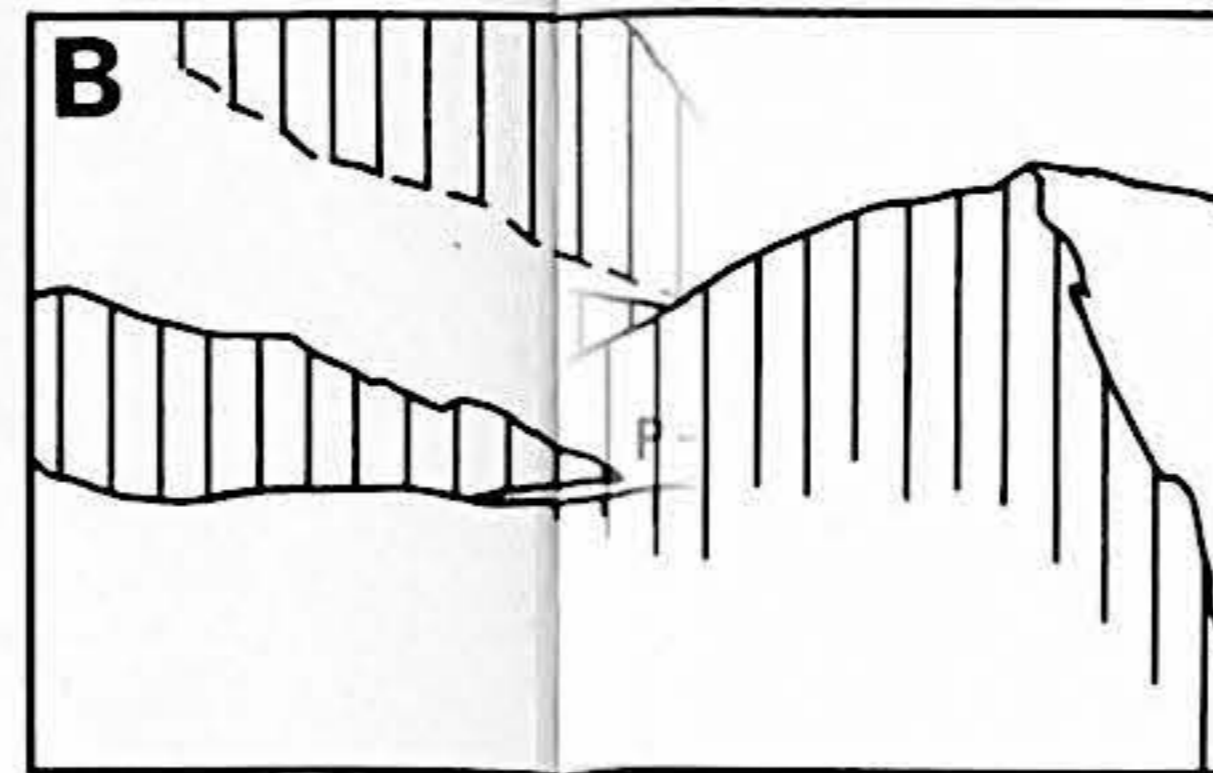
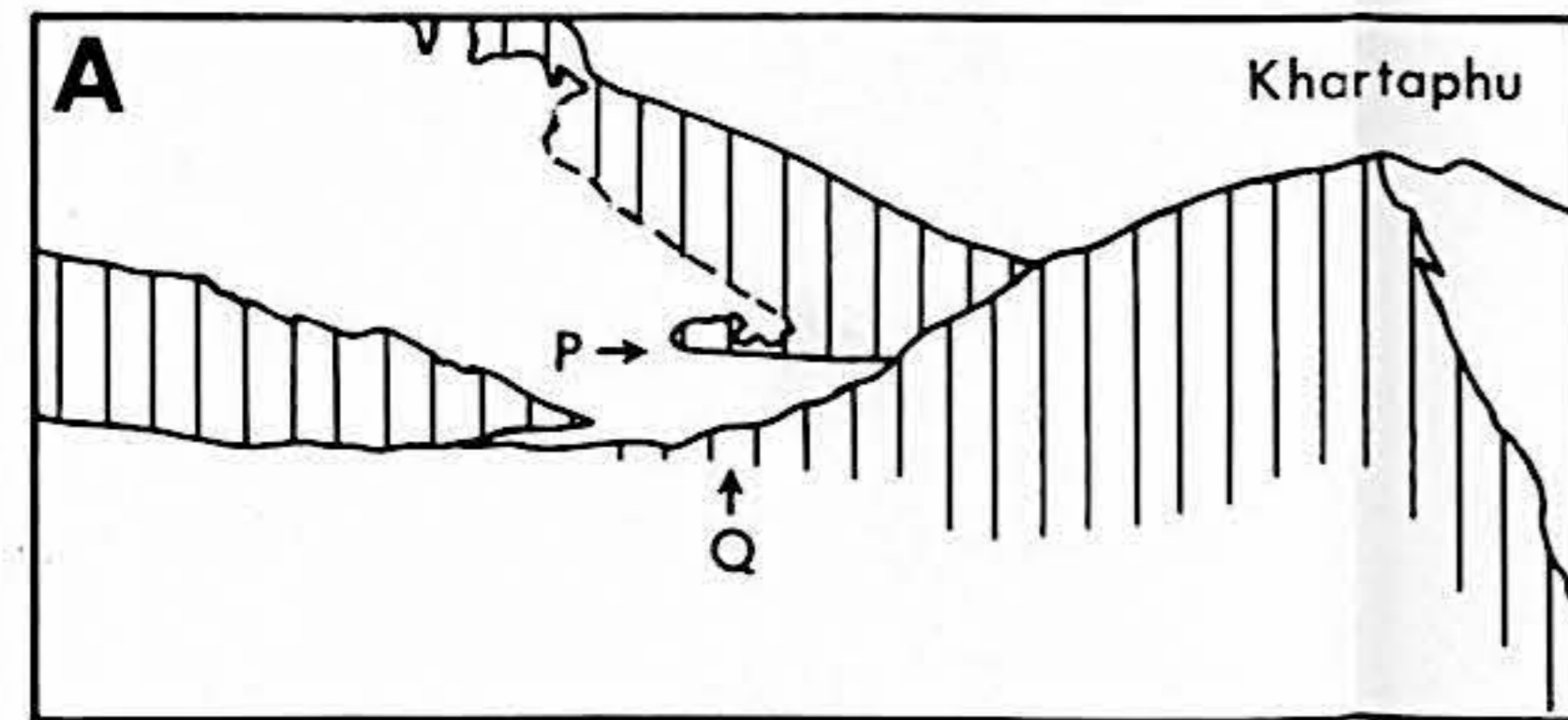
A. Part of the photograph taken by Hillary from the summit of Mount Everest and already reproduced in *A.J.*, Nov. 1961, p. 314.



B. Part of critical Chinese photograph in same number of *A.J.*



C. Part of panorama taken from the foot of the First Step, 30 May, 1933.



were standing; the estimated height of origin is about 27,950 ft. using Spender's map. In the direction of Hillary's and the Chinese photographs, my 1933 panorama is considerably obscured by cloud; the only part useful for comparison is a glimpse through cloud of Khartaphu and the country immediately to the left of it which is reproduced here, considerably enlarged, as Plate C. The graininess and cracked appearance of the photograph is the result of the film having been developed and washed at too high a temperature in Darjeeling.

Parts of Hillary's photograph and the Chinese photograph, both of which have already been reproduced and discussed (*A. J.* 66. 314), have been enlarged to the same size as my 1933 photograph (Plates A and B). Despite differences in lighting and snow conditions, a close comparison can be made of the appearance of the col to the east of Khartaphu and of certain details in the distribution of the rocks and glaciers seen over it. The relative disposition of these indicates in general that the position of origin of the Chinese photograph lies between the positions from which the other two were taken, that is between the summit and the First Step.

To make the evidence clearer, tracings of the col and features beyond it have been made (Figs. A, B and C). On the col there is a slight rock bump 'Q', identifiable in all three photographs and indicated on the line drawings. Beyond the col, a small patch of rock is partly obscured by a level stretch of glacier in front of it. This rock and glacier junction is indicated by the arrow 'P' in the three drawings. In Hillary's photograph from the summit, the level P is some way above point Q on the col; in the Chinese photograph it is considerably closer to point Q, indicating that their photograph was taken from a lower level; while in my photograph, taken from the First Step, it is almost touching the col, indicating that the place of origin, the First Step, is lower than that of the Chinese photograph. In the horizontal direction there is a slight shift in the relative position of the point Q and the features beyond. The differences indicate that the Chinese photograph was taken from a position slightly north of Hillary's while the 1933 photograph was taken from a position slightly further north still. The differences are, however, slight and comparison of the positions of the summit, First Step and Khartaphu on Major Wheeler's map does not indicate that there should be any appreciable horizontal displacement.

From the direct comparison of the two photographs of known provenance, it seems certain that the Chinese photograph was taken either from some position between them, that is between the First Step and the summit, at a height probably rather nearer the First Step than the summit, or from some position in space along the same ray. This implies that the Chinese photograph was taken either on the ridge

a little above the Second Step at about 8,700 m., the position the Chinese claim, and the height also indicated by Goodfellow's analysis, or, just conceivable I suppose, from an aeroplane close to this position, perhaps flying low over the North-east ridge between the First and Second Steps.

Before seeing the film of the Chinese expedition, I had convinced myself by means of the evidence given here that the already published, critical, Chinese photograph must have been taken about one-third of the way in vertical distance between the First Step and the summit. This seemed to me, therefore, to settle the authenticity of the Chinese claim about the height from which the photograph was taken and I felt relieved to think that the various niggling doubts about it could be given up. Unfortunately when Wyn Harris, Longland and I eventually saw the film, at a private showing, we were all three disturbed to find that there were no supporting photographs leading up to the critical one, nor any useful foreground to the photograph. Therefore we had reluctantly to agree that, although the Chinese photograph is consistent with an origin from the North-east ridge of Everest, probably a little above the Second Step, there is no evidence at present to exclude the possibility, no doubt remote, that the photograph was taken from an aeroplane.