

The Kongur Massif in Southern Xinjiang (Sinkiang)

Michael Ward

As Chairman of the Mount Everest Foundation between 1978 and 1980 one of my main tasks was to persuade the Chinese Government to allow a British Mountaineering and Scientific party into China. Both Edward Heath MP and a Royal Society delegation, led by Sir Michael Stoker FRS, kindly took letters from the Mount Everest Foundation and made personal enquiries in Peking and Lhasa. In addition, we received every help from the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and the Embassy in Peking. At the end of 1979, Chairman Hua Guofeng visited the United Kingdom and Sir Douglas Busk, Peter Lloyd and myself were able to meet him and the Chinese Foreign Secretary, Huang Hua at the Prime Minister's reception at the Banqueting Hall, Whitehall. Following this I was invited to visit Peking (Beijing).

Towards the end of 1979 the Chinese announced that a number of peaks had been released for foreign mountaineers to visit. These included Everest, Shisha Pangma, Amne Machin, Bogdo Ola, Mustagh Ata, Kongur Tiube and Kongur. Except for Kongur (7,719m), all were known to have been climbed either by the Chinese or other mountaineers. Kongur was one of the world's highest unclimbed peaks, and possibly the highest peak N of the main Himalayan chain. Because the Mount Everest Foundation is concerned with the exploration of and scientific research in mountain regions, we felt that a visit to an unexplored area that combined scientific research was our first priority. I also knew from the publications of papers in *Scientia Sinica* that a considerable number of Chinese research projects had been carried out on the Central Asian plateau. These had been primarily scientific in nature though a number of ascents, such as Everest and Shisha Pangma, had been made during the course of the research programmes. I thought that because of this, the Chinese would be more ready to accept a combined scientific and mountaineering expedition. In addition, it would be better if 2 people, rather than one, visited Peking, because of the possible complexity of the negotiations there. Finally, because sponsorship would almost certainly be necessary, Alan Tritton, a member of the MEF Management Committee suggested that we should find a sponsor in Hong Kong. Before Chris Bonington and I left for Peking, we met Sir John Keswick, a former Chairman of Jardine Matheson and Co. Ltd., who had been a trusted friend of the Chinese, particularly, the former Prime Minister, Chou En Lai, for many years. We spent a most interesting and informative evening with him and he said that he would let the Chairman of Jardine's, David Newbigging, know of our visit to Hong Kong.

Two days before we left the United Kingdom at the end of February we received the guidelines for the organization and payment of any such expedition from the Chinese Mountaineering Association. From a preliminary reading of these documents it became obvious that the expense would be considerable. During the flight to Peking, we spent our time organizing and costing both a reconnaissance and a combined scientific and mountaineering project to Mt Kongur as this peak was our first choice.

Mt Kongur is situated 190km S of Kashgar in Southern Sinkiang and the only



1 Kongur massif from Pic Lenin, Pamirs (Photo: D. Scott)

information that I had been able to obtain was from the scanty accounts of the area by Sven Hedin, Sir Aurel Stein and Eric Shipton. The best account was that given by Sir Claremont Skrine, Consul General in Kashgar from 1922-1924, who had written an article 'The Alps of Qungur' in the *Geographical Journal*. Though the article had a map and a number of photographs, the region that Skrine had visited was the Shiwakte and Tigurman group of peaks E of the main Kongur massif. The only photo of Kongur in this article was taken from about 65km to the N on the desert plain on which Kashgar lies. This showed Mt Kongur (Qungur II, Skrine) as a very large snow peak rising 5500m from the desert. This peak was connected to Kongur Tiube (Qungur I, Skrine) to the W by a snow ridge 10 to 13km long which fell nowhere much below 6700m.

After a week's negotiation in Peking, I signed an agreement with Mr Shi Shan Zum, Vice-Chairman of the Chinese Mountaineering Association. We arranged that the MEF should carry out a reconnaissance in 1980 and make an attempt in 1981. The cost was such that it was necessary to get sponsorship. We also learnt that the Chinese had climbed Kongur Tiube and Mustagh Ata in 1956 whilst taking part in a combined Russian-Chinese expedition. They had not climbed Kongur which was the highest peak in the area.

Both ascents had been made from the Pamir plateau which is S of the Kongur massif. When we asked for a photograph of Kongur we were told that they had none, but we were given a small sketch map of the area. One of the scientists who had been to Kongur said that the peak was 'enigmatic and mysterious'. He said it was difficult to photograph and the closer one got to the mountain the less one saw of it. He confirmed also that no attempt had been made to explore either the N or S aspect of Kongur and that much of the surrounding country was unknown. This made a reconnaissance essential.

The history of the identification of the 3 main peaks, Kongur, Kongur Tiube and

Mustagh Ata and the initial exploration of this area of the Pamir Plateau is contained in an article by Gerald Morgan, in the *Royal Central Asian Journal* of February 1969.

A large peak S of the Kashgar plain had been seen and plotted by Hayward in 1868 and Trotter whilst working for the Forsythe Mission in 1874 had named it Tagharma and given it a height of 25,050 ft (It is likely that the peak that he saw would be the Kongur massif which includes both Kongur and Kongur Tiube).

In 1885 Ney Elias whilst making a journey across the Pamirs to Afghanistan reached the Karakol lakes and saw 2 peaks. One was 30km NE (The Kongur massif) the other 30km SE (Mustagh Ata) which lay in the Tag Harma range. He measured the N peak (Kongur massif) and gave it a height of 25,350ft. He was unable to measure the S peak but considered it to be lower.

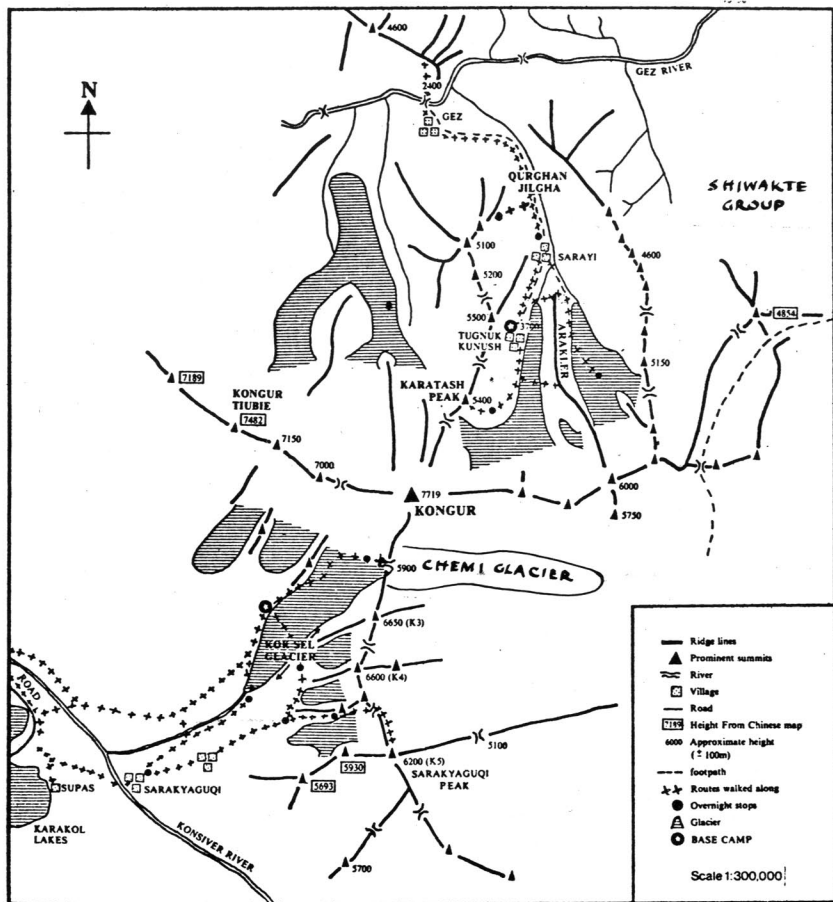
The local semi-nomadic Kirghiz had no definite name for these peaks though some said that the S one was called Mustagh Ata which became the eventual name of this peak. The Kirghiz are naturally more interested in naming grounds which are of use to them for grazing their herds of yaks, goats and sheep and the peaks around grazing areas are, even now, only given a general name which usually refers to the local region.

Elias also believed that the S peak (Mustagh Ata) was the peak seen by the Russian traveller Kostenko in 1876 from the Great Karakol lake. In fact any traveller in this area, whether he was at the Little or Great Karakol Lake would have seen both the Kongur massif and Mustagh Ata.

In 1895 during the Anglo-Russian Pamir boundary Commission, Holditch, the Surveyor with the British team found that the Russians had discovered the local names for these mountains which were Kongur and Mustagh Ata and had so marked them on their maps. Eventually, the heights of these 2 peaks were determined, Kongur being 7719m whilst Mustagh Ata was 7550m.

Whilst in Peking, Chris Bonington showed the Everest 1975 film of the ascent of the SW face. He also talked about modern British climbing techniques. I showed the film of the first successful ascent of Mt Everest in 1953 and gave a lecture to the Chinese Institute of Research in Sports Medicine. This lecture included some recent work that we had been carrying out on 'Exercise Oedema' on which there is an article in the 1980 *Alpine Journal*. I also visited the Peking Medical College and spent one afternoon discussing modern methods of treating cancer of the gastrointestinal tract. On our return via Hong Kong, we met David Newbigging who suggested that Jardine Matheson underwrite the 1980-1981 project. This would help to commemorate the 150th anniversary of the founding of Jardine Matheson in Canton and Hong Kong. This offer was accepted by the MEF with gratitude not only from the financial point of view but because of Jardine's immense expertise gained through trading with China over so many years. Their office in Peking provided assistance for us in China. In London, Martin Henderson, the Financial Director of Matheson's worked closely with us on all Kongur matters and from the organizational point of view, he provided a focal point for communication with Peking and Hong Kong. Tom Harley, an Assistant Director of Jardine Matheson's in Hong Kong who was running all matters concerned with the 150th anniversary was our main Hong Kong contact.

We planned to send a reconnaissance team of 3 to Kongur in June and July and without the organization and expertise available from Jardines this would have been impossible in the 2 months available to us. On my return to the UK I found a personal invitation from the Academia Sinica (the Chinese equivalent to the Royal Society) to attend the first Symposium ever held about Tibet. I was asked to chair



Map 1

meetings and to present a paper at the end of May in Peking. The subject matter of this Symposium was related to both the earth and life sciences. The Chinese have organized and carried out a great many multi-disciplinary research projects on the Tibetan plateau over the last 25 years. The main thrust of these projects had been scientific though subsidiary mountaineering had been carried out. It seems that the Chinese attitude towards the mountain areas of Central Asia was closely akin to that of the early explorers of the Alps and Himalaya. Initially the scientific projects were more important. Climbing as a sport has not yet developed though I have no doubt that in a few years there will be a considerable expansion.

In the Peking Symposium the sessions devoted to the effect of high altitude on man were organized by Professor Hu, of the Academia Sinica, who had a large research department in Shanghai. It soon became obvious that a large amount of work on high altitude had been carried out over the years in Tibet. Most of the results however, had been published in the Chinese scientific literature only. Besides myself, the three invited participants were two Germans and one American and we had an extremely stimulating and interesting week made easier by the fact that all papers were

communicated in English. In the Introductory Booklet to the Symposium, the Chinese acknowledged the work of Odell, Heron, Wager and other scientists from the early Everest Expeditions as making the first contribution to scientific knowledge about the Tibetan plateau. After the Symposium, it had been arranged that the participants would go to Lhasa for a week and then continue on to Kathmandu.

Chris Bonington and Alan Rouse had by now arrived in Peking and accompanied by our Liaison Officer, Liu Da Yi, we spent a day on the Great Wall of China. In the valley leading to the Great Wall there are many small cliffs and as we had been asked to demonstrate modern rock climbing techniques we did routes on some of the many cliffs and boulders that were available. Our flight to Kashgar via Urumchi, the capital of Sinkiang took us across the immensely arid country that stretches across North China for three time zones to the Pamirs. The Great Wall of China, the only man-made object that can be seen from space, traverses much of this region. The Western 2400km of North China, becomes increasingly dry and barren until the Takla Makan desert is reached. This is bounded to the W by the Pamirs, to the N by the Tianshan and on the S by the Kunlun. At its W end lies Kashgar and the Pamir plateau, and into it drain the main rivers of the 3 ranges. The centuries-old commercial path way, the Silk route, runs along the N and S sides of the desert. Traders travelled from one oasis to another to the centre of the Chinese silk industry in Shantung province which is SE of Peking. These 2 routes join at Kashgar before going W to the Caspian Sea and Europe. At Kashgar also a route, now the Karakoram highway, to the S crosses the Karakoram and makes its way to the Indian sub-continent. These routes existed in Roman times and Kashgar is marked on one of Ptolemy's maps and was well established in the time of Marco Polo.

Urumchi, the capital of Sinkiang is about 1600km E of Kashgar and is set on the N side of the Tien Shan. The indigenous people, Uighurs, form one of the many



2 *Mustagh Ata (This and next 3 photos. 1980 Kongur Expedition)*

minority groups found in China and are Muslims. On our first night in Urumchi, we saw an opera in Uighur and it was obvious that the language has a Turkish base. The next day we went to the Heavenly Lake on the N side of Bogdo Ola. The approach was across the arid Sinkiang plain but by contrast the Heavenly Lake is set in Alpine meadows surrounded by pine trees and snow peaks. The Lake has a road along its W side but only steep grass and cliffs along its E banks. We managed to circumnavigate the Lake completely though this took longer and was more difficult than we expected. In Urumchi our interpreter, Cheng Peng (Peter) joined us.

In Kashgar we visited the former British Consulate, now a cheap hotel, whilst in the centre of the town is a fine Mosque. Doctors in one local hospital practise Uighur medicine which has its main text book written in Persian and there is an oral and written tradition stretching back for 2000 years. Patients come from all over China to be treated for skin conditions here.

On 10 June, we left for the Karakol lakes. The roads were lined by Sinkiang poplars planted 4 to 6 rows deep along the irrigation channels. Just before we entered the gorge of the Gez river we crossed a stone and sand desert and had our first view of the Kongur Massif. This was similar to the photograph taken by Sir Claremont Skrine which however was taken several miles to the E. We were at first confused by the appearance of an extra mountain group in the W. A few miles further S it became obvious that the extra mountain that we could see was Chakragil.

The road which was the initial part of the Karakoram Highway ran S by the Gez river past several small villages one of which had a coal mine. Lush green fields and poplars, the result of irrigation, contrasted with the multicoloured and eroded rock cliffs on either side of the road. The gorge soon narrowed and became stiflingly hot. The check post at Gez Qaraul was a particularly hot and unpleasant spot. Here the road turned W and climbed steadily until it reached the start of the Pamir plateau at Tarning Bashi, a mud silted lake several km wide. On the far side of this to the W we could see large areas of grass with the black dots of yak and sheep. Some yurts provided homes for the herders. Beyond, the desert hills rose to the Russian-China border. One group of hills the size of the Snowdon Horseshoe was filled with a gigantic overflowing sand dune. To the E was the Kongur massif, here rising 3950m from the plateau with its glaciers ending in desert.

The Karakol lakes (3650m) were a delightful surprise, for the road suddenly stopped crossing desert and ran alongside the smaller of the two glistening lakes which was fringed with grass. We camped by the lakeside and next morning we were to find that it was covered with a thin ice tracing. Towards Kongur and Mustagh Ata the desert rose gradually until it blended with snowfields and glaciers. The enormous mass of Kongur only 25km away in no way dwarfed the immense horizons around it. The views were immensely long and wide not steep and short. As Aurel Stein commented 'it must be one of the most spectacular areas of Central Asia'.

Semi-nomadic Kirghiz living in yurts and grazing flocks of sheep, yak, goat and camel camped near the lakes as they have done for centuries. Many rode horses on which they looked entirely at home and they wore a characteristic black and white quartered felt hat. Though the telephone wires might be serviced by Han Chinese in Mao jackets we were in Central Asia and I felt that little had changed for many centuries. At this point David Mathew, the Manager of Jardine's Peking office, who had accompanied us so far, had to return to Peking. On the way he visited the Turfan Depression, east of Urumchi, which is the centre of a large grape growing area.

In the next 2 days at the Karakol lakes I visited Supas to see the head man of the local Bulunkul commune. I met many of the local Kirghiz and confirmed what I had

suspected already, namely that goitre was absent in these nomads. Considering that the incidence of goitre only 150km to the S in the upper valleys of the Karakoram is 90% this is remarkable. The Principal of Sinkiang Medical College in Urumchi told me that iodine was first put in the local salt in 1949 but close questioning of the older members of the commune revealed that goitre had never in fact been present in these people though cases were recorded in villages and towns such as Khotan and Yarkand on the S part of the Silk route. Wild purple irises grew on the bare slopes that swept up to Mustagh Ata and in some areas flowers of many varieties including edelweiss could be found on even the barest patch of desert.

Good views of the Kongur massif were obtained from Supas and also from the desert hills climbed by Alan Rouse and Chris Bonington to the W of the lakes. The mountain group seemed to make its own weather and storms and sudden fierce winds came out of the clear sky on more than one occasion.

At dawn on 12 June we set off for Base Camp which we decided to put near the foot of the Koxsel glacier. This was the largest glacier flowing from the SW side of Kongur. We crossed the Konsiver river without difficulty about an hour later. At this time of day the river was relatively low but we knew that it could rise rapidly and be extremely dangerous. Climbing steadily over the bare and arid upland, shade was almost non-existent and the yaks went slowly. Finally, we found a site at 4275m in a small valley with a thin trickle of water. In the evening, the wind grew in force and with clouds of dust swirling round us we spent 2 hours building a stone shelter before the yaks appeared. Both our cook and interpreter looked miserable and complained of the altitude. Neither was really ill, but the cook, a local man decided to return to Kashgar. He was replaced by an excellent Chinese cook, Mr Wang, of great character, ingenuity and force, who provided us with excellent meals for the rest of our stay.



Next day Chris Bonington and I went up to 4875m on the Koksəl icefall. The scale was much larger than we had expected and the icefall had all the ingredients of its counterpart on Everest. The snow shelf for which we were aiming, and which stretched across along the whole of the SW face of Kongur seemed to be at about 5475m.

A number of facts about the topography of Kongur had already become obvious to us. The main one was that the closer we got to the peak the less we saw of its overall complexity and it was a very complex mountain with four definite and differing aspects. Unlike the Everest reconnaissance in 1951 when from the shoulder of Pumori I could see that the route on the Nepalese side was obvious and with little choice, on Kongur it was to take us 40 days in the field to get some idea of the mountain's shape, size and character. In many respects the best views that we got were those from a distance of 15-25km.

We decided therefore that we should climb a peak of just over 6100m, later called the Sarakyaguqi peak, about 25km away to the S. We camped on a snow col at about 5475m and after a day's bad weather Alan Rouse and Chris Bonington, for I was not as well acclimatized as they, climbed this peak getting fine views of the SE side of Kongur. They saw that there was an extensive summit plateau with 2 or 3 summits. The most westerly of these seem to be the highest and we later confirmed this from a viewpoint to the N of Kongur. There was a definite route across the upper part of the SE face to the summit plateau but we could not see the lower part of this although we thought that it might be possible to climb fairly easily from the shelf of the Koksəl glacier to the upper part of the SE face.

Early next morning while walking across easy desert upland to Base Camp, Alan Rouse tripped and injured his left ankle. I asked him if he was alright. He said 'No'. It was obvious that he could not walk and he later said that he felt as though the bones of his ankle had been completely dislocated by the twisting motion of his fall and they had then returned to the normal position. In fact this is exactly what had happened. He had ruptured the outer ligament of his left ankle but luckily there had been no displacement of the joint. Immediately, I put an elastoplast bandage tightly round his ankle and gave him Codeine tablets for pain. He was unable to walk for 3 days and could take no further active part in the reconnaissance but his comments and views about the mountain were extremely useful and he was good company. We managed to find a small spring 500ft lower down the mountain and camped there with the equivalent of 2 bars of chocolate between us, and Chris Bonington returned to Base Camp so that he could organize some animal transport to take Alan Rouse back. Reaching Base Camp that evening he set off with Liu Da Yi early next morning. The Konsiver River which we had been so easily able to cross a week previously had now risen and another attempt to cross it just before dawn nearly ended in tragedy. Both were swept 100m downstream and nearly drowned. Eventually they managed to fight their way out of the river and after going some km further downstream crossed it and made their way to Supas. Here they hired a camel, crossed the Konsiver River again and made contact with an encampment of local Kirghiz. Difficulties over translation arose and this led to inevitable delays but Chris Bonington came up to our camp with some food. The next day we descended to the encampment, Sarakyaguqi. A further 2 days elapsed before we could hire a donkey to take Alan Rouse up to Base Camp. On the donkey Alan Rouse reached the terminal moraine of the Koksəl glacier and next day he managed to hobble to Base Camp. One big bonus from this time consuming and dangerous episode was that we had excellent views of the SW face of Kongur and could see a route which would connect us with the one that we had



4 *The NE face of Kongur from Arakler Ridge*

seen on the SE face. In addition we could study one of the main summit pyramids which was clearly in view for several hours.

Our next task was to get to the shelf above the Koxsel glacier and this Chris Bonington and I did by climbing the narrow corridor between the glacier and the retaining rock. The route was menaced by falling stones but the icefall itself was even more dangerous. We camped just short of the ice shelf.

Next day we traversed across the shelf to its E end and put a camp at about 5650m. From this we climbed easily to a col at just over 5800m which separated Kongur and a 6700m peak to the S. From the col the Chemi glacier fell steeply to the E, and we could see the Shiwakte group of peaks which had been explored by Skrine. They were a mass of steep ice and rock spires, which lay to the NE. To the SE the country was very confused and it was difficult to make out any salient features. The lower part of the SE face of Kongur was very steep and broken, but we confirmed that we could climb over a small peak on the S ridge and join the upper part of the SE face. More interestingly we could also see a spur coming down to the shelf from the ridge of Kongur which connected it to Kongur Tiube. This was at an easy angle and could be an alternative route to the summit plateau. We had arrived at the col at midday but only had a clear view for about $\frac{1}{4}$ hr before clouds boiled up and within a few minutes very little could be seen.

Next day the weather was bad and we stayed in our tents. The following day the clouds cleared enough for me to take a quick compass bearing on the top of the Koxsel glacier. We spent the next 4 hours in a 'white-out' moving across a fairly heavily crevassed area. On the ascent we had managed to avoid this but travelling on a compass bearing we had to walk straight through it until we reached the top of the icefall. Because the ascent of the icefall had been so dangerous we tried a number of alternative routes on the descent.

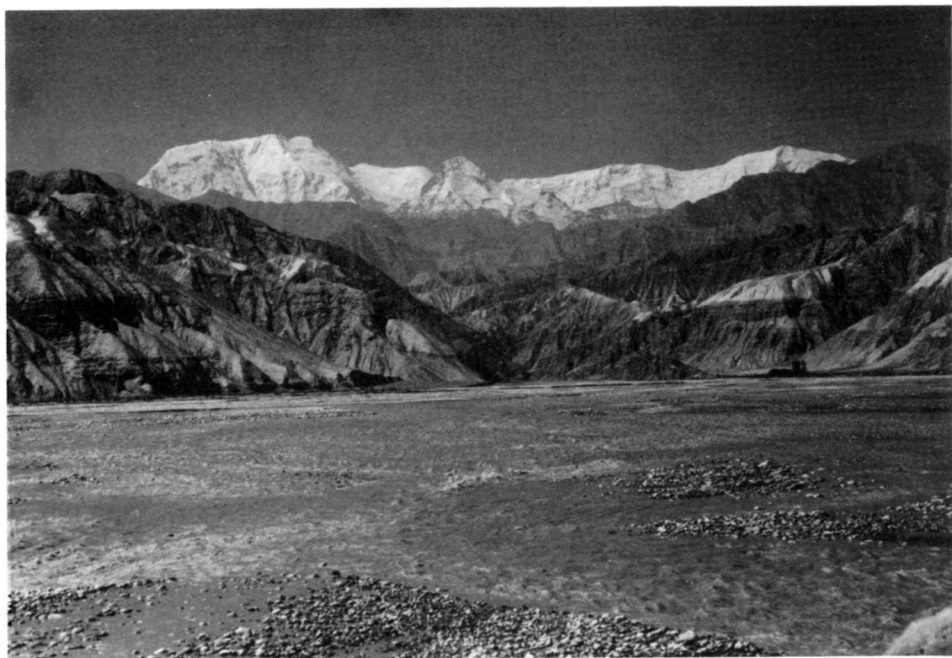
It soon became obvious that these alternatives were even more dangerous and so after 3 hours we gave up and returned to the original route. Next day we descended to the Karakol lakes in the knowledge that at least 2 feasible routes existed on the S side of Kongur.

On 4 July we arrived at Gez Quraul on the N side of Kongur. The village itself is 150m above the check post in the gorge and is on a well irrigated flat lateral moraine. Fields of what seemed to be alfalfa and many poplars made it an attractive spot. Invisible from the road there are many well-built and clean mud houses. The whole population of the village had come to greet us and we had an enormous meal with the Head man and the village elders. This was washed down with fermented mare's milk.

Next day Chris and I climbed 1500m up the N side of the Gez valley in order to get a view of the NW side of Kongur. It was immediately obvious that the whole N face was higher, steeper and more difficult than the S side. We also had a good view of the N side of the summit plateau and the ridge joining Kongur and Kongur Tiube.

On 7 July we started up the Qurghan Jilgha valley travelling by camel. The lower part was arid but some grass appeared after about 600m. Higher up large areas of grass could be seen and these provided summer grazing.

The main summer encampment in the W valley head, was called TugnuK Kunush (3650m). As Alan Rouse's ankle had improved we all climbed to just over 4275m on the Arakler ridge between the E and W valley heads, and from here the NE face of Kongur looked huge, complicated and steep. There was no obvious easy route to the summit plateau but we did see a climbable peak of above 5475m on the N side of Kongur. This peak which we named Karatash peak (5440m) Chris Bonington and I climbed 2 days later. There was one good ice pitch of 90m and from the summit we had excellent views of the N face of Kongur. Essentially all routes on the N side of



5 *The N side of Kongur from the Gez Gorge*

Kongur which we could see were harder, longer and steeper than those from the S.

The weather which had been changeable over the past few days now grew worse and for the last 6 days gave us very little in the way of views. Chris and I carried a camp up to the E valley head hoping to climb a peak in the Shiwakte group thus joining up with Skrine's exploration and in addition getting a different view of Kongur. The clouds remained low and snow fell. Our last effort involved trying to climb a shapely peak above Gez which we called the Gez Matterhorn. That night torrential rain and fresh snow fell at our camp site at 3950m so we had to give up this attempt.

We returned to Kashgar on 20 July and as we descended the gorge of the Gez river we had excellent views of Kongur which had cleared after the bad weather of the last few days. This seemed to confirm that the summit was at the W end of the summit plateau. In 40 days of exploration, despite Alan Rouse's accident we had explored a vast amount of country, climbed 2 respectable peaks and seen Kongur from 6 different and informative viewpoints. The organization of the Chinese Mountaineering Association was excellent. We will return in the summer of 1981 to climb Kongur by its S side using Alpine-style methods. The expedition will be a combined scientific and mountaineering project and the use of Alpine-style tactics ensures that neither interferes with the other. The scientific content is aimed at expanding our knowledge about the oedema of exercise and of altitude which contributes to the lethal complications of mountain sickness. We now know that the mechanism of the formation of this oedema is found also in heart and lung diseases, so that this work will benefit both the ill patient and the fit mountaineer. In addition we shall be investigating the reasons why modern mountaineers have gained the extraordinary facility for climbing peaks of 8000m and above with much the same ease as high altitude dwellers such as Sherpas.

Mountains and climbs in Tasmania

Roland Rodda

Tasmania, the island State of the Australian Federation is some 240km S of the continental mainland and in the low forties of S latitude. About the area of Scotland, it is triangular in outline with one apex to the S and coastal sides of about 300km. There is a relatively undissected dolerite capped large central plateau rising from 600m in the S to over 1100m in the N. The N and E rim of this central plateau falls steeply in a long curved escarpment of dolerite bluffs called rather confusingly the Great Western Tiers. To the E across the broad rift valley of the Tamar are the NE highlands comprising uplifted remnants of old fold mountains with towered dolerite tops and dominated by the dolerite capped plateau horst of Ben Lomond. To the W of the central plateau the W ranges form a jumbled series of peaks made up of dolerite crowns on steeply tilted sediments but to the S the western ranges fan out with wider valley systems. A few outlying NW and W peaks are conglomerate, the SW ranges are quartzite, some lower mountains on the E coast are granite and there are various