

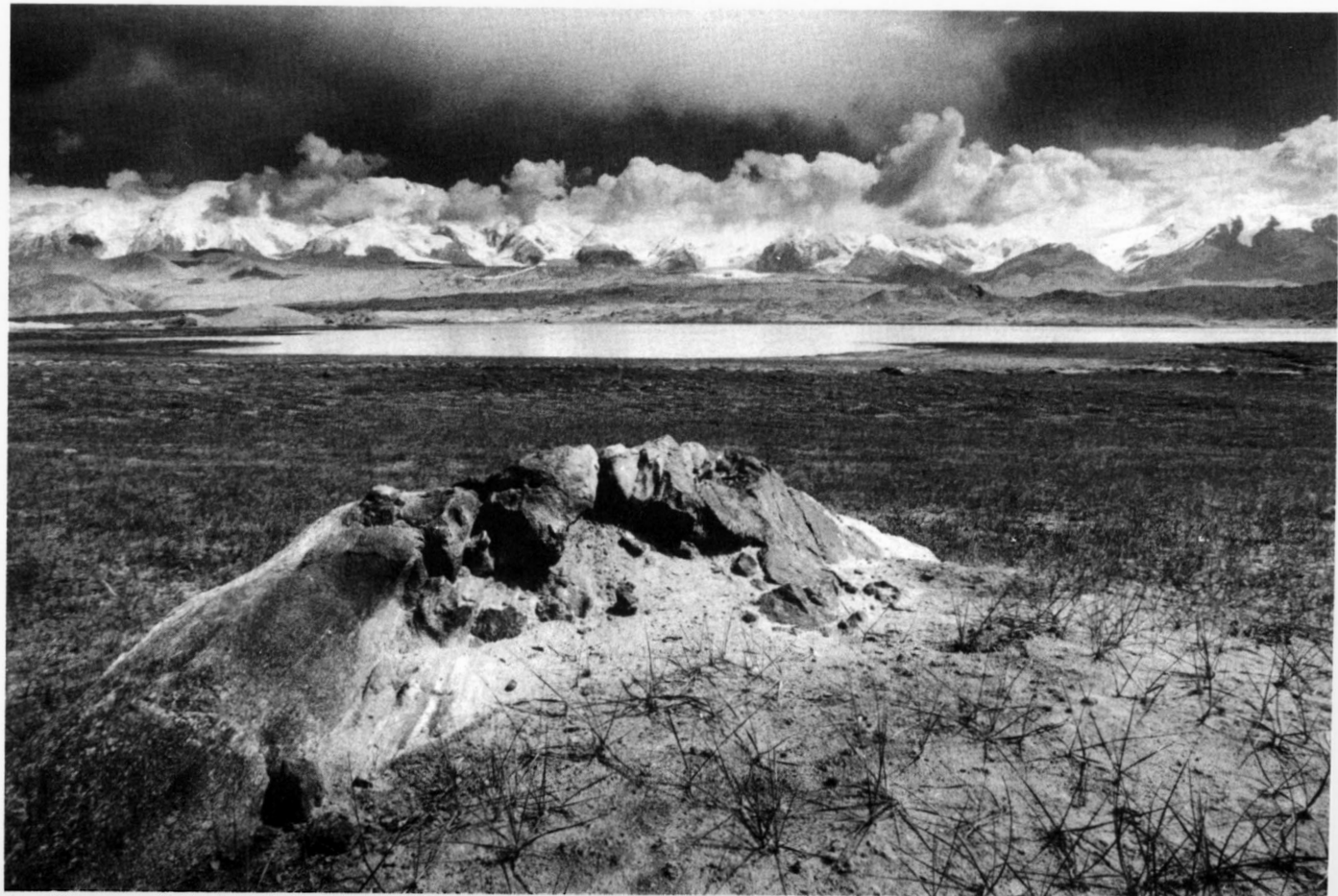
China's Highest Mountain

Gerald Morgan

When in 1981 a British expedition made the first ascent of China's highest mountain, Kongur II, situated in Sinkiang (Xinjiang) it was of interest to many, besides climbers. The mountain itself is the latest as discoveries go, having been sighted only at the beginning of the present century. It and its two giant neighbours have undergone many changes of name, but at this stage we will call it Kongur II: other names will be referred to later. Factually the history leading to its discovery dates back over 100 years. It originated not in the work of explorers but through international politics, and in spite of recent publicity much of it will be new to readers.

In the middle of the last century China was in great trouble with internal rebellions. When that happened she always withdrew her suzerainty over her vassal states; in this case Eastern Turkestan consisting of Dzungaria and Kashgaria. But she always returned when times got better. In 1862 a Muslim rebel from Ferghana named Yakub Beg took advantage of the situation and set up an independent state at Kashgar. This immediately excited the interest of Russia and Britain: both saw Kashgar as a buffer state but for different reasons. The Russian one was as a buffer against China, and possibly even eventual annexation to ensure a peaceful border. The British also saw it as a buffer state. Always with the defence of India in view, she feared it as a possible base for a flanking movement as part of an invasion of India. The fact that the intractable Karakoram range lay across such a route thus making it a very minor threat indeed, does not seem to have made much impression. Dating from the days of the East India Company, India always believed in gaining influence through cultivating trade, although sooner or later that usually resulted in an expensive campaign followed by annexation. At any rate we find both Britain and Russia courting Yakub Beg, with the latter keeping his options open by treating with both sides. Britain sent 2 missions to him under the able Bengal civil servant, Douglas Forsyth. The first in 1870 accomplished nothing; but on the second, in 1873, a trade treaty was drawn up, though Yakub never ratified it, probably for fear of Russia, who had already occupied the rich oasis of Ili on the Silk Road farther to the N and looked like stopping there. He obviously thought he might be next and India was a long way farther off than Russia.

It was on the 2nd mission that Captain Trotter, one of 2 British surveyors with the party, spotted from the Kashgar plain an enormous



14 *The western flank of the Kungur massif with its many summits and glaciers, viewed from Karakul*

Photo: John Cleare

mountain to the W. This was a rare chance because a dust haze normally obscured long range vision. He plotted its height at 25,050ft (7635m) and named it Tagharma because it appeared to rise in what was then called the Tagharma range. He and his companion Gordon decided to survey it further, as well as the neighbouring region, returning to India via Kashmir; but after a relatively short distance they had to rejoin the main mission on its return. That, so far as India was concerned, was the end of the first episode. The next Viceroy, Lord Ripon, vetoed British exploration; possibly he had in mind the murder in the region in 1868 of the erratic explorer Hayward, a protégé of the Royal Geographical Society. Meanwhile the Russian government sent several exploratory missions into the Pamir and Eastern Turkestan under the guise of the Imperial Geographical Society.

India's next chance did not come until 1885-86 when the Viceroy, Lord Dufferin, despatched the vastly experienced explorer and later historian of Central Asia, Ney Elias, on a one-man mission with 2 objectives. In the meantime the Chinese having settled their internal troubles had, true to form, recovered Eastern Turkestan—Yakub Beg had died mysteriously and the Chinese army met little opposition for most of Yakub's army had joined them. The first objective of Elias was to negotiate a trade treaty and consular representation at Kashgar on the lines of the one Russia had already exacted; but this objective failed because the Chinese denied that there was any trade with India. (Indeed it had never amounted to much more than charass—the local name for cannabis—and percussion caps for flintlocks. Probably too they did not want another Consul like the intriguing, bombastic Russian Petrovsky.)

So Elias departed on his far more arduous 2nd objective; tough enough for a fit man, but Elias had been a sick man for years. His task was to cross the Pamir, reconnoitre *en route* as many passes as possible for their possible strategic significance and then to trace the main source of the Amu Dar'ya (the Oxus). On this depended the Northern boundary of Afghanistan with Russia which had been agreed in principle some years earlier. He started only in the late autumn which was almost too late to cross the Roof of the World, but Elias was a dedicated and brave explorer and had even refused to take a doctor offered by the Viceroy.

Looking back from the lake called Little Kara Kul he saw a sight which greatly pleased him. Not only was Trotter's Tagharma visible 20 miles away to the NNE but there was another huge mountain the same distance away to the SSE. The latter actually did rise in the Tagharma range whereas Trotter's did not; but Trotter could not have seen the new one because, in Elias's words, from the Kashgar plain it was 'on with' the former. Elias could find no certain local name for his new discovery though he thought it might be Muztagh Ata, i.e. Father of Ice Mountains. He considered it was somewhat the lower of the 2 but he was unable to survey it, so he simply transferred to it the name Tagharma. Lastly he noted that this might have been the mountain seen

by the noted Russian explorer Kostenko in 1876, and which he had called Ata Tagh.

Next he turned his attention to Trotter's original peak which he was able to re-survey. Although Elias was not a professional surveyor he had had vast experience, first in 1872 when he crossed Western Mongolia and several hundred miles of Siberia, and elsewhere in Asia. He was most meticulous and the Survey Department always treated his calculations with professional respect. He made the peak 25,350ft (7727m) which was 92m higher than Trotter had estimated. He was unable to find a local name so he asked for permission to call it Mount Dufferin. That, together with his re-assigned Tagharma, appeared on Indian maps for several years. His sketches of both peaks, done on the spot, in fading indelible pencil (ink would have frozen in the bottle) are in the log of his journey lodged with his other papers in the archives of the Royal Geographical Society by Sir Francis Younghusband—they were to remain there undiscovered for the next 70 odd years.

During the next 10 years there is nothing to relate except that one of several Russian geological and botanical missions found that the local names for the 2 peaks were Muztagh Ata and Kungur and these were included in their maps which they were always proud to publish. The Russians however marked Muztagh Ata at 25,050ft (7635m) and claimed that it was higher than Kungur. Of course they did not have access to Elias's findings because the Indian government was notably secretive. To the fury of the Royal Geographical Society it allowed no details of his epoch-making journey across the Pamir and Afghanistan to be published, and even he was allowed to retain only one copy of his printed map.

The next step in the discovery was in 1895. The Pamirs Boundary Commission was in the Wakhan Corridor—that narrow strip of Afghan territory which for a few miles adjoins China and thus separates Russia from British India (but now Pakistan). It was the last stage in the tripartite demarcation of Afghanistan's N frontier which had been going on acrimoniously for years, with Russia contesting every yard and the Amir complaining with justice that the huge mission was ruining his country's sparse economy. Into the encampment rode Dr Sven Hedin, the famous Swedish geographer of Central Asia. He said he had tried 4 times to climb Muztagh Ata but each time he and his Kirghiz team had been driven back by mountain sickness. Over 40 years later the late Eric Shipton had had to give up for the same reason: not because he got it himself since he was acclimatized through years in the high Himalayas including Everest, but because his Kirghiz companion though born and bred at 3000m or more succumbed. Hedin claimed to have found the true names of the 2 mountains although he should surely have known they were already on Russian maps. He also claimed, like the Russians, that Muztagh Ata was 25,050ft (7635m) and higher than Kungur. But he does not seem to have measured either. Colonel Holdich, the senior



15 Bactrian camels graze in the pastures of the Su-bashi Pamir near Jambalak. Behind them rises the SW face of Kungur II

Photo: John Cleare

British surveyor, believed they were wrong and that Elias would be proved right in calculating the height of Kungur and that it was the higher of the 2. He thought Hedin had merely transferred Trotter's original estimate without re-calculating it. Now Hedin made great contributions to the geography of Central Asia, but he was not one to acknowledge prior claims. Moreover for some unknown reason he disliked the British so much that though Sweden was neutral he worked actively for the Kaiser in the First War and sided with Hitler in the Second. Not surprisingly therefore he did not refer to Elias's findings when he lectured to the RGS. The British had meanwhile transferred both the Russian names to their own maps. As Holdich had forecast, Elias was to be proved right in both his statements: Kungur was indeed higher than Muztagh Ata and his calculation of the height of the former at 25,350ft (7727m) was right at the time to within a few feet, whilst the height of Muztagh Ata was subsequently put at 24,767 ft (7549m). It is sad to have had to criticize this Swedish folk hero, but even geographers have their frailties.

That should have been the end of the story but it was not. At the turn of the century—and it is not exactly clear when or by whom—another mountain was seen nestling 6 miles behind Kungur. Elias could not have seen it from Little Kara Kul because using his own words again it was 'on with' Kungur. For the same reason it could only have been seen from a few viewpoints from the Kashgar side. It appeared to be somewhat higher than the original Kungur. But whoever made the discovery, the honours go to Skrine (later Sir Clarmont). Skrine was not a professional surveyor; indeed his only previous experience had been a plane table survey under tuition, of a 9 hole golf course. In 1922 he was appointed Consul General at Kashgar. Before he went he consulted Aurel Stein about the Qungur (as it was now spelt) massif. In 1900-01 and again in 1906-08 Stein had calculated 2 values, both making Qungur II (as it was then numbered) lower than the original Qungur, but showing wide discrepancies each time; the second being much nearer to Elias's calculation. Skrine rose to the occasion and showed great aptitude. Not only did he make Qungur II slightly higher than Qungur I, though his figures were later proved rather too low, but he took a teleanorama of both mountains. These photographs he showed in his lecture to the RGS in 1926, and years later he was kind enough to give a copy to the present writer.

Subsequently the names were changed again. Qungur I was dropped and under current spelling the later find was, and is, called Kongur Shan (in pin yin but previously Quongur Shan) with an official height of 25,700ft (7719m) and is the one which has now been climbed. Muztagh Ata has since been confirmed at 24,902ft (7546m) thus agreeing with Holdich and Elias that it was the lower of the 2 massifs, as against the view of Hedin and the Russians.

By way of postscript it remains only to be said that a Russian

expedition climbed the original Qungur I in 1956 and they then made it about 100m lower than Kongur Shan. In 1961 it was again scaled—this time by a Sino-Tibetan women's team. So far as is known that was then a women's record. Surely few mountains can have had such a long history: the 1981 enterprise has successfully crowned it.

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