
TAMOTSU NAKAMURA

Untrodden Mountains of West Sichuan

(Plates 26–32)

'Today the map has no more secrets.' Idle minds repeat that parrot phrase. But who knows all Tibet, or its far-away frontier on western China? Even its own prayer-muttering tribes know only their own bleak, wind-swept valleys.'

National Geographic Magazine, February 1930

This is the opening paragraph of Joseph F Rock's account of his journey seeking the mysterious mountain, Amne Machen. The venture was carried out three-quarters of a century ago. However, the reader's attention is invited to the fact that, even today, Rock's words still apply widely to the Tibetan territories of southwest China. Once off the beaten track in the remote regions of southeast Tibet and West Sichuan, you will meet stunning untouched peaks and hidden valleys, with beautiful forests, pastures and, in some places, historic monasteries.

This article introduces the lesser-known mountains of West Sichuan (formerly Eastern Tibet), in two parts:

1 HENGDUAN MOUNTAINS EAST: UNCLIMBED PEAKS IN SICHUAN PROVINCE

Unlike southeast Tibet, where all the 6000m peaks remain untrodden, in Sichuan there are only a couple of unclimbed 6000m peaks. Nevertheless, countless alluring rock and snow peaks lower than 6000m are awaiting visits from climbers and trekkers. The first part of this article is an outline of the major mountain ranges/massifs in the eastern part of the Hengduan Mountains between Jingsha Jiang and Min Jiang of the Upper Yangtze River. These are described from west to east. It is noted that, unless otherwise specifically mentioned, all the peaks are unclimbed.

Chola Shan Range

Two 6000m peaks have already been climbed. Chola I (6186m) was first climbed by a joint Japanese-Chinese party in 1987 and Chola II (6119m) was ascended by an American solo climber in 1997. A UIAA team ascended some 5000m peaks in 1997. However, a 5816m peak at the northern end of the range is still unclimbed, and to the west there are some supposedly remarkable rock peaks surrounding an old monastery.

Shaluli Shan Range

This mountain range covers a vast area and there is no clear boundary between it and the other mountain ranges. Each massif is introduced in succession from north to south.

1 Gangga Massif

This massif stretches to the southeast from the end of Chola Shan, south of Yalong Jiang. The main peak, Gangga (5688m), and other 5000m peaks have small glaciers.

2 Jarjinjabo Massif

The highest peak is 5812m and the second highest is 5725m. The most impressive peak is a brilliant granite rock tower (5382m) soaring to the sky, like Fitzroy in Patagonia. These mountains are located along the northern rim of the wide Zhopu Pasture north of Xiashe (5833m) Massif. To the west there are several 5500m peaks and to the east the challenging fortress of Hati (5524m) rises proudly.

3 Xiashe Massif

Xiashe (5833m), the highest peak, has beautiful lakes on its southern side, while the north face seems to attract climbers. The massif also has 5500m-5600m peaks adjacent to the Sichuan-Tibet Highway.

4 Dangchezhengla Massif

This massif is situated 15-20km away from Batang to the east. There is short and easy access to base camp. Four principal peaks of 6060m, 6033m, 5833m and 5850m dominate, ranging from east to west. A Japanese party attempted the highest peak from the northern side in 1991, but they were unsuccessful owing to bad weather and avalanche danger. Since then no one has attempted these mountains. On the southern side of the massif a heavenly lake called Yamochouken lies at the high altitude of 4800m.

5 Genyen Massif and neighbouring mountains to the north and northwest

To the south of the Sichuan-Tibet Highway, between Litang Plateau and Batang, lies a vast mountain area. The highest peak, Genyen (6204m), a divine mountain, was climbed by a Japanese party in 1988. However, more than ten peaks of rock and snow at over 5800m are awaiting climbers. In particular, a 5965m peak, towering like a sharp beak, looks magnificent, and the scenery surrounding the 600-year-old Rengo Monastery amid spiky rock pinnacles is really enchanting.

6 Gongga Xueshan (Kongkaling) Massif

These mountains were known to F. Kingdon Ward and Joseph Rock in the 1920s. There are three major peaks: Xianre Ri (6032m), Yangmaiyong (5958m) and Xaruo Doje (5958m). A Japanese party failed to climb Xianre Ri in 1989 and two Americans made a reconnaissance of Yangmaiyong in 1993. A perfect snow pyramid, Yangmaiyong, which Joseph Rock called 'Jambeyang', must be one of the most beautiful mountains in Sichuan.

Gongkala Shan Range

This is a small mountain range located 30km from Garze to the southeast. In 1998 a Japanese party made a reconnaissance from the south of the highest peak, Kawarani (5992m), and the second highest one, Peak 5928m. According to the topographical map of the Chinese Liberation Army (1:100,000), there seem to be well-developed glaciers on the northern side. No other record is available.

Daxue Shan Range

This range has the most famous mountains, including Minya Konka (Gongga Shan, 7556m). The Tibet-Qinghai Plateau ends at Daxue Shan. The scope of the range is rather ambiguous. Each massif is described from north to south.

1 Haizi Shan - 'Ja-ra'

Tibetans called Haizi Shan (5820m) 'Ja-ra' to signify 'King of Mountains' and many explorers have noticed this outstanding peak. A good close-up view of the southwest side can be had from the Sichuan-Tibet Highway. The north face would provide a possible climbing route.

2 Mountains of Dadu River basin

Along the deep valley of Dadu He, one of the large tributaries of the Yangtze River, there exist many 5000m peaks both to the east and west. The highest is a 5712m peak on the left bank of the river. The eastern end shares a boundary with the Jiaojin Shan, a minor range, and the Qionglai Shan ranges.

3 Cheto Shan

This is a minor mountain with the highest peak, 4962m, located between Haizi Shan and Minya Konka.

4 Lotus Flower Mountains

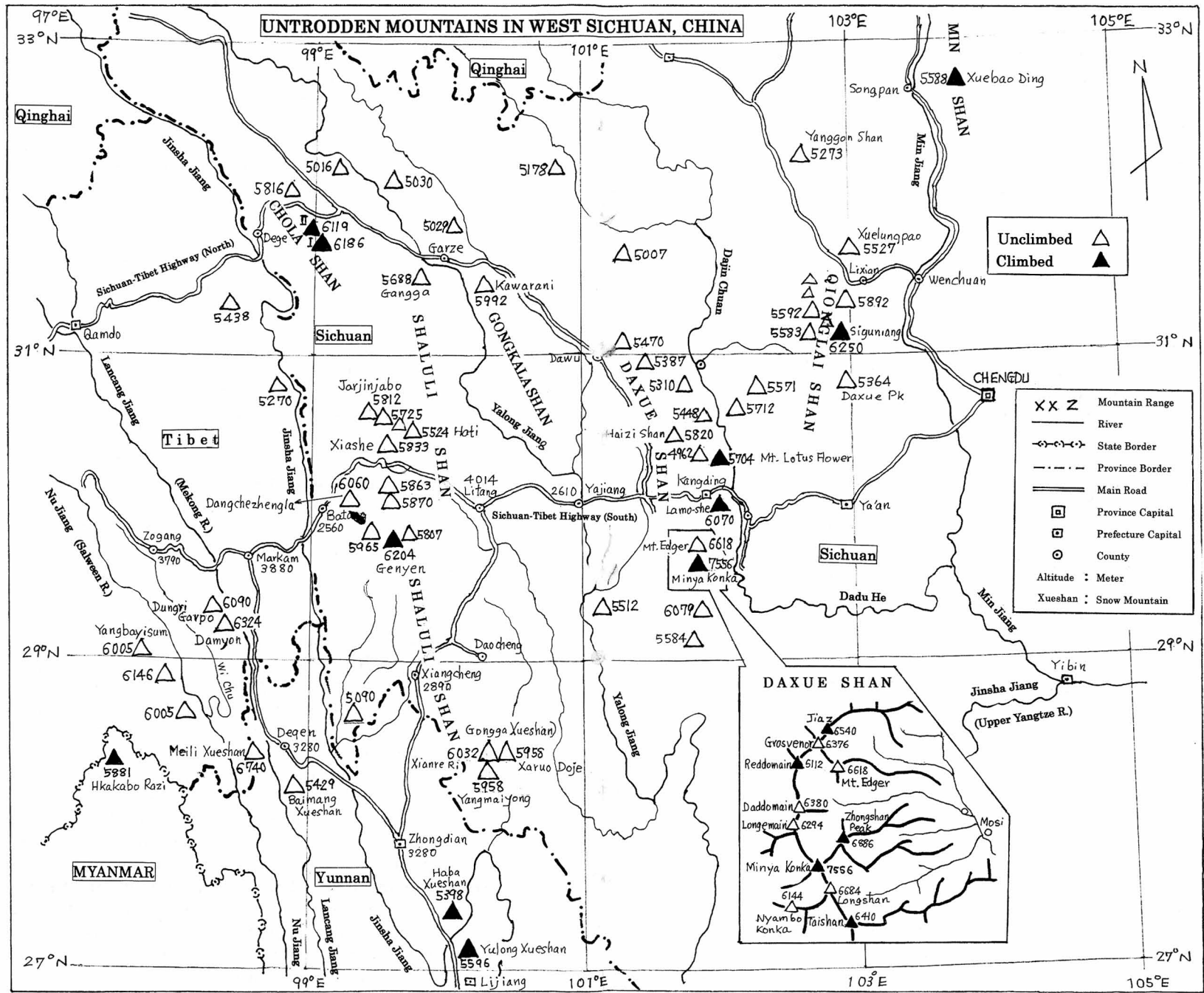
Although no glaciers have developed, eminent rock peaks can be seen north of Kangding, the capital of the Garze Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture. A Japanese party climbed the highest peak, 5704m, in 1998.

5 Lamo-she Massif

This massif, east of Kangding, has been called the 'Mountains of Tachienlu'. In 1993 its highest peak, Lamo-she (Tianhaizi Shan, 6070m) was scaled by Americans and the fourth highest (Shehaizi Shan, 5878m) was climbed by an American-Canadian-NZ team. The other two peaks, 5924m (Baihaizi Shan) and 5880m, are guarded by rocks and hanging glaciers.

6 Minya Konka (Gongga Shan, 7556m) and its Satellite Peaks

All the ascents of Minya Konka, from the first ascent by Americans in 1932 to the sixth ascent by Japanese in 1997, were made via the northwest ridge. In 1998, however, a Korean party made the 7th ascent, via the northeast ridge, an enterprise which had taken the lives of 12 Japanese climbers in three expeditions. Future problems are the difficult south ridge and southwest ridge.



There still remain unclimbed satellite peaks over 6000m. The following list shows the most important peaks still to be challenged:

Northern part	Grosvenor	6376m
	Mt. Edger	6618m (E-Gonnga)
Central part	Daddomain	6380m
	Longemain	6294m
Southern part	Longshan	6684m
	Nyambo Konka	6144m

7 6079m Massif

This is an independent massif with an unclimbed 6000m peak in the vicinity of Minya Konka to the south, though it is not on a large scale. No one has yet made a reconnaissance of the highest peak at 6079m. Further south, a 5584m mountain is shown on the Chinese map, but no specific information about it is available.

Qionglai Shan Range

This range forms the Min River–Dadu River divide and the highest peak is the famous Mt. Siguniang, 6250m, first climbed via its east ridge by the Japanese in 1981. Japanese mountaineers were also the first to climb the south face in 1992. The southern side of Mt. Siguniang is now a popular place for tourists, but to the north a splendid climbing field is expanding along beautiful valleys. Many granite rock spires of some 5500m soar, peak upon peak, and two major peaks of 5892m and 5712m with glaciers can be seen in the distance at the northern end.

Apart from Mt. Siguniang, Americans climbed the following peaks:

- 1983 Celestial Peak, 5413m (Tibetan name: 'Punyu'), a complete rock pyramid
- 1994 5484m and 5383m peaks
- 1996 a 5666m peak

Further north, there is an unknown massif of five 5000m peaks, of which the highest is 5527m.

Min Shan Range

The Min Shan range, at the eastern end of the Hengduan Mountains near Jiuzhaigou and Huanlong, is registered as a UNESCO World Heritage site. The highest peak, Xuebao Ding (5588m), was first climbed by Japanese in 1986. This area is now more suitable for tourists than for those seeking pioneer climbing.

2 JOURNEY TO UNKNOWN MOUNTAINS AND VALLEYS IN SOUTH KHAM

South Kham, which formerly belonged to Xikang Province, was incorporated into Sichuan Province in 1949 when Communist China imposed a new administration. Our trip during the first half of 2000 was focused on this unknown region. 'Seeking New Discoveries' was our primary aim, and consequently we planned the following objectives:

- First round Unclimbed 6000m peaks, Dangchezhengla Massif east of Batang
- Second round Jarjinjabo and Xiashe Massifs north of Litang Plateau

Dangchezhengla and Heaven Lake

Except for the satellite peaks of Minya Konka, only three mountain massifs in West Sichuan have unclimbed 6000m peaks. These are Xianre Ri (6032m) in the Gongga Xueshan massif, Peak 6079m south of Minya Konka, and Dangchezhengla.

Our party of two (total age 132 years) arrived at Chengdu via Shanghai on 26 May 2000. We were well received by the Zhang brothers of Sichuan Adventure Travel and by our guide, Lenny Cheung. The Zhang brothers have gained a reputation in the USA as the most experienced guides for rafting on both the Yangtze and Tsangpo rivers.

On 27 May we reached Kangding from Chengdu in eight hours in a Toyota Land-Cruiser via the newly opened Erlangshan Tunnel. On 28-29 May we proceeded westwards in the rain along the Sichuan-Tibet Highway to Batang (2560m). The road lies at an altitude of over 4000m for about 200km as it traverses the Litang Plateau. Lenny made the necessary arrangements for our party at Dongba village (2690m) near Batang.

On 31 May, after it had rained for several days, we heard that a cycle of favourable weather was moving in our direction. So we left Dongba and ascended a trail along a mountain ridge to the east. Our party consisted of two Japanese, a Chinese guide, three Tibetans (the local Communist Party Secretary and two muleteers), nine horses and one yak. We lost half a day waiting for the Secretary who had difficulty finding us. This was very frustrating. We stayed overnight at one of the Tibetan houses in Zhomba village at 3740m.

In the spring season it is not easy to employ local people as porters, or bearer animals such as horses, mules and yaks, because the villagers are busy gathering caterpillar fungus (a Chinese traditional medicine) from locations at over 4000m; at this time, animals are moved to high pastures for grazing. The fungus is a substantial source of income for local Tibetan people, one piece selling for a quarter dollar.

On 1 June the fine weather returned. Our caravan started with five horses and seven porters. The trail ascended along the left bank of the valley to the

east through a primeval conifer forest. Rhododendrons were in full bloom. On the opposite side of the valley there was an isolated monastery. Before long the valley ended, blocked by an overwhelming 5148m rock peak beyond which must be heaven lake. We set up our base camp (BC) at 4450m by the main stream, near a temporary summer grazing hut.

On 2 June it was cloudy with some sunshine. Our path climbed up a steep zigzag slope and then followed a stream leading us to the right shoulder of the rock peak. This was likely to be the only outlet for heaven lake, Yamouchouken (4800m). The horses were gasping. Off the trail we could see many *Meconopsis integrifolia*s with its yellow flowers, but *Meconopsis horidulas*, the so-called 'Blue Poppy' were not to be found anywhere. I described the scene in my diary:

At last we reached the outlet at 10:30am from the western end of the lake. Total tranquillity rests over the entire area. No sounds of animals are heard, and the scenery before me is quite different from how I had imagined it. The sight is breathtaking. In spite of early summer, the lake is almost completely frozen and the surface glitters in silvery white. I was reminded of the salt lakes in the highlands of the Bolivian Andes and Ethiopia in East Africa. If you took one day's walk down to the Jinsha Jiang river basin from the lake, you would suddenly suffer from a dry and hot blast running up the valley. It is a wonder of nature, indeed, in South Kham.

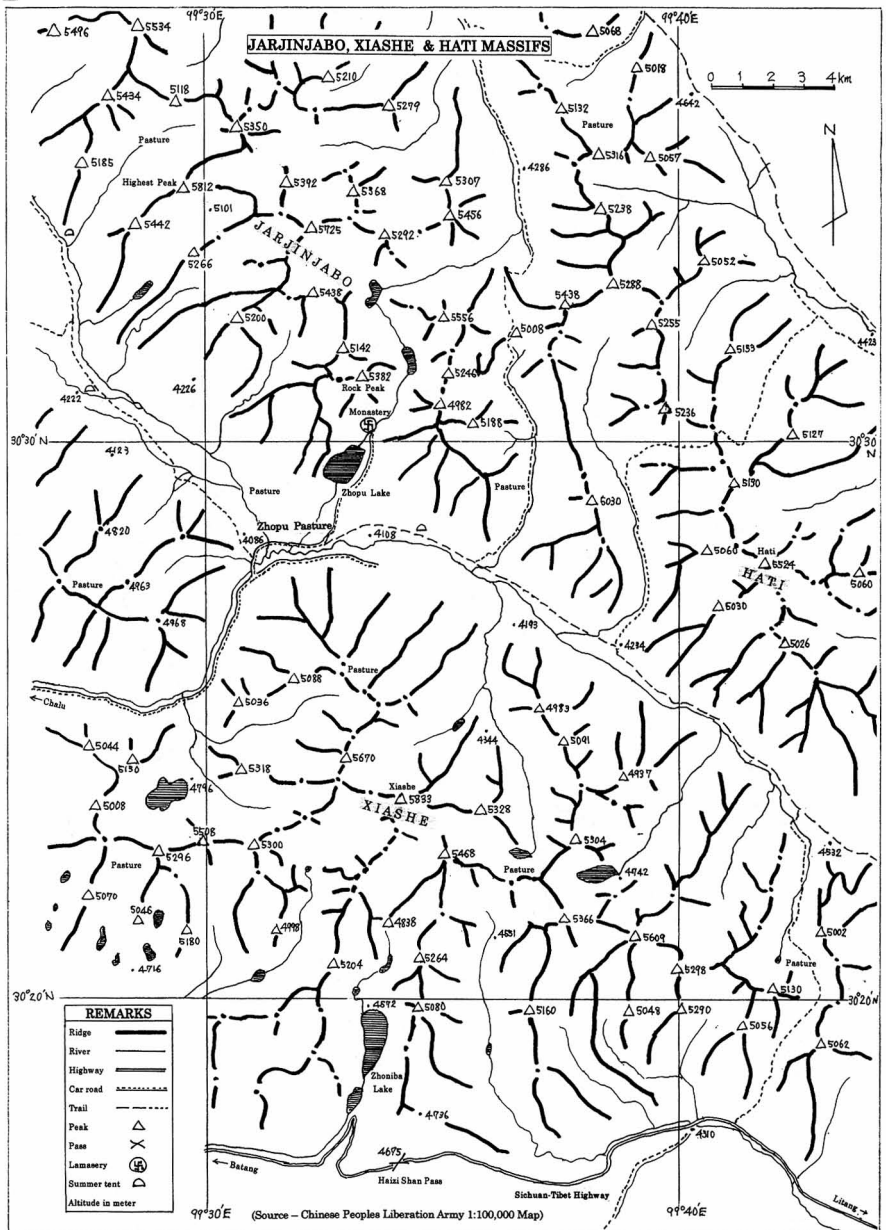
We dismounted and continued our march further to the east, tracing a footpath along the north bank of the lake, until all the three peaks (at 6060m, 6033m and 5833m from east to west) of Dangchezhengla Massif came into view. We stopped trekking at 4900m. Peak 5833m had a large glacier. The southwest side of the highest peak appeared to be not too difficult to climb. In the late afternoon we returned to BC having accomplished a preliminary reconnaissance of the mountain massif.

On 3 June our caravan went down to Batang and spent one day there to prepare for the next round.




The heart of South Kham – Zhopu Pasture and Jarjinjabo Massif

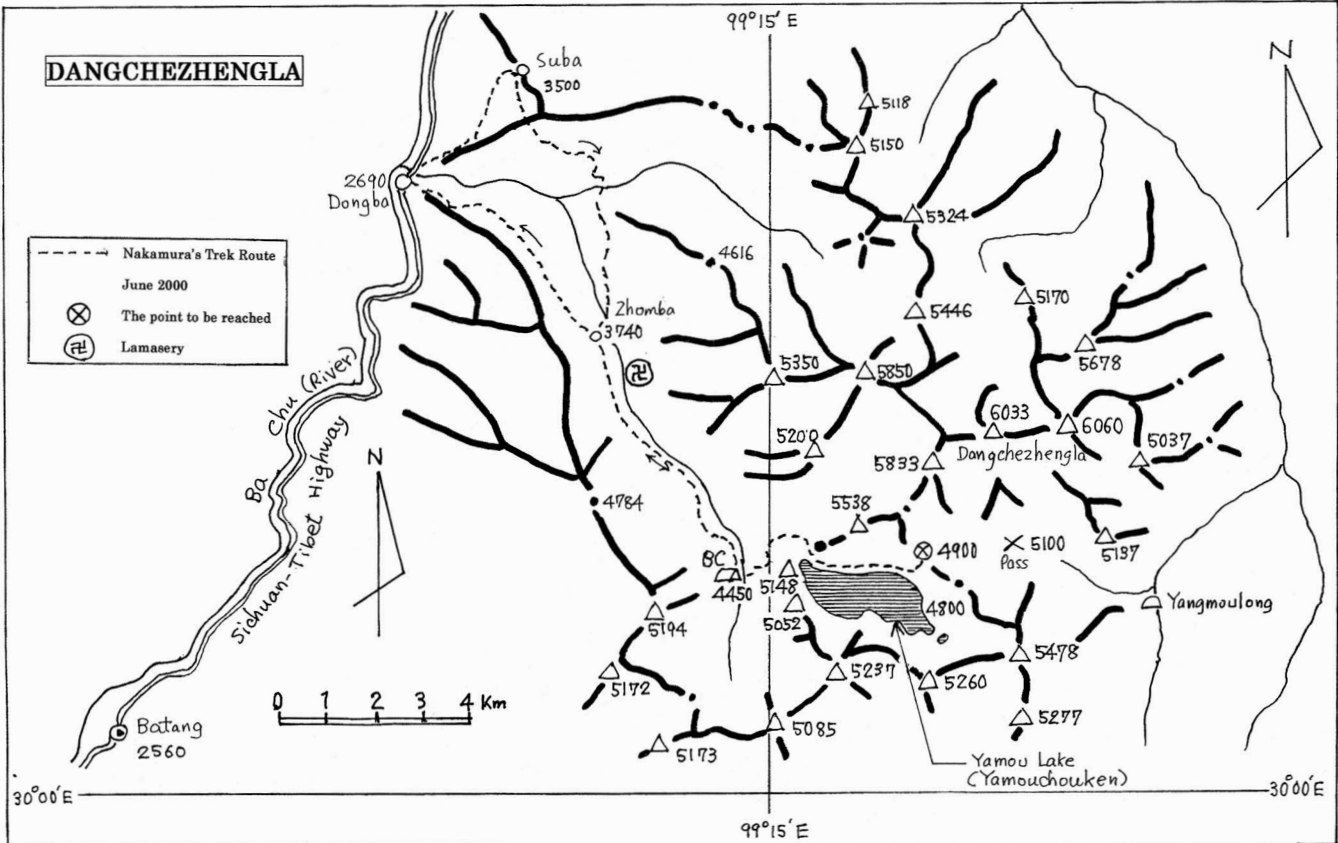
One is apt to overlook something important if it lies near at hand: a hidden paradise exists not far north of the main Sichuan-Tibet Highway. The local chief of Dongba village gave us some information, summarised as follows:

1 Zhopu Pasture and its surrounding nature reserve is the most beautiful in Batang County. A wide grassy valley, rock and snow mountains, primeval forests, a blue lake and wild animals – all are in perfect harmony. It could be compared with Jiuzhaigou.



DANGCHEZHENGLA

-  Nakamura's Trek Route
June 2000
-  The point to be reached
-  Lamasery



2 Zhopu Monastery, with its 700 years of history, is a holy place of the Red Hat sect. Vehicle access is now possible, since a road to carry mining products has been constructed from Chalu to a silver mine beyond Zhopu Pasture.

On 5 June we left Batang in the early morning for Zhopu Monastery with a great deal of expectation, as if we were entering into a secret and isolated world, like James Hilton's *Lost Horizon*. We turned north at the junction of the highway to Chalu and Zhopu. From Chalu a young local government officer accompanied us as a pilot. He had the task of watching the foreigners too. Our land-cruiser proceeded along the left bank of the valley to the northeast. We passed by a hot spring where old lamas were bathing. Conifers and oak trees grew freely on the mountain. The oak trees yield pine mushrooms that are exported to Japan. Soon an old monastery and then a ruined stone defence tower appeared. At about 4.00pm, we reached a point where the valley merged with a vast and flat pasture where hundreds of yaks and sheep were grazing.

Zhopu Pasture lies at an altitude of 4050m-4100m, spreading for about 20km from WNW to ESE and 2km-4km wide. Here the Khamba people live the life of nomads in black tents, looking after yaks, sheep and horses. Jarjinjabo mountain massif stretches in a panoramic view over the pasture. The grandeur of a 5382m granite rock peak, viewed head-on, is outstandingly impressive. But we were disappointed that there are no glaciers.

In the late afternoon we arrived at Zhopu Monastery (4120m), the neighbourhood of which supposedly has an atmosphere of 'Shangri-La'. Many lamas and students received us warmly but curiously, as we were the first foreigners to visit them.

On 6 June it was fine. After taking photographs of the challenging north face of Xiashe (5833m) in the early morning, we ascended a gully between granite rock walls just behind the monastery to the upper lakes for some hours. It was hard work and we could not help turning back halfway. At 3:00pm we had an interview with Living Buddha, who is the supreme lama in this monastery. He explained that the monastery had been opened in AD 1260 and now had 30 lamas and 300 students, of whom 100 were nuns. We came back to Zhopu Pasture and stayed at a villager's log house.

On the morning of 7 June the weather was settled. We spent one day exploring the two highest peaks, at 5812m and 5725m. Then, riding on horses, we moved calmly to the northwest. Fertile grasslands, yaks, sheep, black tents, Khamba girls and Tibetan dogs presented a typical picture of Eastern Tibet. We spent a couple of hours in a Tibetan black tent where only women and children were based, on their own, almost throughout the year. Tibetan women look after animals and children in the pasture, whilst males remain in their villages to take care of houses and barley fields.

The top of Peak 5725m is snow-covered and the southern side looks gentle. A profile of the highest peak, 5812m, looks very different. The broad

southeast face is guarded by precipitous ridges and gullies, with hanging glaciers. But from a climbing point of view, it would not be very attractive. Further to the northwest are more ranges of 5500m peaks. In the evening it rained a little and we heard the rumbling of thunder, indicating that the weather was changing.

On 8 June it rained. We said 'Zaijian' ('See you again') to the warm-hearted Zhopu people. On 10 June we returned safely to Chengdu. We felt well satisfied with the outcome of our journey.

MAPS

1. Map of Mountain Ranges in China, 1:6,000,000 (Chinese version)
2. Map of Mountain Peaks on the Qinghai-Xizang Plateau, 1:2,500,000 (English)
3. Garze Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Sichuan, 1:500,000 (Chinese)
4. DMAAC (USA) – TPC Aeronautical Chart, 1:500,000 (English)
5. Chinese Peoples Liberation Army, Topographical map, 1:50,000 & 1:100,000 (Chinese)
6. Russian Topographical Map, 1:100,000, 1:200,000 & 1:500,000 (Russian)
7. Sketch maps of 'JARJINJABO, XIASHE & HATI MASSIFS' and 'DANGCHEZHENGLA' are included in this article.



26. An unclimbed granite peak in the Jarjinjabo massif, Sichuan Province. (*Tamotsu Nakamura*) (p65)



27. Another unclimbed peak in the Jarjinjabo massif, Sichuan Province, seen from the Zhopu pasture, north of the Sichuan-Tibet Highway (South). The peak on the right is 5382m. Nakamura describes the region as being particularly beautiful. The Nyingma-pa monastery at Zhopu was founded in the 1260s. (*Tamotsu Nakamura*) (p65)



29. The unclimbed North Face of Xiashe (5833m), Shaluli Shan, photographed from the Zhopu Gomba. (*Tamotsu Nakamura*) (p65)



30. Mt Siguniang (6250m) in the Qiolangai was first climbed by a Japanese expedition in 1981 via the East Ridge, but the Japanese have also climbed the South Face, in 1992. To the north, Nakamura reports a number of granite towers up to 5500m. (*Tamotsu Nakamura*) (p65)



31. The highest peak in the Dangche Zhengla massif, photographed from the south-west. This peak is unclimbed. (*Tamotsu Nakamura*) (p65)



32. Lengo Gomba and rock peaks, Sichuan Province. The monastery was founded 600 years ago. (*Tamotsu Nakamura*) (p65)