
JOHN TOWN

Nyenang and the Nye Chu

(Plates 35, 40)

In September 2001 Derek Buckle and I explored the mountains at the head of the Wortse Chu, to the north of the Draksum lake, in the Kongpo province of east central Tibet. Despite finding a wealth of beautiful unclimbed peaks, we failed to reach the two highest peaks of the range. The first, N69, unnamed and marked as 6842m on Chinese maps and 6920m on detailed Russian maps, lay out of sight behind the headwall of the He Chu. The trackless upper gorge of the Wortse barred access to the second peak, Nyenang, 6870m or 6730m.

In 2002 I teamed up with Nicky Hart to take another look. I was determined to reach and explore these two mysterious giants and, since the southern approach had yielded little result, thought that a route from the north might hold the key. The watershed of the range forms the boundary between Kongpo and the province of Lhari. On the northern side the rivers and glaciers run down to the Nye Chu, which runs for 70km from its source below the Lochen La to its junction with the Sung Chu. A few kilometres further east the river joins the Alado (Dakson) Chu to become the Po-Yigrong, which continues eastward into a series of savage gorges. Frank Kingdon Ward had come this way in 1936, travelling west up the gorges from Tongkyuk to Rigongka (Ragoonka), on through Nye and over the Lochen La. The weather was bad and he had only a few glimpses of the spectacular main range as he made his way over the pass. This route took several months and was plainly not a starter for anybody with a steady job, even with employers as understanding as ours. In any case Kingdon Ward's hair-raising accounts of the gorge were not encouraging.

Some Chinese maps showed another approach to Nye, via a road running south-west from the city of Nakchu to the town of Atsa, on the old Gya Lam caravan route from Lhasa into China, and then down the gorge of the Sung Chu. Chris Bonington and Charles Clarke had travelled this route in 1996 as far as Lhari, the former provincial capital, about 20km east of Atsa and had various unkind things to say about the road, but I could not find any accounts of anyone traversing the final 60km down the lower part of the gorge to Nye. Charles' most recent expedition report said that it was unlikely that permission could be gained for travel in this area. The sensitivity arises from continuing controversy over the Panchen Lama, with both the Chinese and Dalai Lama's candidates having been found in Lhari province, in the town of Chiali, just north of Atsa.

Rather than becoming too discouraged I took courage from Kingdon Ward. At Temo Chamna he flourished his 'permit' to Tibetan officials, before heading up the Po-Yigrong gorge. At a later stage he learnt that the 'permit' was in fact a letter denying him permission to go any further. In our case I followed my usual practice of faxing to the ever-reliable Bikrum Pandey in Kathmandu a map of where I wanted to go and not asking too many questions when I was told it could be arranged.

The MEF supported us with a grant and Loughborough University was generous enough to release me for four weeks over Easter. On Thursday, 21 March 2002 we reached Kathmandu unusually refreshed; there had been no economy seats left, so we had travelled business class and been upgraded to first on the last leg.

Two days later we flew to Lhasa and were greeted by our guide and translator Dawa and his companion 'The Driver'. It was immediately apparent that these were two very sound men, even by Tibetan standards. I was particularly impressed by The Driver's beaming smile and white gloves. In Lhasa we met their boss Mingma, a man who was willing to go out of his way to make our trip a good one; just how far would become apparent later in the trip.

On 25 March we set out from Lhasa, taking the tarmac main road north through Yangpachen and reaching the outskirts of Nakchu in about six hours. We didn't enter the city but refuelled and then doubled back a few kilometres to the Atsa turning, crossing the frozen Nakchu river on the way. Conditions up here were tough. Anybody outside the warmth of a vehicle had their faces wrapped against the wind. It was a lonely business as we headed away from the traffic of the main road and into the gathering darkness of the late afternoon. The deserted dirt road was in poor condition and at times the way was far from clear.

Road maps of this area are vague as to place names and distances, but it gradually became apparent that there really isn't much worth marking on a map anyway. Somewhere in this snow-bound wilderness of endless plateau and low hills were two 5100m passes, the Shilok and Apa La, the highest on our route. We both assumed that long before crossing these some homely truck-stop would duly appear over the horizon, with a warm fire and plenty of tea. Instead it started to snow. We struggled on into the darkness. There was no opportunity to discuss whether it was time to call a halt, since there was nowhere to do so. We climbed gradually, the air became thinner and the road gradually disappeared. Just before things became impossible the road levelled out and dipped down to a storm-bound hovel. On the way back the Tibetans had to walk this section, to guide the vehicle through the whiteout. The inhabitants suggested we cross the second pass, which lay just ahead of us, and try to find shelter lower down. Given the weather and the state of their accommodation, I thought they might want to come with us.

We pressed on, crossed the second pass and stopped at the first house we could find. Relief at finding somewhere warm and dry was fast tempered by the realisation that we had not descended very far and were in for an unplanned night at 5000m, with prior acclimatisation limited to one day in Lhasa at 3500m. An appalling night duly followed, lightened only by the opportunity to practise a little amateur medicine. Mingma had trapped The Driver's thumb in the car door in Lhasa and Dawa requested the most powerful painkiller we had. We duly administered the second best and The Driver quietened remarkably. He had, we were told on enquiry, lost all feeling in his tongue.

The next day we pressed on, across high featureless plains and low hills, with the occasional group of houses huddled against the elements. On an icy section the Landcruiser broke through the crust and sank to the axle. Eventually a tanker passed and hauled us out. Shortly afterwards we took a wrong turn, then doubled back, only to find the tanker bogged down in front of us. Figures and vehicles gradually appeared out of the snow to pitch in and two hours later we were on our way again. Towards mid-afternoon the road started to descend into a shallow valley system, which led to the town of Atsa, at the northern end of the Atsa Lake, also known as Lhari, in its role as capital of that province. Official outposts, however bleak, usually provide good Chinese cooking and we feasted gratefully in a sub-zero dining room.

We drove onwards, first over a low pass and hydro scheme, where the road to Chiali branched off to the north, and on into the gentle beginnings of the Sung Chu valley. A beautiful snow peak was lit by the sunset as we wondered, as so often travelling in Tibet, whether we were ever going to stop. Relief came in the shape of a small village, with a picturesque gumpa, whose headman was kind enough to give us shelter and whose population found us endlessly fascinating. Foreigners were rare here, though there had been Japanese some years ago, attempting the snow peak. A light snow fell overnight and dusted a bald section of the road just below the village. The vehicle slipped gently sideways here next morning prompting a speedy exodus by all but the man at the wheel.

The gorge grew deeper and deeper and we began to be able to plot our progress in detail, using GPS points inputted from Russian maps in the UK. As we descended the air became warmer and the road more and more difficult. Landslides and rockfall were obviously a regular occurrence and it was often necessary to get out and remake the road before we could proceed. As the gorge closed in, houses gradually disappeared and dense forest crowded the slopes above. It is said that fewer than 100 vehicles a year make it down this road and it is easy to see why. After eight hours of painstaking driving, we crossed to the right bank by a concrete bridge. Its mangled predecessor could be seen in pieces some way down stream. But despite the rock walls on either side, we knew the end was in sight.

Shortly afterwards the gorge suddenly opened into the wide sunlit Nye valley, surrounded by high mountains, where a series of substantial villages nestled amongst extensive fields of barley and potatoes. The eastern end of the valley framed some impressive snow peaks, which rise to the north of the Po Yigrong Gorge. Nicky later visited this eastern end, where the Alado Chu issues from a massive cleft to join the Nye Chu, and then, as the Po Yigrong, falls eastwards into an even more impressive gorge.

At Nye the road ended and we would continue our explorations on foot. The mayor provided us with a room with electric light courtesy of the valley's hydro station, and we set about finding horses. The next day Nicky and I explored the approaches to the Palung Valley, which runs seven kilometres south from Nye to the Palung Glacier, and then a further ten kilometres to the main watershed and a possible view of the elusive N69. The Palung Gorge was not for the faint-hearted. There may be a route to the glacier but it would need local help to find it. We became hopelessly lost in the dense bamboo forest clothing the side of the gorge and retired in disarray.

Our main hope was that we would gain a view of N69 by a relatively modest climb up the Tsari valley, which branched south from the Nye Chu at De-ba, about a day's journey west. We would then continue on up the main valley to the villages of Kongma and Nyeto Sama, which promised access to Nyenang and other major peaks.

As our horses and horsemen assembled it was clear that they had little or no experience of expedition transport (or any other kind, one is tempted to say). After an hour, a leisurely lunch was taken, together with the opportunity to shoe a horse or two. The mules in the party did not like the airy and precarious cliff-track which followed, and an extended traffic jam ensued. We left them to it and were rewarded by a peaceful stroll through idyllic woods of oak and pine to De-ba.

The two of us set off with determination before dawn the next day into the Tsari Gorge. After being misdirected by two locals through the thorn bushes of the river banks, we eventually found the path and began to experience what it had to offer. For a while it climbed pleasantly enough up and along the valley side, but then hit the remains of a massive landslide. The path disappeared amidst a chaos of brambles and smashed trees from which we eventually emerged an hour later. When we regained the path far above, it had been so undercut by the landslide that anyone coming the other way would have plunged unwittingly to their doom. Beyond was another landslide, this time barred at the far side by a continuous line of cliff. More in hope than expectation I aimed for a tree which had fallen diagonally across part of the cliff face. On inspection it appeared that one balanced out along the trunk until a lunge gained access to the relative security of a turf ledge. Nicky seemed impressed I had spotted this and so was I.

The landslides seemed to be at an end but we now started to encounter a series of frozen streams, which proved time consuming without axes or

crampons. Finally a larger torrent blocked the way. It had cut a deep trench whose sides slipped away at the first attempt to descend. At the second try a large boulder gave way leaving me hanging by my hands. After 8½ hours and just three kilometres of horizontal progress, it was time to give up on 'Nightmare Valley' and hope we made it back to camp without serious injury. This ended our hopes of seeing N69, but on a clear day on our return journey down the Nye Chu, we had spectacular views of the north faces of N63 and Peak 6170 glittering above the far end of the 17km gorge.

The following morning we continued on up the main valley, climbing gradually through unspoilt woodland to camp at the point where the valley narrows before turning south-west towards Kongma. This was the poorest of the hamlets we had encountered, with the inhabitants eking out a meagre existence in the perpetual shadow of the peaks towering above. We had reason later to be grateful to these people.

From Kongma the valley begins to open out, houses reappear and the path ascends to a whitewashed shrine marking the boundary of the upper valley. Nyeto Sama lies in the centre of a plain about ten kilometres long. Another large village lies at its near end and the hamlet of Ekar marks its western boundary. Beyond Ekar a large glacier spills directly across the main valley, blocking it entirely and forcing the track onto its northern slopes. The route to the west follows the headwaters of the Nye Chu up to the Lochen La (5300m), giving access to Pungkar and the upper part of the Drukla Chu, and on over the Tse La to the Gya Lam. This was the route followed by Kingdon Ward in 1936.

As we approached Nyeto Sama, a dazzling area of snow peaks appeared to the south above the broken terraces of the Kalu Glacier. Most spectacular of these was a blade of ice and snow and I gradually realised, with some incredulity, that this must be the northern aspect of Jomo Taktse (6582m), which we had seen from Kongpo the previous September. Seldom can a mountain have been blessed with two such spectacular and contrasting aspects.

A series of other unnamed peaks ran south from Jomo Taktse down the eastern side of the 'Y'-shaped Kalu Glacier, which has such a characteristic appearance on maps and satellite photos. No doubt there were others bounding the western side, but time prevented us from exploring. Our main aim now was to explore the northern approaches to Nyenang, called Kangla Karpo by the local people, where a high lake, the Chung Tso, promised to offer a grandstand view. We therefore hurried on to Ekar and pitched camp just beyond the village.

The weather closed in for the next two days but on 4 April, after early morning snowfall, we made a damp crossing of the main river. A group of wood-cutters showed us onto a good path which climbed steeply for 600m up through the woods. Fresh snow had filled in the line of the path making it hard going as it zigzagged precipitously high above the Chung Chu and onto the shoulder above. From here it was a short descent into the upper

valley and then a flog through new snow towards its head. Nicky ploughed a heroic trough through waist-deep powder up onto the moraine and we could then look down onto the lake itself. The 2500m north face of Nyenang or Kangla Karpo was laid out before us in a stunning panorama. The main peak rose sheer above us, dropping westwards to an icy comb whose flutings formed the headwall of the glacier basin. From its foot the Chung Glacier fell in a series of icefalls into the waters of the lake. The north peak and north ridge fell vertically towards us in an angry series of rock walls and séracs.

It was too cold to stay long but these few moments made all the efforts of the previous days and weeks worthwhile. On our journey back our guides and pack train managed to lose us entirely and, but for the good people of Kongma finally understanding our predicament, we would have spent a cold and hungry night out. The police discovered us in Atsa and assigned a nice young man to accompany us to the Public Security Bureau office in Nakchu. Sensitivities over the Panchen Lama had been heightened by a recent visit to Chiali by his parents. We received an hour's lecture in Chinese on the evils of travelling without a permit – we thought we had one – followed by a promise in English that we were nevertheless very welcome in Tibet and would be provided with an escort to 'the best hotel in Nakchu'. The Nakchu Hotel desk-staff wear down jackets in April and the restaurant is the only one I know where they give butter tea to tourists. Mingma appeared out of nowhere. He had driven the six hours from Lhasa that morning and had taken tea with the police inspector before we arrived. Apart from the odd car wreck passed on the road to Lhasa it was all downhill from there.



34. The southern side of the holy mountain of Nenang (6870m), the highest unclimbed peak in Nyenchentangla East. (*Tamotsu Nakamura*) (p81)



35. The same mountain from the north, viewed during John Town's expedition. (*John Town*) (p95)



40. Jomo Taktse (6582m), from the north. (*John Town*) (p95)