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## The Mountains of the Gangdise or Transhimalaya of Tibet

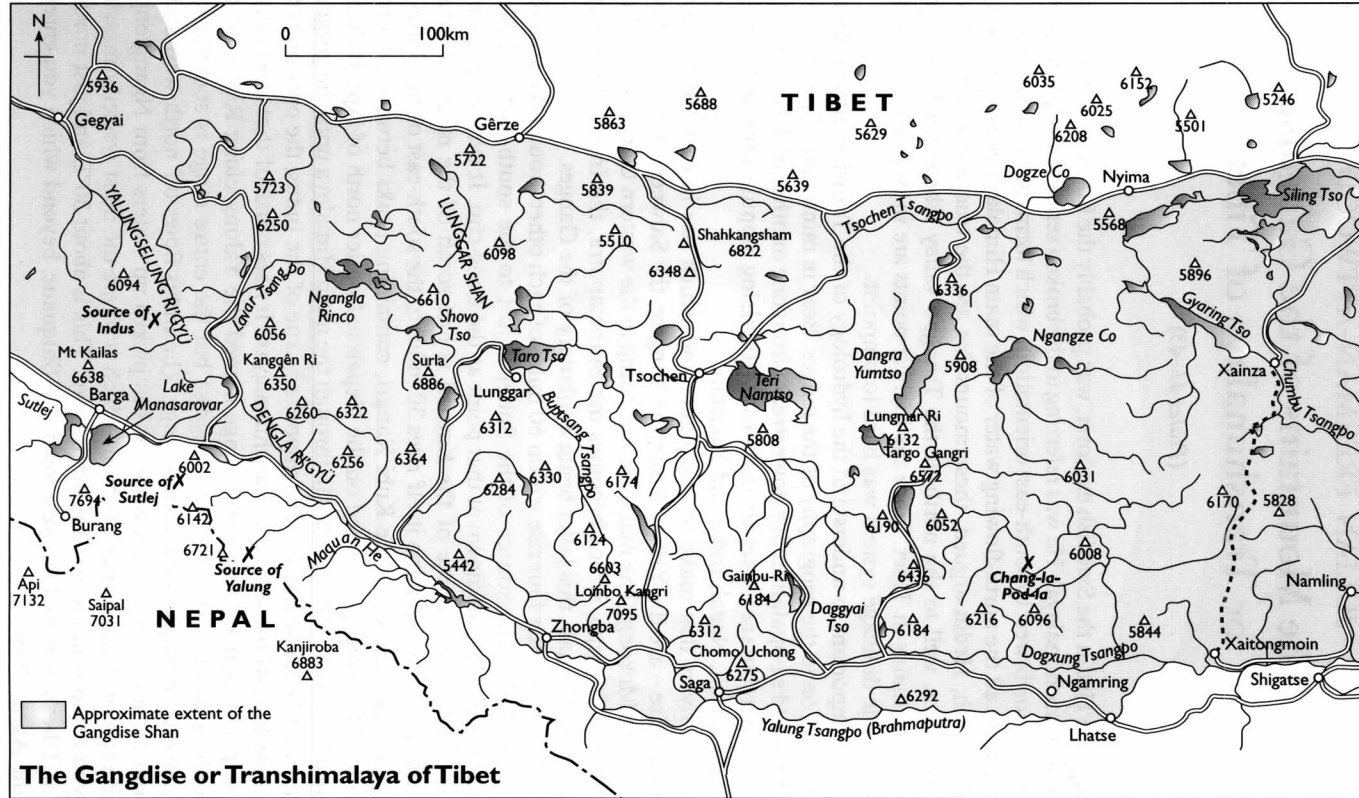
(*Plates 41–43*)

Sven Hedin the Swedish explorer, was probably the first to coin the term 'Transhimalaya'. He was referring to the broken series of ranges, mostly with a north-west to south-east orientation, which form the Gangdise Shan. Because all the north-flowing water of the main Himalaya ends up back in the south, Hedin argued, these mountains are the true watershed of the Himalaya, well to the north of the Tsangpo valley where north-flowing water remains in Tibet. Since the highest points are in isolated massifs, a definable drainage system was hard to pinpoint.

It's important to understand the hydrology of the Transhimalaya before moving on to the geography of the ranges. Bear in mind that 47 per cent of the world's population live downstream from one or other of Tibet's rivers. That percentage is set to increase with rising populations in China, Bangladesh, Nepal, India and Pakistan.

The rivers that make up this figure and which rise in east Tibet – not Gangdise – are the Yellow River, the Yangtze, the Salween, the Irrawaddy and the Mekong. The main streams rising in the western Gangdise are the Yalung Tsangpo, which becomes the Brahmaputra, the Indus, the Sutlej and the Karnali, this latter being a tributary of the Ganges.

All these latter four rise within 60 miles of each other around the area of 31°N 81°E. The source of the Sutlej is just to the south-east of Lake Manasarovar and known at that point as the Lang-chu. It eventually joins the Indus. The source of the Karnali is just south of the mighty Gurla Mandata. The Tsangpo itself rises 30 miles to the south-east of the Sutlej, in a range known as the Kubi Kangri, containing peaks between 6400m and 6700m and positioned on the Nepalese frontier north of Api. It then heads off east, failing to break through the main Himalaya until the gorges around Namche Barwa. The opposite is true of the Indus, the only one of these four whose source is Transhimalayan. It rises north of that most holy of peaks, Kailas, in a minor range named the Yalungselung Rigyu. Not only is Kailas firmly in the Gangdise but the entire range is sometimes marked on maps as the Kailas range. The Indus flows off north-west and out of our story but not before it has picked up waters from Nganglong Kangri or Aling Kangri (6450m) which is to me the most westerly massif you could claim to be Transhimalayan. This is about 80°E and just north of Tibet's principal far-west town, Ali Shiquane, beyond which you enter the Aksai Chin.



The southern boundary of the range is easier to define. It is the Tsangpo which begins life as the Maquan He. This remains the southern extent of the Gangdise until approximately 88°E, or a point between Lhatse and Shigatse. I say approximately, as it remains indistinct where the Gangdise end and the Nyenchentangla ranges begin. Some would claim the range to continue to the longitude of Shigatse. We thus have a minimum Gangdise length of 480 miles. Finally the northern extent of the range runs to approximately 32°N where it blends into the southern Chang Tang plateau, that area of north-western Tibet which runs eventually up to the Kun Lun ranges. Therefore, from the Tsangpo up to 32°N is about three degrees of latitude, or 200 statute miles.

If this does not sound extensive to the reader, it may help as a comparison that the Gangdise, at 96,000 square miles is slightly larger than the United Kingdom and Northern Ireland. The highest peak in the range as a whole is Loinbo Kangri (7095m), the only peak over 7000m the Gangdise can boast.

Linking this ill-defined watershed to the Tsangpo are various south-flowing streams. These mostly do not emanate from one or other of the great Transhimalayan lakes. Usually, and this is where the true watershed lies, the rivers cannot break south and instead flow into one or other of these lakes. The water is dissipated not by any great further north-flowing streams out of them but by evaporation and probably complex underground water systems which may resurface as springs great distances away and down. I suspect evaporation by sun on these lakes is amply assisted by the frequent strong winds, associated with the central plateau and Chang Tang, and these blowing over great lake surfaces must take their toll especially when the amount of water entering the lakes is not necessarily vast.

Starting in the west, Ngangla Rinco, 30 by 12 miles, is on the north side of the watershed. The two rivers feeding it, which merge 30 miles from the lake's west end, are the Aong Tsangpo emanating from the northern slopes of the Surnge La not far from Kailas and the Lavar Tsangpo, originating from the Lavar Kangri range.

Water from the Lunggar range also enters the northern shore. Heading a little east, the watershed of the Surla range is marked by the east-west Surla La (5833m). The north part of the range drains by way of the Pedang Tsangpo into Shovo Tso which is therefore north side. To the south of Surla (6886m) runs the Tsachu Tsangpo eventually merging with the Yalung Tsangpo or Brahmaputra.

The next lake to the east is Taro Tso, 25 by 12 miles, which is to the north of the watershed and fed by a great stream the Buptsang Tsangpo. This runs up from the Loinbo Kangri range 29.5°N 84.5°E for a hundred miles through what is arguably the highest inhabited area in Tibet. The nomads hereabouts live all year at over 5000m, greatly exceeding anything in South America. Hedin visited here in 1906 and noted, as there is today, a great variety of wildlife.

Between 85°E and 86°E and again in the north watershed is Lake Zhari or Teri Namtso, 35 by 15 miles. This is fed by the Tsochen Tsangpo which runs north from the Sangmo Bertik La, a 5550m pass which Hedin also crossed.

A degree further east is the great Bonpo holy lake, Dangra Yumtso, some 45 by 12 miles, with the remote Sezhi monastery on its southern shore. The lake is in the north watershed and fed by the Targo Tsangpo from a point north of Hedin's Chang-La-pod-La, which is the high point between it and the Yarlung Tsangpo. Hedin was told there were many passes called Chang-La-pod-La. Chang signifies 'north' or 'north country'; Pod or Po is Tibet, or at least central Tibet, chiefly inhabited by a settled population. Chang-La-pod-La is therefore 'the pass between the northern tableland of the nomads and the country to the south having drainage to the sea'. Hedin was often told that, whatever the name of a pass, it was always a *Chang-La-pod-La* when it lay on the great watershed between the inland drainage of the north and the river basin of the Tsangpo to the south.

Dangra Yumtso and nearby Shuru Tso, both have a north-south orientation which, unlike the mountain ranges, is rare for lakes of the Transhimalaya. The final two great lakes are Siling Tso which is arguably not in the Gangdise and Nam Tso which is firmly in the Nyenchentangla ranges. There are of course innumerable lesser lakes.

One of the earliest explorers of the Gangdise was the pundit Nain Singh followed by British officers Rawling and Ryder who were accompanied by Lt F M Bailey returning from Younghusband's 1904 mission to Lhasa. They followed Nain Singh's route to Lake Manasarovar, south of Kailas, and confirmed much of his work.

But it is the name of Sven Hedin that will always be linked with the ranges due to his four years of travel within it at the turn of the twentieth century. He was much admired by Lord Curzon, the viceroy of the time, but his German sympathies in the First World War and Nazi sympathies in Second World War brought him into sharp conflict with those who had previously admired his work.

Although Hedin had broken the veil hanging over the region, no mountaineering was accomplished until very recent times. This is not altogether surprising given the difficulty until recently of gaining permission for even the more accessible areas of the main Himalaya. Anyway, most climbers were interested in bigger fish than the Gangdise had to offer.

Having said that and although it is true that the geology of the ranges gives rise to peaks of less steepness than those of the Himalaya, there are nevertheless more than just a few exceptions to be found which give hard complex face and ridge climbs. On the plus side, the weather in general can be much more stable for longer periods than in the Himalaya or eastern Tibet. That is if you discount quite marked diurnal temperature fluctuations and vicious dry winds. At least they often blow out of a clear blue sky. As with any area there are bad years, especially in times of global warming

when the seasons seem to become jumbled around into disorder. In winter the nomads will tell you that there is not much depth of snow, roughly knee deep, but that it remains lying for months with very low temperatures and dry air. If seen from the air in winter, the sheer scale in area of snow cover has given rise to Tibet being termed the third pole.

With regard to the mountain ranges of the Gangdise and in an attempt not to complicate matters, we will start again, as with the rivers, from west to east. Most of the ranges are between 20 and 45 miles in length and between five and 12 miles in width. The most westerly is Nganglong Kangri (6596m), which lies just north of the infant Indus and can be viewed as a relatively small group. It was first seen, named and given its location by the pundit Nain Singh in 1867. The height was entered in his record as 'exceeding 23,000ft and possibly 24,000ft'.

Next, there is the group around Kailas itself. The spiritual significance of this mountain for both Buddhists and Hindus is well known. The kora path around it is a gruelling affair of 33 miles taking some three days, and much longer than that for devotees who prostrate themselves the entire way including a crossing of the Drolma La (5630m).

Kailas is often quoted as over 6700m but all the Chinese maps put it at 6638m and they are probably correct. Happily, it has never been climbed and nor should it be although the Chinese, possibly in an attempt to outrage the Tibetans, gave permission to the Spanish to climb it quite recently. Many in the West, as well as in Tibet, put pressure on the climbers, who eventually backed down. It was pointed out that nobody would be much impressed by the mountaineering feat and that, for them, it might mean a one way ticket to the everlasting depths and darkness.\*

Some 70 miles to the east and centred on 82°E to 83°E is the Dengla Rigyu range with the highest peak Kangqen Ri (6350m) standing at the northern end. I have not come across any photographs of it or the rest of the 35-mile-long massif. Just 30 miles to the east again, we come to the Surla Range, which was well documented by Hedin in 1906 to 1908 and of which he executed some very fine drawings.

The highest peak is Pt.6886m in the north of the range, and when I accessed the area some years ago from Taro Tso, I was met by a wall of fog which persisted for several days. Time ran out, it being late October, and snow was beginning to fall. I was therefore unable to get any photographs although I was undoubtedly at the point 31°N 83.5°E where Hedin sketched a great east-flowing glacier from the range. The nomads here build wide stone circles, rather Celtic-like, around their tents to keep away the evil one.

The only township hereabouts is Lunggar, which stands quite near Taro Tso with salt mines to the north. The wild men of this place had changed

\* Editor's note: The circumstances surrounding this proposed expedition remain confused and controversial. But it was not the first time the Chinese had offered Western climbers the opportunity to climb Kailas.

little in 90 years according to the faces in Hedin's photographs. There is a monastery still existing which, as with many in Tibet, was destroyed in the Cultural Revolution and recently rebuilt. We had a copy of Hedin's drawing of it and we also knew it was the monastery that the red-hat monk came from in Kipling's book *Kim*, and whom Kim met outside the museum in Lahore. The monastery, and this is common to rebuilt ones, is permitted usually less than 12 monks, the authorities being wary of too many of the church gathered in one place. Seven monks and one nun lived in caves behind the monastery. You get a strong feeling there that the strength of their faith will never be squashed by such petty government edicts and rules.

Another equally long and significant range lies just to the north of the Surla across Ngangla Rinco, the lake mentioned earlier. It is named Lunggar and has as its highest peak Pt.6610 in the south of the range. In fact the highest peaks often lie close to the lakes. I suspect this was the peak incorrectly positioned by Nain Singh, historically put at 7216m and named Kuhanbokang.

Looking south, upstream along the Buptsang Tsangpo river, is the Loinbo Kangri range. (Hedin: Lunpo Gangri). The highest peak, Loinbo, is the highest in all the Gangdise at 7095m and corresponds to Pk.W134 of the Ryder and Wood survey of 1904. The mountains are of granite and the southern half of the range contains some very fine looking rock peaks although the rock is somewhat flaky. The main ice mountains are Talha Zhenggo (6317m), Gopalho (6453m), a beautiful pyramid, and Phola Kyang (6530m). Then north of Loinbo, which itself has a rocky and technical looking Pt.6645m, is the Nyidokang La and beyond that Kangbulu (6603m), this latter peak of less interest.

Some 55 miles to the south-east of Loinbo and centred around the Chinese military garrison town of Saga lies the Kanchung Gangri ranges (Hedin: Chomo Uchong). The highest peak Pt.6450m (possibly only 6312m) is in view from near the town and looks quite complex to access. Sven Hedin spent a considerable time surveying and drawing the range.

If you were to travel north from Chomo Uchong you would pass hot springs and geysers en route to Daggyai Tso. On the left is a significant range with a peak marked on Chinese maps as Gainbu-Ri (6184m). If you go on 150 miles, crossing the Lapchung and Nakbo ranges, past Tsochen and the Teri Namtso lake, you end up at a massif called Shahkangsham, some 18 miles in length and way up at 31°40'N. Nain Singh was the discoverer of this range on his 1873-75 journey from Leh to Lhasa. He gave it a height of 7660m; the range was marked at 25,000ft by Hedin, who referred to it as Nain Singh's Shahkangsham. I ascertained the height of this peak to be over 6800m, which correlates with the RGS map measurement of 6815m and the Chinese height of 6822m. There are a dozen good-looking 6000m peaks in the north sector of the range including the south summit Pk.6600m. A large rocky south face dominates the mid-range, soaring up to a peak of around 6500m.

As you approach the northern Gangdise the wildlife is spectacular. You can see in just a few days Tibetan wolf, antelope, gazelle, marmot, foxes, hares, bharal sheep, wild ass, eagles, ducks and geese, black-necked cranes and even lizards. There were flocks of small birds in some numbers, most of which I was unable to identify. Partridges and ram chikor can also be seen. Conversely the amount of human habitation decreases with the aridity found in these regions.

South-east of Shahkangsham and visible from it in clear weather at 120 miles distant is the Targo Gangri range. This is a fascinating area, south of Lake Dangra Yumtso at 31°N 86.5°E and, as mentioned before, holds the main Bonpo monastery in the Gangdise. Their holy mountain is Targo-ri, sometimes known as Lungma Ri. The lake, like Shakangsham, lies on the edge of the windy Chang Tang and at the northern limits of our definition of the Gangdise.

There are only a handful of Bonpo monasteries in Tibet and just three per cent of the country's inhabitants profess to be of that faith. Hedin was refused entry to this one or indeed from travelling beyond 'by a troop of twenty horsemen armed to the teeth who had been sent by the governor of Naktsang with orders to stop us in case we should attempt to advance to the holy lake'.

Three other Bonpo places of worship in Tibet are Chorten Nyima on the northern Sikkim border, Laya on the Bhutan border and Takpa Shiri on the Arunachal Pradesh border. Flying from the monastery's roof was the black trident symbolising the land of the gods (of a white colour), land of men (red) and land of the water spirits of the lower world (blue). A king reigns in heaven as well as in the lower world but the greatest in power on Earth is the 'earth mother'. This worship of the natural world is also associated with animistic and ancestor worship. Circumnambulations are undertaken in an anti-clockwise direction, the opposite to Buddhist practice, although the two religions have huge amounts in common.

The approach to the lake can be made from the west but also from the township of Sangsang to the south by way of following a tributary of the Dogxung Tsangpo. This takes you over 5500m passes and on to a good-looking peak of 6436m called Dobzebo with a monastery 1500m below its castellated top. Hedin was forced out this way in 1906. The first township you come to is Tsatse at the southern end of the turquoise lake Xuru Tso, some 15 miles in length, complete with its own quite extensive range to the west. From here you can see Targo. There is a great red gash to the side of Targo Gangri's south face where the nomads say that in a battle Dobzebo fired an arrow at the mountain's knee. On Dobzebo you can see where a returning arrow from Targo was said to hit him in the stomach.

The Targo range comprises about 16 peaks over 6000m with the highest and most prominent, although not the steepest, being Targo Gangri itself at the southern end. These highest peaks used to form a massive peninsula

eastwards, jutting into Dangra Yumtso in days when the lake was much larger than in present times. Again Nain Singh noted the peaks on his 1873-75 journey and Hedin was arguably the next to go there. A height of 7400m for Targo Kangri was revised down to 7100m and then 6572m. The latter height I can confirm is accurate. The central part of the range contains some of the most interesting mountains of all the Gangdise, and like Loinbo, is composed of granite.

Some 140 miles east of Targo is a peak as good a candidate as any to mark the far eastern end of the Gangdise. That mountain lies south of Gyaring Tso, another 35-mile-long lake, and is named Gyagang (6444m). Its position is at 88°40'E, nearly that of Shigatse.

There are, of course, many other sub-ranges not mentioned above, that may be seen through extensive travel in the Transhimalaya. For now they are too numerous to mention.



41. Nomad woman and children of the Surla Range, in the Transhimalaya of Tibet.  
(*Julian Freeman-Attwood*) (p103)



42. Pk 6530m seen across the Qulunggam Glacier in the Loinbo Kangri Range  
of the Transhimalaya. (*Julian Freeman-Attwood*) (p103)



43. Tibetan antelope in front of the E Face of Targo Gangri (6572m). (*Julian Freeman-Attwood*) (p103)