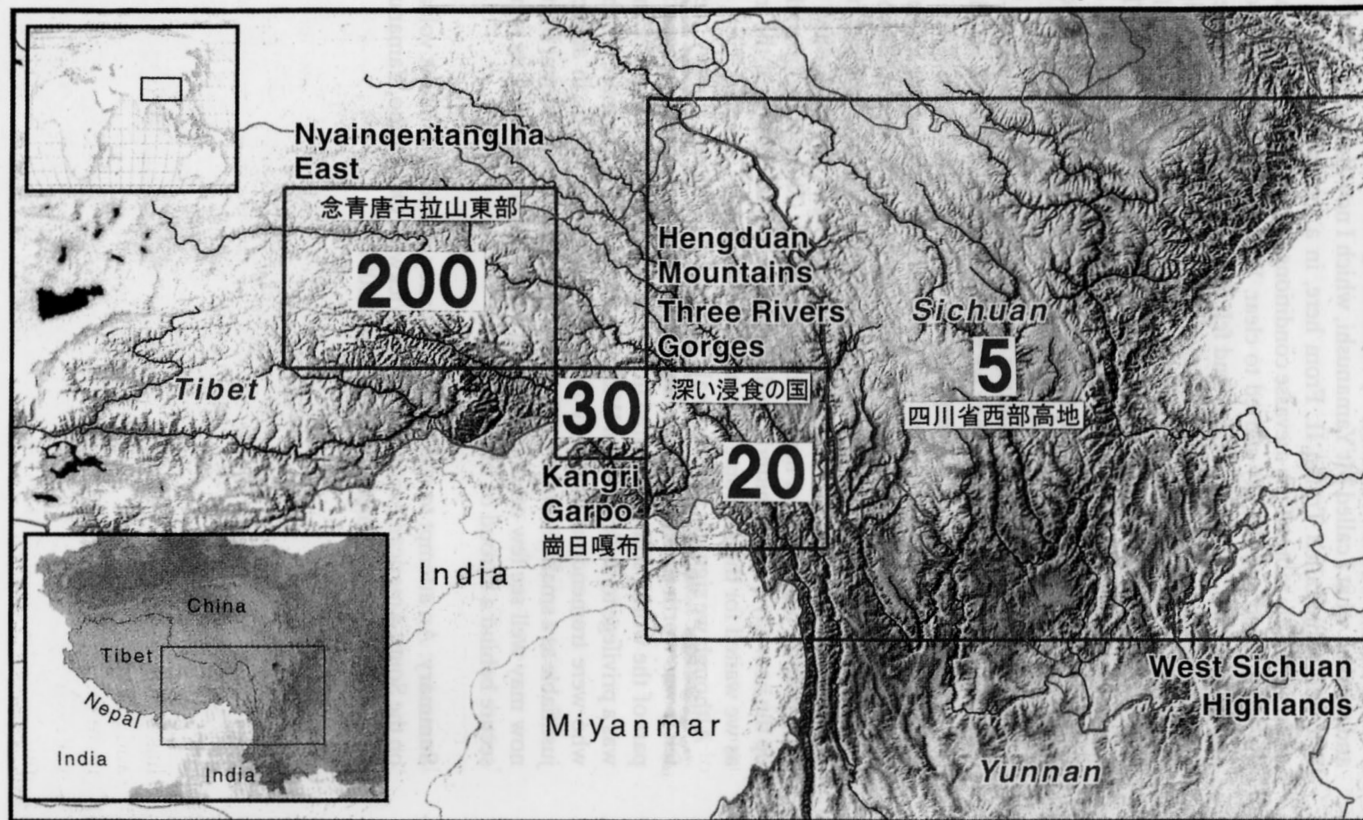


EAST OF THE HIMALAYA-ALPS OF TIBET

255 Unclimbed 6000m Peaks

January 2008 Tamotsu Nakamura



TAMOTSU NAKAMURA

Return to Gorge Country 2007

In spite of a chilly wind, I sat for some time gazing at this colossal chaos of mountains flashing in the sunlight, the deep valley of the Wi-chu at our feet, and then range beyond range to the Salween, and beyond that again more mountains. Why yes! I must be looking at the very sources of the Irrawaddy itself, and there in the south-west, one, two, three, I know not how many ranges away must be the gorge of the Taron, and beyond that Burma. Wonderful!

The Mystery Rivers of Tibet
Frank Kingdon Ward, 1913

My voyage of discovery to 'East of the Himalaya – the Alps of Tibet' was triggered by the enchanting narratives of Frank Kingdon Ward on his travels to the remote Tibetan marches of north-west Yunnan and south-east Tibet. This paradise for plant-hunters has an equal allure for mountaineers, with 255 unclimbed 6000m peaks mapped in the whole area of 'East of the Himalaya'. They are distributed as follows:

Nyenchen Tanglha East – 200 peaks

Kangri Garpo range – 30 peaks

Deep Gorge Country of the Hengduan mountains – 20 peaks

Sichuan West Highland of Hengduan mountains – 5 peaks

In autumn 2007 I led an expedition of six members to Deep Gorge Country to revisit an isolated borderland that has been of particular interest to me. It is a land of natural wonder where great rivers have eroded the Tibetan plateau into deep valleys with gloomy shadows and forbidding gorges. This was the hunting ground of Kingdon Ward whose footsteps I have been tracing since 1990.

A wave of changes, however, is sweeping China, reaching every corner of its frontier in the west. The Deep Gorge County, which the Chinese call 'Three Rivers Parallel Streams' (Salween, Mekong and Yangtze), was registered as a world natural heritage site by UNESCO in 2002. Playing on the Shangri-La of James Hilton's *Lost Horizon*, the Chinese government has highlighted the Meili Snow Mountains on the Yunnan-Tibet border and Mekong River valley for the development of tourism. Nevertheless, there still remain many unfrequented and lesser-known mountains and valleys to attract an old explorer. I have been fortunate, though I must admit our 2007 expedition was rather hard and uncomfortable.

Baxoila Ling-Salween/Yu Qu Divide-Nu Shan in Three Rivers Gorges

Our original plan was to go up the Salween River (Nu Jiang) north-westwards from Tsawarong by horse caravan, but the muleteers refused, saying the trail was too narrow and dangerous for pack animals to pass carrying loads. We were forced to choose an alternative route along Yu Qu (Wi-chu), a tributary of the Salween, which I had already traced twice. Extraordinarily heavy snowfall in mid-November closed the high passes, including two, at 4900m and 5300m, that we had intended to cross, forcing a further change of plan. In addition, all six of us caught serious colds in the smoky Tibetan houses where we stayed.

Nevertheless, our journey achieved a satisfactory outcome, shedding light on two 6000m mountain massifs and one 5700-5800m massif, as follows:

Baxoila Ling. The northern part of this large mountain range is on the Lohit-Parlung Tsangpo-Salween divide; the southern part is on the Irrawaddy-Salween divide in the Tibetan Autonomous Region and changes its name to Gaoligong Shan in Yunnan Province. There are three outstanding mountain massifs: Yangbayisum (6005m), Chagelazi (6146m) and Mukong Xueshan (6005m) ('Xueshan' means snowy mountains).

Range on the Salween-Yu Qu divide. Comprises three massifs: Geuzong massif opposite Jino to Do villages, 5700-5800m, many outstanding rock peaks in its northern part; central massif opposite Bake to Jomei villages, 5300-5700m, many peaks; northern massif opposite Zayi, 5400-5600m, few attractive peaks.

Nu Shan / Taniantawen Shan: This is also a large mountain range on the Salween-Mekong divide. Nu Shan in the southern part has a famous holy peak of Meili Snow Mountain (6740m) with well-developed glaciers, while Taniantawen Shan stretching north of Nu Shan has the rocky massifs of Damyon (6324m) and Dungri Garpo (6090m) with no eminent glaciers.

Itinerary: 6 to 30 November 2007

We flew from Kunming (1950m) to the ancient city Dali (1900m) on 6 November and returned to Kunming from Shangri-La/Zhongdian (3280m) by air on 30 November. (Air temperatures shown below were taken at 8am.)

By Land Cruiser through Salween canyon

6 Nov: Cloudy, 11°C, From Dali (1900m) – across Mekong – Liuku (850m) Salween bank.

7: Rain/cloudy, 17°C, Liuku – Gongshan (1560m) [Yunnan].

8: Cloudy/fine, 10°C, Gongshan – Longpu (1860) – Tsawarong (1950m) [Tibet].

16 horses caravan along Yu Qu valley

- 9: Rain/cloudy, 11°C, organising caravan at Tsawarong.
- 10: Cloudy/fine, 10°C, Tsawarong – Tongdu La (3340m) – Zaji (2360m).
- 11: Cloudy/fine, 7°C, Zaji – across Yu Qu – Gebu (2460m) – Wobo (2730m).
- 12: Fine 5°C Wobo – Razun/Radoun (2880m). Perfect view of east face of Mukong Xueshan.
- 13: Fine, -1°C, Razun – Tong La (3270m) – across Yu Qu – Pitu (3060m).
- 14: Fine/cloudy, -2°C, Pitu – (this section by a car) – Dino (3130m).
- 15-16: Snowing -0°C. Stay at Dino owing to heavy snowfall.

12 horses caravan from Yu Qu to Do Qu - Reconnaissance of Damyon

- 17: Rain/cloudy, 1°C, Dino – (entering Do Qu) – Do (3350m).
- 18: Fine, 0°C, stay at Do. Perfect view of west face of Damyon.
- 19: Cloudy/fine, 0°C, Do – (Do Qu) – camp site at 3560m.
- 20: Fine, -5.5°C, camp site – (Do Qu) – pasture for yaks at 4140m – camp site.
- 21: Fine, 2°C, camp site – Do. Viewed Geuzong massif on Salween-Yu Qu divide.

13 horses caravan northwards along Yu Qu

- 22: Fine/cloudy, -6°C, Do – Bake (3270m).
- 23: Fine, -7°C, Bake – Ge La (3960m) – Meila (3750m). Central massif of Salween-Yu Qu divide viewed from Ge La.
- 24: Fine, -10°C, Meila – Jomei (3320m).

Return from Yu Qu via Sichuan-Tibet Highway

- 26: Fine, -9°C, Jomei – Zayi (3470m) – Zhogang (3780m) – Sichuan-Tibet Highway – Tongda La (5008m) – Chaka (across Mekong) – Markam (3860m) – (across Upper Yangtze) – Batang (2530m) [Sichuan].
- 28 to 29: Fine, -2.5°C, Batang – (along Upper Yangtze) – Derong (2410m) – Shangri-La [Yunnan]

Highlights

The **grand canyon of the Salween** runs northwards from Liuku, capital city of Nu Jiang Lisu Minority Autonomous Prefecture, where we arrived by three Land Cruisers on 6 November. The canyon scenery is rich and varied with magnificent gorges, great bends, rope bridges, rapids, pools and beautiful forests. The people are friendly with colourful costumes, raised houses and Catholic churches.

A paved road runs from Liuku to Bingzhonglou, 40km north of Gongshan, and in 2005 a new vehicle track was opened, 56km as the crow flies, from Bingzhonglou to **Tsawarong** on the left bank of the Salween.



81. & 82, North-east face of Mukong Xueshan – North peak (6005m, main peak) seen from Wobo village. North peak and South peak (6000m) (left) seen from Razun village. (*Tamotsu Nakamura*)

This new road forms part of the ambitious West Development Plan and is connected to the Sichuan-Tibet Highway from the south. Thanks to this road, we were able to reach the administrative centre of Tsawarong in six hours from Bingzhonglou, whereas the old path required three to four days on foot.

Kingdon Ward loved the people and culture of Tsawarong, visiting in 1911, 1913 and 1922. It is said that the pine-forested valley of the Yu Qu, to the north, is the most beautiful in eastern Tibet. It is also, as Kingdon Ward noted, a valley of pretty females. The people are hospitable and we were welcomed in Tibetan houses, lodging at Dino, Do, Bake and Meila villages on the route of our caravan.

The grandeur of the first bend of the **Yu Qu gorge** is breathtaking. The traveller has a bird's-eye view while descending the trade path (pilgrimage trail) from Tongdu La (3340m) to Zaji village. This was the first highlight for us along the Yu Qu, and the second was to come near Tong La (3270m). The well-maintained trade path crosses the Yu Qu at Gebu village and ascends about 300m before levelling and continuing northwards. Down to our left was the meandering turquoise stream of the Yu Qu while to the west we could see prayer flags at a pass on the ridge separating the Yu Qu and Salween. The mysterious view of the Yu Qu [Wi-chu] from the pass would be similar to the one we enjoyed at the Tong La, near Razun village (2880m) and enthusiastically described by Kingdon Ward.

Now we see the Wi-chu at our feet, flowing southwards ... plunge into thicker forest, and climbing steadily soon reach a low pass, Tong-la. Wonderful! We have just this minute turned our backs on the Wi-chu and certainly it was flowing due south; yet here it is at our feet again, this time flowing north! Surely I must be dreaming!

An examination of the highly tilted rocks led Kingdon Ward to a conclusion that this extraordinary loop of the river was made up of fragments of two or three older rivers, which had been gradually forced into each other's embrace as the result of earth movement, or cutting back by head erosion.

I woke at dawn on 13 November and went out from Razun village so that I could at last take a full picture of **Mukong Xueshan**, the snow mountains. Kingdon Ward had also seen the peaks near the same place, though I regret that no pictures of 'Orbor', as he referred to Mukong Xueshan, are found in his book *Mystery Rivers of Tibet*. He wrote:

The sun was setting behind the twin crystal peaks of Orbor, and black cliffs crowded up one behind the other from Wi-chu to the Salween, their feet in the curdled mist, their heads amongst the brilliant stars. Darker and darker grew the shadows, the crimson faded from the sky, and indigo dusk curtained a scene of savage grandeur.

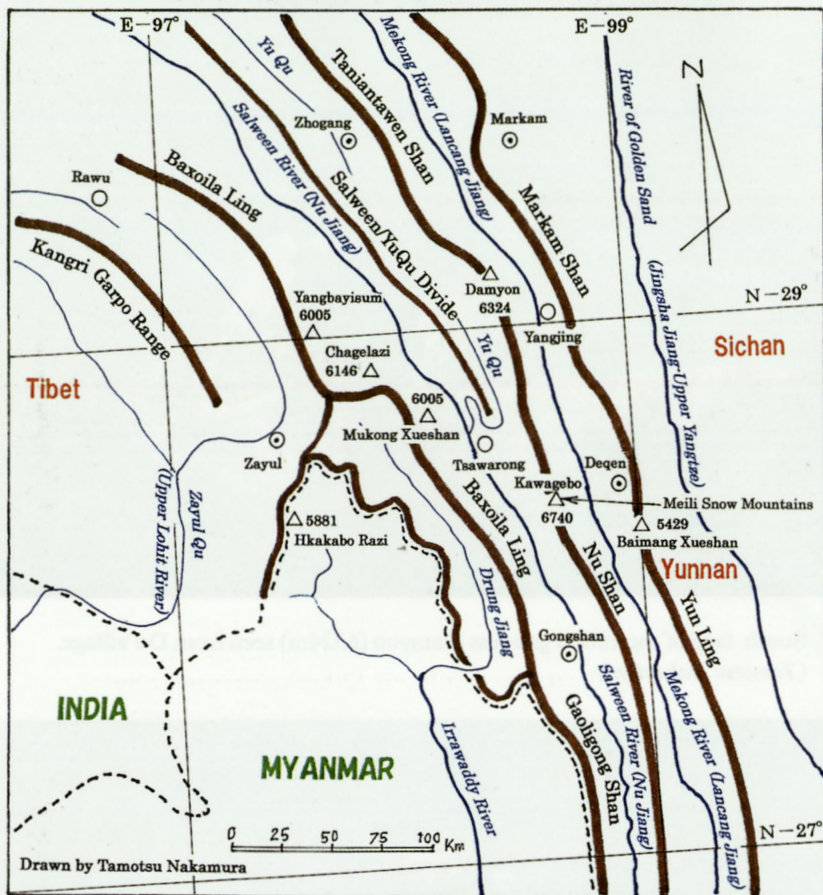


83. South face of mountain goddess Damyon (6324m) seen from Do village.
(*Tamotsu Nakamura*)



84. South face of c 5800m rock peak south-east of Damyon seen from Do Qu.
(*Tamotsu Nakamura*)

Deep Gorge Country – Mountain Ranges



Mukong Xueshan is a large mountain massif with sizeable glaciers. It has twin peaks, the north of 6006m and the south of 6000m. The north-east face looks magnificent, comprising precipitous walls of snow and ice.

It might not be exaggerating to say Mukong Xueshan had become one of my mountain obsessions. I had tried to view it several times before. There were two chances in autumn 1996 from the pilgrimage trail round Meili Snow Mountains, when I crossed a ridge of Yu Qu loop and later as I crossed the Xu La (4815m) on the Yu Qu-Mekong divide. In autumn 2003 as I traversed the Gorge Country from Zayu to Mekong, one late afternoon I hurried on our caravan to reach the Tsema La (4710m) on the Irawaddy-Salween divide, but thick clouds already hid the peaks. Two days later I expected to get a view from another high pass, the No La (4269m), and stayed there for more than two hours, but I could see only part of the south face of the main peak, which had a large glacier. Another chance came at Razun, but I only caught a glimpse of the summit for a second. Ninety per cent remained in the cloud.

In November 2007 the gods finally blessed me. I saw the main peak from Wobo village and a whole panorama of the north-east face appeared before me at Razun. The AC's email *Newsletter* of January 2008 included a paragraph on my visit to Gorge Country illustrated by photographs of Mukong Xueshan and Damyon.

Though the Meili Snow Mountains are now famous among tourists, few are aware of **Damyon** (6324m), which has long been worshipped by the local Tibetan and Nashi minorities as a sacred mountain. Damyon and Dungri Garpo (6090m) are located at the southern end of the Taniantawen range which is 50km long from south to north and has five unclimbed 6000m peaks. Kingdon Ward first saw Damyon from the east in 1911 and again in 1922 when he approached from Yangjing (2680m), a place of salt wells on the bank of the Mekong. He wrote of an 'abrupt climb from the Mekong gorge to the crest of the ridge, over 3,000 feet above the river' (*From China to Khamti Long*, Journey 1922). He went up a trail to the north-west and when this soon disappeared ascended scree and moraines to about 5500m, where he found dead glaciers that had supposedly retreated hundreds of years earlier. For my part, in 1998 I had a perfect view of the east face of the two massifs from Hong La (4200m) on the Mekong-Yangtze divide, but the south and west sides of Damyon remained quite unknown till 2007.

After two days of heavy snowfalls our 12-horse caravan departed from Do village (3350m) on 13 November to reconnoitre Damyon from the west. We ascended through primeval conifer forest along the Do Chu, a tributary of the Yu Qu, and camped at 3560m. The following day we reached a pasture at 4140m where yaks are grazed in summer. Above were lofty rock peaks of c5800m ranging south from the main peak of Damyon. In summer we would have found a fairy meadow.

According to an old villager, the west face of the main peak lies to the north of a small ridge running east-west. To reach this face one must cross a high pass (4850m) called Zeh La near the headwaters of the Do Qu beneath the south face. There is a lake called Uke Tso just north of the Zeh La and a muddy lake called Nacha Tso directly beneath the west face. Camping is possible at a pasture just north of Uke Tso. A trail passes northwards from Uke Tso to a pass of 4000m near Chaka where the Sichuan-Tibet Highway crosses the Mekong.

The old man also explained that each of the rock peaks ranging south from Damyon has its own name. From north to south, the names are Lamyon, Gonmyon, Nachamyon, Suzemyon and Kashonmyon. *Myon* means goddess and each has her own legend. More peaks named after the goddess sisters of Damyon extend to its north. We were fortunate to be able to photograph the whole of the south and west faces of Damyon, soaring to a blue sky, from Do village – the first time the challenging Damyon had been photographed from this southern aspect.



86. East face of 5770m peak in Geuzong massif on Salween–Yu Qu divide.
(*Tamotsu Nakamura*)



87. East face of 5841m peak in Geuzong massif on Salween–Yu Qu divide .
(*Tamotsu Nakamura*)



88. Caravan crossing a suspension bridge over the Yu Qu at Gebu village.
(*Tamotsu Nakamura*)



89. A farewell party with muleteers at Jomei; in the centre is Tom Nakamura.
(*Tamotsu Nakamura*)

After his reconnaissance of Damyon, Kingdon Ward entered Pitu crossing the Beda La (4542m) on the Yu Qu-Mekong divide. He described the scene thus:

If you travel north-westwards from Yakalo (Yangjing), you meet with snow peaks at every turn, growing ever more lofty. There is a perfect botanist's paradise in that mountainous and little-known country beyond the sources of the Irrawaddy.

(From China to Khamti Long)

In mid-November 1998, I crossed the Di La (4581m) adjacent to the Beda La to the north-west and saw the same panorama of the mountains as Kingdon Ward. One of the objectives of our 2007 journey was to gain information on the little-known mountains, notably the **Geuzong massif**, that lie between the Salween and Yu Qu. Less attention has been paid to this range as there are no peaks exceeding 6000m and only very small glaciers. A Russian 1:200 000 map denotes many 5300-5800m peaks ranging from north-west to south-east.

I tried to profile as many peaks as I could while marching up the Yu Qu. However the valley path was too close to the mountains to have good views. I could just manage to take pictures of Geuzong from near Do village on the way back after reconnoitring Damyon and the central massif from the Ge La 3960m between Bake and Meila villages. Photos of the northern massif were taken in 1998 on the way to a pass at 4000m west of Zayi.

Our quest finished in Jomei, where the muleteers from Jino and Do village held a farewell party for us – the first time this has happened for me during 17 years of travel 'East of the Himalaya'. We were deeply moved by the kindness and generosity of the people of the Tsawarong area.

Expedition members: Leader Tamotsu Nakamura (72), Tsuyoshi Nagai (75), Eiichirou Kasai (67), Tadao Shintani (64) and Ms Sonoe Sato (48). Interpreter Lu Weidong (58, Han), guide Shaohong Cheng (35, Tibetan).*

* Shaohong Cheng, whose Tibetan name is Gerong, is a guide from Degen who has travelled with me several times to Gorge Country since a circumnavigation of the Meili Snow Mountains in 1996. Cheng arranged everything for our journey and I proudly recommend him as the best and most reliable guide for trekking in the Hengduan Mountains.