

UIAA note:

This is a prototype draft of Tamotsu Nakamura's report on his Autumn 2007 expedition to the deep gorge country in southeast Tibet. It is used for the JAN, Alpine Journal (UK) and his book "East of the Himalaya - Alps of Tibet" which is to be published from Detjen-Verlag in Hamburg, Germany. Tamotsu Nakamura has very kindly let us publish this draft on the UIAA website.

TAMOTSU NAKAMURA

Return to Gorge County 2007 — A world of F. Kingdon-Ward

Prologue

“In spite of a chilly wind, I sat for some time gazing at this colossal chaos of mountains flashing in the sunlight, 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* Journey 1913)

My voyage of discovery to “East of the Himalaya – Alps of Tibet” was first triggered by enchanting narratives of Frank Kingdon-Ward on his travels to the remote Tibetan marches of the northwest Yunnan and southeast Tibet. A paradise for plant-hunters is also a land of attracting mountaineers where numerous unclimbed stunning peaks remain never trodden. Throughout the whole areas of East of the Himalaya we may count 255 unclimbed 6000m peaks on the map.

- (1) 200 peaks in Nyainqentangla East
- (2) 30 peaks in Kangri Garpo Range
- (3) 20 peaks in Deep Gorge Country of Hengduan Mountains
- (4) 5 peaks in Sichuan West Highland of Hengduan Mountains.

Among them the Deep Gorge Country has fascinating scenery of natural wonder. Tibetan plateau is now intersected and eroded by some of the longest rivers in Asia. These rivers changed this high plateau not merely into a land of steep mountains, but of deep valleys with gloomy shadows and forbidding gorges. It was a field of Frank Kingdon-Ward and I have been tracing his footsteps since 1990.

A wave of changes, however, is rushing very fast and dynamic in China. It reaches every corner of the isolated frontiers in west China. The Deep Gorge County which they call as “Three Rivers Parallel Streams” (Salween, Mekong and Yangtze) was registered to the world natural heritage of UNESCO in 2002. Taking advantages of **Shangri-La** of James Hilton’s “Lost Horizon”, the Chinese Government highlights the Meili Snow Mountains on Yunnan-Tibet border and Mekong River valley for the development of tourism. Nevertheless, there still remain many unfrequented and least-known mountains and valleys to attract an old explorer. I have the good fortune.

Seeking for new discovery

In autumn of 2007, I led an expedition of six members to the gorge country to revisit an isolated borderland of my particular interest and sentiment. The expedition was rather hard and uncomfortable.

1. Our original plan was to go up the Salween River (Nu Jiang) northwestwards from Tsawarong, but was refused by muleteers as the trails was too narrow and dangerous for pack animals to pass carrying the loads. We failed to organize a horse caravan heading to the heart of the upper Salween and we were forced to choose an alternative route along Yu Qu (Wi Chu), a tributary of the Salween, which I had already traced twice.

2. Extraordinary heavy snowfall came in mid November and high passes were closed. This also caused change of our plan to cross the two high passes of 4900m and 5300m. In addition all six members caught a serious cold being smoked in Tibetan houses where we stayed.

Nevertheless, we could bring back a satisfactory outcome to have unveiled two 6000m mountain massifs and 5700-5800m massif. These peaks are in the following mountain ranges.

(1) **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 Tibetan Autonomous Region and changes its name to Gaoligong Shan in Yunnan Province. There are three outstanding mountain massifs of Yangbayisum 6005m, Chagelazi 6146m and Mukong Xueshan 6005m (Xueshan means snowy mountains).

- (2) **Range on the Salween-Yu Qu Divide:** There are three massifs of Geuzong massif 5700-5800m peaks, central massif of 5700m peaks and northern massif of 5400-5600m peaks.
- (3) **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 rocky massifs of Damyon 6324m and Dungri Garpo 6090m with no eminent glaciers.

The Salween river (Nu Jiang) – Tsawarong

On November 6, 2007, we arrived at Ruiku a capital city of Nu Jiang Lisu Minority Autonomous Prefecture alongside the Salween River from an ancient city, Dali of Yunnan Province by three land-cruisers. The Salween grand canyon starts from Liuku northwards to the upper Salween. Scenery full of variety such as magnificent gorges, great bends, rope bridges, rapids and pools, beautiful forests-----friendly minority inhabitants with colourful costumes, their elevated floor houses and catholic churches, vegetations varying from sub-tropical zone to dry river beds would undoubtedly attract visitors' attention.

There is a paved road from Liuku to Bingzhonglou 40km north of a capital of Gongshan County and new vehicle track was opened 56km as a crow flies from Bingzhonglou to Tsawarong on the left bank of the Salween a couple of years ago. This new road construction forms is a part of the ambitious West Development Plan. It is connected to the Sichuan-Tibet Highway from the south passing through Tsawarong, the Deep Gorge Country, along the Salween and then its tributary, Yu Qu. On November 8, thanks to this new road, we could reach a town of administration centre of Tsawarong in six hours from Bingzhonglou, whilst an old path requires three to four days on foot.

Tsawarong is a warm and fertile land to Tibetan inhabitants who live in arid and cold high plateau and a place of remembrance of Kingdon-Ward. He loved people and culture of Tsawarong. He visited three times in 1911, 1913 and 1922. Tsawarong is a region to cover the current Tsawarong sub-county, neighbouring upper Salween area where a historical village of Mengkung is located and Yu Qu valley up to Zhogang county capital. Tsawarong is a warm and fertile land to Tibetan inhabitants who live in arid and cold high plateau, and it is said that Yu Qu is the most beautiful valley with pine tree forests in Eastern Tibet. In addition Yu Qu is a valley of pretty female as Kindon-Ward described too. People are hospitable. We were welcomed in Tibetan

houses where we lodged at Dino, Do, Bake and Meila villages en route of our caravan. They provided us with the best place for taking rest and sleeping in their houses.

Tswarong was a place of remembrance of Kingdon-Ward which he visited three times in 1911, 1913 and 1922. He loved people and culture of Tsawarong.

“To return to Tsa-wa-rong. I have asked myself why it that the men of Kam (Tibetan) are so highly civilised in this dour land, and the answer I found was, because they are great travellers; their horizon is unbound. They go far into China to trade, and far into Tibet to worship. They see other civilisations – China, India, even Burma, and other people; exchange goods with them, bring back new ideas. They go to Lhasa to pay homage to their pontiffs and visit their own holy places. They are a pastoral people who have settle down to an agricultural life without ever loosing their nomadic instinct.”(*The Mystery Rivers of Tibet*)

Itinerary of the journey

We flew from Kunming 1950m to an ancient city Dali 1900m on November 6 and returned to Kunming from Shangri-La 3280m (Zhongdian) by air on November 30. The temperature shown was as at 08:00am.

Moving by land-cruiser trough Salween canyon

6th: Cloudy 11°C Dali 1900m –(crossing Mekong) – Riuku 850m/Salween bank
 7th: Rain/cloudy 17°C Ruiku – Gongshan 1560m [Yunnan]
 8th: Cloudy/fine 10°C Gongshan – Longpu 1860 – Tsawarong 1950m [Tibet]

16 horses caravan along Yu Qu valley

9th: Rain/cloudy 11°C Organising 16 horses caravan at Tsawarong
 10th: Cloudy/fine 10°C Tsawarong – Tongdu La 3340m – Zaji 2360m
 11th: Cloudy/fine 7°C Zaji –(crossing Yu Qu) – Gebu 2460m – Wobo 2730m
 12th: Fine 5°C Wobo – Razun (Radoun) 2880m
 Perfect east face of Mukong Xuseshn was viewed.
 13th: Fine –1°C Razun – Tong La 3270m – (crossing Yu Qu) – Pitu 3060m
 14th: Fine/cloudy –2°C Pitu – (Only this portion is by a car) – Dino 3130m
 15-16th: Snowing –0°C Stay at Dino due to heavy snowfall

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

17th: Rain/cloudy 1°C Dino – (entering Do Qu) – Do 3350m
 18th: Fine 0°C Stay at Do Perfect west face of Damyon was viewed
 19th: Cloudy/fine 0°C Do – (Do Qu) – Camp site 3560m,

separates the Wi-chu from the valley of the Salween. Round the base of this bluff the river races; flowing on one side due south, on the other side due north. -----I went up towards the pass we had crossed the previous evening to get a glimpse of Orbor (Mukong Xueshan).” (*Mystery Rivers of Tibet*)

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

Before Kingdon-Ward, F. M. Bailey passed the Tong La in June, 1911, on his way from China to Assam. He described not in an emotional style “We climbed up to a pass, the Trong La, from which we could see snows to the south and southwest. Below the pass bears and goral (Indian antelope) are to be found. From the top of the pass we saw below us a stream flowing to the north. This turned out to be Drayul Chu, the river which we had just left the other side of the pass, where it had been going southwards. The river, as can be seen from the map, some extraordinary bends, and the Trong La is on a spur of these loops.” (*China-Tibet-Assam Journey 1911*, see Bailey’s route map)

Unveiling Mukong Xueshan

I waked up in the dawn of November 13, and went out from Razun village in the dark. I could at last take a full picture of veiled Mukong Xueshan (snow mountains). Kingdon-Ward had also seen the peaks near the same place. 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. -----I went up towards the pass we had crossed the previous evening to get a glimpse of Orbor (Mukong Xueshan)” (*Mystery Rivers of Tibet*) I regret that no pictures of Orbor are found on his book.

Kingdon-Ward called Orbor for Mukong Xueshan, which is a large mountain massif with sizeable glaciers. The north peak 6006m of the twin peaks is the main peak and the south peak is 6000m. The northeast faces look magnificent being guarded with precipitous walls of snow and ice.

It might be an exaggeration if I say that Mukong Xueshan were a mountain of my obsession. I tried to view this mountain twice. There were two chances from the pilgrimage trail round Meili Snow Mountains, when I crossed a ridge of Yu Qu loop and

then crossed the Xu La 4815m on the Yu Qu-Mekong Divide in autumn of 1996. The next was in autumn of 2003, when I traversed the gorge country from Zayu to Mekong. In late afternoon I hurriedly drove our caravan to reach and stand at a high pass Tsema La 4710m on the Irrawaddy-Salween Divide, but thick clouds already hid the peaks. Two days later I expected the view to the north from another high pass No La 4269m of a trail to Mengkung, Tsawarong. I stayed more than two hours at the pass, but I could see only a part the south face of the main peak 6005m which fostered a large glacier. There was another chance from Razun village, but only a glimpse of the summit was in sight for a second. 90% was in the cloud.

In November, 2007, Gods did not deserted but finally blessed me. I could have a look of the main peak from Wobo village and a whole panorama of the northeast face appeared in my front at Razun village.

The Alpine Club Email news January 2008 reported introducing pictures of Mukong Xueshan and Damyon massifs as follows.

“Our member Tom Nakamura has returned in December from another of his remarkable expedition – This one to the Deep Gorge Country between the Upper Salween and the Upper Mekong rivers (and near to Shangri-La). He has once more identified some stunning unclimbed peaks around 6,000 m for you to dream about and attempt (many thanks Tom for this and pictures). Attempt on these would be good candidates for the AC expedition grants mentioned above.”

Mountains of Goddess – Damyon

Meili Snow Mountains are now famous among tourists, whilst few draw an attention to Damyon, which has long been worshiped by local Tibetan and Nashi minority as a sacred mountain. Damyon and Dungri Garpo massifs being located in the southern end of the Taniantawen range has 50km long from south to north with five unclimbed 6000m peaks. Kingdon-Ward first saw Damyon from the east in 1911 and made an access from Yangjing 2680m, a place of salt wells, on the Mekong river bank in 1922. He wrote “It was 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 northwest. As the trail soon disappeared, he ascended scree and moraines to about 5500m, where he found dead glaciers supposedly having been retreated in hundreds years time. He returned from a glacial lake at about 5200m. For my part, I had a perfect view of the east face of the two massifs from Hong La 4200m on the Mekong-Yangtze Divide in 1998, but the south and west sides of Damyon have

remained quite unknown till 2007.

After extraordinary heavy snowfalls having continued two days, on November 13 our 12 horses caravan departed from Do village 3350m for reconnoitering Damyon from the west. We ascended primeval conifers forest along the Do Chu, a tributary of the Yu Qu and camped at 3560m. On the following day we reached a summer pasture for grazing yaks at 4140m. The snow-covered pasture was surrounded by outstanding lofty rock peaks of ca.5800m ranging to the south from Damyon main peak. If we had come in the summer, we would have found a fairyland. We returned from the pasture because of snow.

According to an old villager, the west face of the main peak is located in the northern side of a small ridge sharing watershed which ranges from east to west. To reach the west face of the main peak, we must cross a high pass 4850m called Zeh La near the headwaters of the Do Qu which is beneath the south face. There are a lake called Uke Tso just north of the Zeh La and a muddy lake called Nacha Tso directly beneath of the west face. There is a pasture just north of Uke Tso where camping is possible. A trail passes northwards from the Uke Tso to a pass of 4000m near Chaka where the Sichuan-Tibet Highway crosses the Mekong river.

The old man also explains that each rock peak ranging to the south from Damyon main peak 6324m has its own name. From north to south, the name of the rock peak 5800-5900m is Lamyon, Gonmyon, Nachamyon, Suzemyon and Kashonmyon. Myon means Goddess. The other Mountains of Goddess, sisters of Damyon, having own legend continue peak after peak to the north of Damyon.

We should say that it was very lucky for us to be able to take a picture of the whole view of the south and west faces of Damyon soaring to the blue sky seen from Do village. This would be the first photo of challenging Damyon taken from the south towards the north.

Geuzong massif – Salweem-Yu Qu Divide

“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* Journey 1922)

After reconnaissance of Damyon, Kingdon-Ward entered Pitu crossing Beda La 4542m on the Yu Qu-Mekong Divide. The above paragraph is a scene that he saw at Beda La. In mid November in 1998, I crossed Di La 4581m adjacent to Beda La to the northwest

and saw the same panorama of the mountains on the Yu Qu-Salween Divide as Kingdon-Ward wrote. Eric Teichman stood on the Di La in late December, 1918, but he did not describe anything about a view from the pass.

One of the objectives of our journey 2007 was to have as much information on the mountains range between Salween and Yu Qu as possible. This range is least-known and less attention is paid since there are no peaks exceeding 6000m and no glaciers are developed except for very small ones. Russian topo 1: 200,000 map tells us many 5300 – 5800m peaks ranging from northwest to southeast.

(1) Geuzong massif (5700-5800m): Opposite side of Jino to Do villages.

Many outstanding rock peaks in northern part

(2) Central massif (5300-5700m): Opposite side of Bake to Jomei villages.

Many lofty peaks

(3) Northern massif (5400-5600m): Opposite side of Zayi to north. Few attractive peaks

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

This part, a deeply eroded country of Southeast Tibet, is the most beautiful in the Yu Qu valley. The river flows in a narrow gorge between two snow-clad ranges of the Salween-Yu Qu and Yu Qu-Mekong Divides. When Eric Teichman traveled along Yu Qu southwards in mid December, he admired the landscape. He wrote:

“The scenery of this part of Tsawarong is exceedingly beautiful. From the summit of Do La there is a good view down the Yu Chu, which flows in a pine-clad valley between two snow-capped ranges on either side. An enormous massif is visible.-----From the Do La we descended to a group of firms called Di (Do village).”(*Travels of a Consular Officer in Eastern Tibet* Journey 1918) The Do La 4580m on an old trade path is now almost abandoned since a new trail and car road pass along the left river bank.

Epilogue

Our journey to quest unknown mountains was over in Jomei, where muleteers from Jino and Do village held a farewell party for us. Such occasion was the first time to me

during 17 years to have traveled through East of the Himalaya. We were deeply moved and felt a warm heat of the people of Tsawarong. In the Tibetan house at Jino, the family remembered my stay in 1998 and rendered the best services. At Meia village, I met an old man with whom I made an interview on the slavery system in Tibet nine years ago. Also in Pitu which was an old centre of Tsawarong in the Yu Qu valley, we met a rapid change taking place in a couple of years. Two new guest houses were constructed and main streets were rebuilt. Cars and motor bikes were gradually substituting pack animals for local transport. In Jomei we were invited to a primary school and welcomed there too by seven teachers and 150 pupils.

On November 26, we left Jomei by three land-cruisers for return journey. We went up the Yu Qu to Zhogang and then took a long route of the Sichuan-Tibet Highway to Batang, a historical town of west Sichuan. From Batang we drove down to south along the River of Golden Sand (Upper Yangtze) and safely arrived at Shangri-La of Yunnan, a terminal of our expedition on November 29. On the following day we flew to Kunming.

Finally I wish to thank two my old friends for their support for our expedition. Mr. Weidong Lu who joined us as an interpreter from Kunming and Mr. Shaohong Cheng, (Tibetan name: Gerong), a guide from Deqen who traveled with me several times to the gorge country since a circumnavigation of pilgrimages round Meili Snow Mountains in 1996. Mr. Cheng arranged everything for our journey. He is now reputed in Deqen, and I proudly recommend him as the best and most reliable guide for trekking in the Hengduan Mountains.

Expedition members: Hengduan Mountains Club

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Member – Tsuyoshi Nagai (75), Eiichirou Kasai (67), Tadao Shintani (64),

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Interpreter- Lu Weidong (58 Han)

Guide – Shaohong Cheng (35 Tibetan)