

*Masayuki Kitamura*

## DISCOVERY & FIRST DESCENT OF MEKONG HEADWATERS

### Quest for True Source and Rafting Down

By international geographic convention, the source of a river is the furthest source of water from the mouth of river, typically a spring or glacier. The agency of the country responsible for official surveys makes the final decision regarding geographic sources of rivers within its boundaries.(P. Winn)

The geographic source of the Mekong River (Langcang Jiang) was officially recognized by the Commission for Integrated Survey of Natural Resources of the Chinese Academy of Sciences in October 1999 as being located at an altitude of 5224 meters (17,135 feet) at the foot of the glacier that discharges into Lasagongma Creek on the north side of Guosongmuchu Mountain (5514m or 18,086ft), **94 41 44 E** longitude and **33 42 31 N** latitude. The actual survey was conducted in July 1999 by the team of the Chinese Academy of Sciences under the sponsorship of Dexiang Business Group of Tianjin.

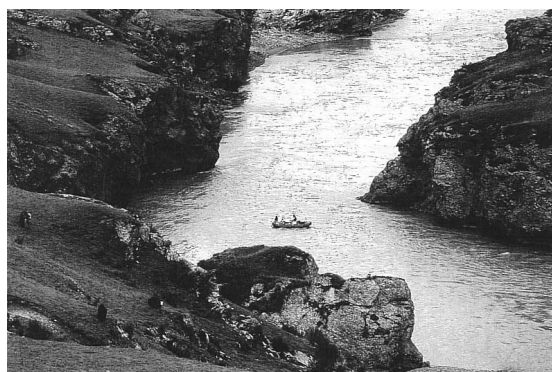
A special attention must be drawn, however, to the fact that the above geographic source had already been first discovered and reached by a Japan-China joint party on the 12th September 1994, then due to conflicts with another Chinese survey, the source was more precisely located by a Chinese team in 1999.



Pic.1 Mekong headwater (5160 m).

The first drops stream down from the glacier of Guosongmuchu Mountain(5514 m).

by The Exploration Club of Tokyo University of Agriculture



Pic.3 Rafting down the source of Mekong River near Zadoi, Qinghai Province.

by The Exploration Club of Tokyo University of Agriculture

### 1.A Brief History of Efforts to Locate the Source of the Mekong

Tibetans living in the Mekong Headwaters believe there are several spiritual sources to the Zaqu (Upper Mekong): Lungmug Spring (drains into the Zanaqu), Zanarigen Mountain (drains into both the Zanaqu and Zayaqu), and Zaxiqiwa Lake (drains into the Zayaqu). None of these are the geographic source.

In 1884, Dutreuil de Rhins and Fernand Grenard of France were the first Europeans to claim they had discovered the geographic source. They entered the Mekong drainage from the Yangtze headwaters at the pass above Lungmug Spring and declared it to be the source. This spring discharges into Zanaqu, a tributary to the Zaqu which drains from the west and is now known to be shorter than the Zayaqu, the headwaters tributary draining from the North.

In 1994, the Frenchman Michel Peissel claimed that springs below Rup-sa pass were the geographic source. The pass is between the Yangtze headwaters and the Mekong drainage that is further west than Lungmug Pass. These springs having been recorded as **93 52 56 E and 33 16 32 N** at 4975m also drain into the Zanaqu. The tacit approval and publicity of the Royal Geographical Society endorsed Peissel's discovery. ***The Geographical Journal, Vol. 161 Part 2, July 1995*** reported that the explorer – Tibetologist accompanied by Jaques Falck and Sebastian Guinness had reached and identified the principal source on the 17th September, 1994 at the head of the Rup-sa pass (4975m). However, the China Academy of Sciences did not accept and turned down Peissel's claim that "here we were recording for the first time the source of the third-largest river of Asia." (***The Last Barbarians – The Discovery of the Source of the Mekong in Tibet*** Henry Holt, NY 1997). It would be a matter of concern how the experts assess and appreciate the Peissel performance.

At the same time Peissel visited Rup-sa pass, a Japanese-Chinese team of the Exploration Club of Tokyo University of Agriculture (TUA) and the Chinese Academy of Sciences traveled to Guosongmuchu Mountain near the northeastern reaches of the Zayaqu. They chose this area for the source based on Chinese 1:100,000 scale topographical maps. The Japanese team was led by Junichi Nakanishi and Masayuki Kitamura of the TUA Exploration Club who recorded the source as **94 41 37 E and 33 42 41 N**, the point where Lasagongma Creek emerges from a glacier at the Guosongmuchu Mountain at 5160m.

In 1999, two teams visited the Mekong source with a view to confirm the location of the headwaters. The Dexiang team, representing the Commission for Integrated Survey of Natural Resources of the Chinese Academy of Sciences, went to Lasagongma and reported that the geographic source was located at **94 41 44 E** and **33 42 41 N**, elevation 5224m. This is only 360m upstream and 57m higher than the source identified by Kitamura. Between improvements in GPS technology and the likelihood of glacial retreat, the 1994 Japan-China party was most probably the first non-Tibetan group to reach and identify the true geographic source.

The Liu Shaochuang team, representing the Remote Sensing Office of the Chinese Academy of Sciences, went to the base at a glacier on Jifu Mountain. They claimed the geographic source was the point at which Gaodepu Creek discharged from the glacier – **94 41 12 E** and **33 45 35 N**, elevation 5552m – about 6km north of the source of Lasagongma Creek draining into Gaoshanxigu Creek which becomes Guoyonggu Creek at the confluence with Gaodepu Creek (Yeyonsongdou). It is felt, however, the Dexiang team's survey and research had more scientific basis.

In 1999, Masayuki Kitamura returned and completed the first descent of the Mekong Headwaters within Qinghai and down to Qamdo of East Tibet. The following is a summary of the expedition report published by The Exploration Club of TUA in the Japanese alpine magazine "Gakujin" No. 632, February 2000, translated into English by Tamotsu Nakamura

## **2.The First Descent of the Source of the Mekong River**

Descending 560km by a kayak and rafting boat in Tibet-Qinghai Plateau August to October 1999

**The Exploration Club of Tokyo University of Agriculture (TUA)**  
**The Chinese Academy of Sciences (CAS)**

The Japan-Sino Joint Expedition succeeded in the first descent of the source of the Mekong River from the headwater to Qamdo in the fall of 1999. It should be also noted that the American party of Earth Science Expedition led by Mr. Pete Winn navigated the same course upto Zadoi starting only one day later. The following is a summary of the record published by TUA for a Japanese alpine magazine "Gakujin" No. 632, February 2000.

### **3.Member of the Expedition**

Masayuki Kitamura (Leader, TUA, 30 years old)

Wu Jian-sheng (CAS)

Ryosuke Aoki (Sub-leader, TUA, 23)

Zhou Jun (The Institute of Tibet-Qinghai Plateau)

Kazunori Fujimori (TUA, Accounting, 37)

Alidari Bartle (Interpreter)

Aya Yamamoto (TUA, Food & medicals, 23)

Yosuke Uchida (TUA, Equipment, 21)

Takao Momoi (TUA, Navigation equipment, 21)

### **4.Itinerary and Highlights**

Aug. 19: Arrived at Xining.

Aug. 21 – 23: Move from Xining to Yushu (Jyekundo) by a bus.

Aug. 27: From Yushu to Zhidui (4235m) by a Beijing Jeep and a truck.

Aug. 28: From Zhidui to Zahe (4580m) by cars, a point where they originally planned to start the caravan.

Aug. 29: Return from Zahe to Zhidui by cars. As they could not hire yaks and horses at Zahe, they decided to come back to Yushu.

Aug. 30: From Zhidui to Yushu by cars.

Sep. 1: From Yushu to Zadoi (4100m) by cars. A reconnaissance party went towards Nangchen.

Sep. 4: From Zadoi to near Danrong (4000m) by 2 Beijing Jeeps and a truck where they made camping.

Sep. 5: From camp site to Moyun (4501m) by cars.

Sep. 7: Caravan started from Moyun to Tent Site 1(T.S.1). Support party went to Zadoi.

Sep. 8: The 2nd day of the caravan. They proceeded from T.S.1 to T.S.2 round a sacred mountain, Zanarigen, a legendary (spiritual) source of the Mekong.

Sep. 9: The 3rd day of the caravan. The rain fall that did not cease from the previous day stopped them at T.S.2.

Sep. 10: The 4th day of the caravan. Getting wet to the skin in a hailstorm and rain they moved from T.S.2 to T.S.3.

- Sep. 11: The 5th day of the caravan. The navigation party to descend the headwater advanced from T.S.3 to T.S.4, whilst the other party went to a confluence with Zayaqu.
- Sep. 12: The 6th day of the caravan. The navigation party advanced from T.S.4 to T.S. 5 (**Put-in** point). Meanwhile the other party was in stand-by.
- Sep.13: The two members of Kitamura and Uchida started the navigation by an inflatable canoe of 3 meter long. in the headwater from T.S.5 to T.S.6, a confluence with Zayaqu. Minus 5 at 7:00am. Water temperature was 1 . Cloudy and very cold. They went down 40km in ten hours.
- Sep. 14: They navigated from T.S.6 to T.S.7, a confluence with Zanaqu. The other party of Fujimori and Aoki joined and used a raft-boat. It was fine. Minus 3.4 in the morning. They received a message from the support party in Zadoi that the American professional party was coming for descending the same course.
- Sep. 15: Navigation from T.S.7 to T.S.8. They set up tents before the gorge and ascend a mountain in the vicinity for reconnaissance. But they were unable to have a view forward.
- Sep. 16: From T.S.8 to T.S.9. 2 in the morning. They passed through the rapids of a narrow gorge of Class VI. No good progress was gained due to a danger of falling rocks. A huge rock blocked the mid stream of the river of only 10 meters width. They made a portage of 300 meters.
- Sep. 17: From T.S.9 to T.S.10. They did running down of the rapids Class VI.
- Sep. 18: From T.S.10 to Zadoi. They were forced to make a portage using cars to bypass the rapids of "Red blood slope" of Class VI which were blocked with huge falling boulders to make the stream complicated. The rapids looked like a raging river of Japan after heavy rain falls. The members changed here.
- Sep. 19: They stayed at Zadoi for taking rest.
- Sep. 20: They commence again the navigation from Zadoi to T.S.11. The support party left for Nangchen.
- Sep. 21: From T.S.11 to T.S.12. Using horses they made a portage to avoid the rapids of Class VI which is difficult to steer a boat.
- Sep. 22: From T.S.12 to T.S.13. They navigated "Rubicon" that was considered the most hazardous point in the upper Mekong. The least information was available on this area. The name of place is "Where many monkeys live." They challenged and succeeded in rafting down through the formidable gorge as narrow as 10 meters width streaming between precipitous walls in the both banks. .
- Sep. 23: From T.S.13 to T.S.14. An information that there would be rapids on the way

made them careful. The navigation party ran down together with the support party cooperating each other.

Sep.24: From T.S.14 to T.S.15 via Nangchen. There is a dam at Nangchen. They made a portage to detour round the dam and procured foods, etc. at Nangchen.

Sep. 25: From T.S.15 to T.S.16. They made a portage to avoid the second largest falls in the upper Mekong that are called Jalarungga.

Sep. 26: From T.S.16 to T.S.17. They easily passed through the rapids of Class III – IV that locate in the downstream of the falls.

Sep. 27: From T.S. 17 to T.S.18. Autumn leaves were beautiful. They entered into Tibetan Autonomous Region. They were suddenly attacked by villagers and met a robbery at the camping site. They could make a narrow escape from the violent Tibetans, but it was a dreadful experience.

Sep. 28: From T.S.18 to T.S.19. They made running down of the 500m long rapids of Class IV – V. The public security joined them.

Sep. 29: They stayed at T.S.19. The public security police searched robbed items.

Sep. 30: At T.S.19. The public security came back. Almost all the items were recovered.

Oct. 1: From T.S.19 to Qamdo (3370m). The rapids of Class IV – V continued. They passed through the rapids being helped by an information of the support party. The navigation was completed here.

Oct. 2: They moved from Qamdo to the camping site at the river bank of a tributary of the Mekong by a Beijing Jeep and a truck.

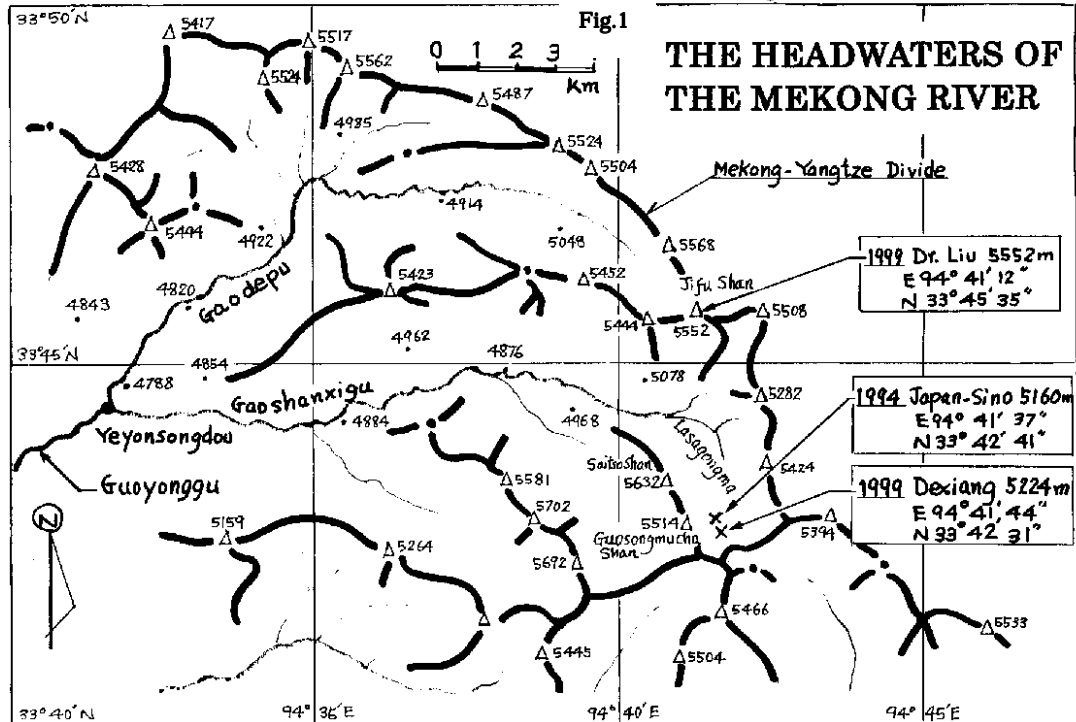
Oct. 3: From the camping site to Nangchen by cars.

Oct. 4: From Nangchen to Yushu by cars.

Oct. 5 – 7: From Yushu to Xining by a bus.

Oct. 9 – 10: From Xining to Beijing by a train.

Drawn by Tamotsu Nakamura



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