

Shigeru Kodama

QONG MUZTAG – RECONNAISSANCE & FIRST ASCENT

South of Taklamakan, West Kunlun

How enchanting and fascinating does it sound? “Kunlun” has long tempted the travelers to have all sense of adventure and ambition and even these days there still remained an untrodden and hardly accessible mountain in the remotest eastern end of West Kunlun, Xinjiang Province, China. That is Qong Muztag in the source of Keriya River. The Waseda University Alpine Club of Tokyo unveiled the mountain for the first time as foreigners since an approach by H.H.P. Deasy of Survey of India in 1898 and succeeded in the first ascent of Qong Muztag (6962m) on August 15, 2000.

The West Kunlun Mountains lie in the northwest of Tibetan Changtang Plateau. The total length from east to west is some 350km, and Yulungkax River in the western part separates the mountains to two latitudinal ranges – the North and the South ranges. The former is relatively dry and the latter is of unstable weather. Most of high peaks are covered with massive ice and snow fed to glaciers although there exists the only one peak to exceed 7000m. In the central part Keriya River flows down from south to north between the two ranges. Qong Muztagh, the second highest in the West Kunlun, soars in the eastern end of South range being encircled by the headwaters of Keriya River.

Peaks of the North range have an easy access from villages along Silk Road. Peaks in the western half of the South range may have also an access to take advantages of a military road to link Kashgar and Southwest Tibet via Karghalik. The highest peak (7176m) rises in this part and has no difficulty to approach. The conditions surrounding Qong Muztag are quite different as it locates far away from oasis villages at the northern foot of the range. In addition there is no road around the mountain.

Climbings in West Kunlun commenced in 1985 when a door was opened for foreigners to enter into the region. The highest peak was scaled by Tokyo University of Agriculture in 1986 and several minor peaks were climbed by Japanese parties. Qong Muztag far in the eastern end did not allow the foreign expeditions to challenge for a long time until the attempts by the Academic Alpine Club of Kyoto University (AACK) in 1985, 87 and 88. However, AACK could not have even a glimpse of the mountain profile and gave up further challenges.

The Waseda University Alpine Club of Tokyo launched intensively the pioneer

expeditions to Qong Muztag as a venture in commemoration of the 80th anniversary of the foundation. The club got a permit for climbing the mountain from the Xinjiang Mountaineering Association in March 1999. They took immediate steps to reconnoiter the least known mountain in May and September 1999 successively, and the climbing party was sent in the summer of 2000.

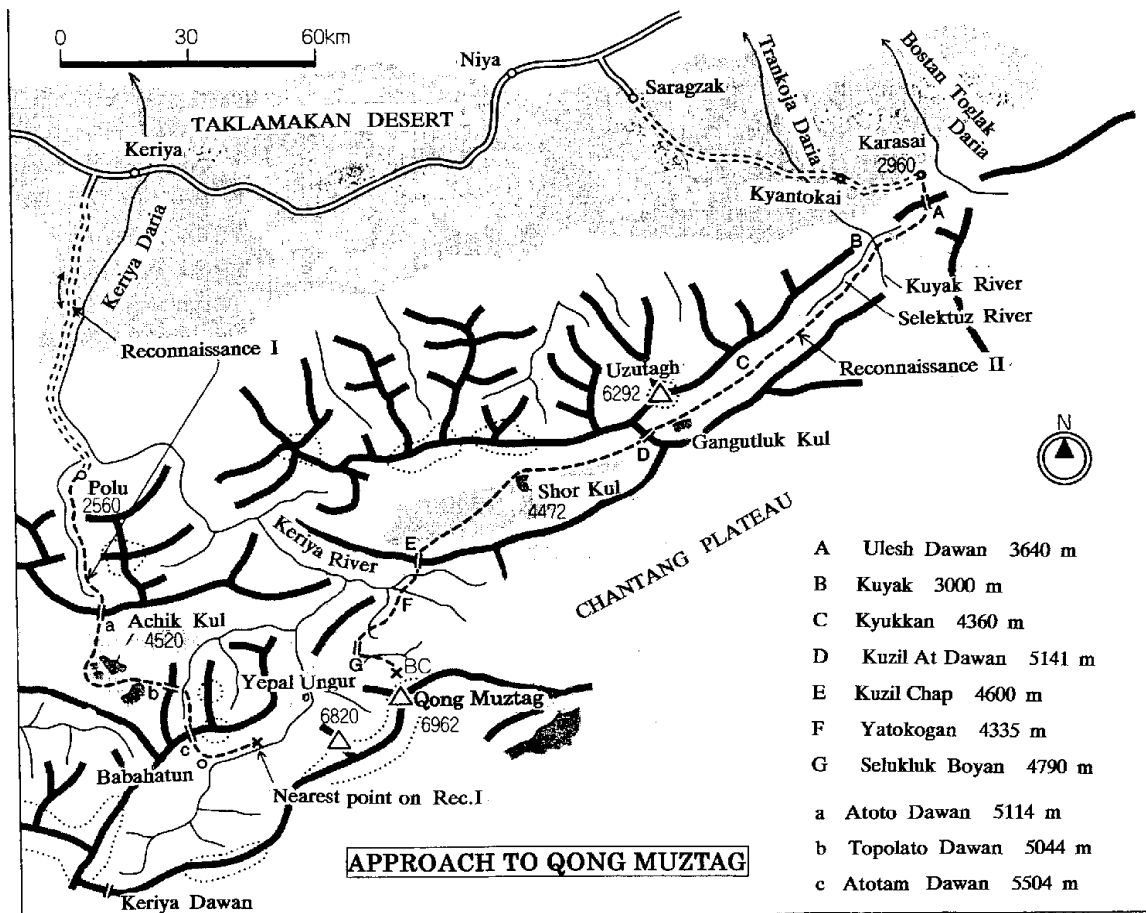


Fig.1 Approach to Qong Muztag (by Shigeru Kodama)

Reconnaissance I - May 1999

Two members of Hiroaki Kino and Hideki Inaba were dispatched. They chose an old trade path that connected East Turkestan and Ladak. Polu (2560m) was a starting point of their caravan. They left there and ascended a rough trail up the valley to the south as far as a high pass of 5114m that is drawn as Atoto Dawan in Deasy's map. From the pass they went down to large Achik Kul (4520m) basin named after one of the name of salty lake there at about 4500m. They marched forward through a barren and waterless desert, ascended again to two more passes and then descended down to graveled riverbed of the upper Keriya River. Having overcome such hardship and

difficulty as worse and cold weather and problems to handle donkeys, they reached a point 25km far from the mountain. However, they retreated from there since no further advance of the old trade path was felt possible.

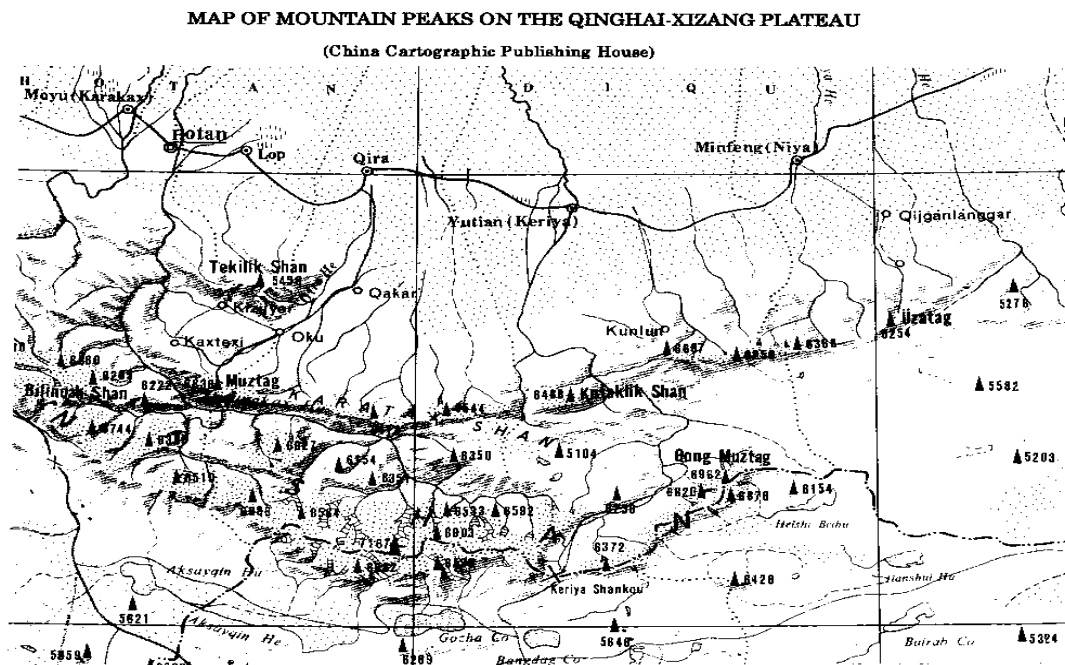


Fig.2 "Map of Mountain Peaks on the Qinghai-Xizang Plateau"

Compiled by the Chinese Research Institute of Surveying and
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Reconnaissance II - September 1999</

day the caravan crossed Kuyak River and entered into Selektuz valley, meaning of which was Yellow Straight valley that was representing an existence of the tectonic line. Massive volume of alluvial sediments having been cut apart by a narrow stream piled on the bottom of the valley. They entered into a deep gorge guarded with 100m high walls in the both sides. After ascending the steep cliff a wide view of blue sky and an expanse of pasture with many kinds of grasses came into sight. There were many burrows of marmots too.

The series of terraces continue up to 4000m, streams disappeared, and massive talus deposits and fluvio glacial deposits covered almost all the riverbed. The landscape changed to that of a cold desert. Sign of a living thing seemed very scarce. Perhaps only a few plants less than ten species grow there. Small shrubs belonging to family Chenopodiaceae, *Ceratoides compacta* – indigenous name is Yapkak is a principal plant in this area. A typical scene of the birds living in a habitat in desert of high altitude was observed. A flock of Snow Finches flew around sand dunes and solitary Redstarts rested on whitish gravel. They ascended a wide dry valley where glacial moraine formed a longitudinal parallel line. As they went up, the valley became a narrow basin between rolling hills where a “8” shaped lake accumulated ground water coming from the glaciers that covered the mountains in the vicinity. 200 to 300 Ruddy Shelducks were feeding themselves on the lakeside. They had flown from Siberia, stopped over here and then would headed to India. The local name of the lake is Gangutluk Kul that means the lake of many Ruddy Shelducks.

On the sixth day after departure they reached a desolate pass of 5141m that was the highest point throughout the route they traced. Shortly after having crossed the pass, appeared in front a large basin of 80km wide from east to west and 20km wide from north to south. They could have a view of a chain of brilliant white peaks in the right hand side. There was a salty lake in the center of the basin, named Shor Kul at 4500m. Fresh water sprang out from the north bank and formed a small stream flowing into the salty lake. Some kind of cushion plants and countless footmarks of ungulates, birds and a sort of *Feridae* (cat) dotted the field near the stream. They went ahead 25km on the sandy and graveled plain from Shor Kul, turned to the south, ascended toward the gap and crossed a corridor like a pass that the local people called Chap (4600m). The topography surrounding Chap area had undergone deformation. Flat-topped ridges are ranging to every direction.

From Chap area they descended to the Keriya River basin. For a short while they went along the easternmost tributary of Keriya River filled with gravel. A small stream again appeared near the confluence, Yatokogan (4335m) where three tributaries converged

together. Huge volumes of deposit made up a wide riverbed and formed the river terraces, which extended to the upper confluence. When they were moving to the left bank terrace, they saw a big Wild Yak running away on the opposite bank.

The landscape changed here from an arid one to a place influenced by glaciation and periglacial weathering. Till several hundred years ago the mass of ice had remained here. An average temperature got lower. When they took water from small streams in a wide tributary joining from the southwest, they noticed the water contained some fine soil and some flowering grasses that grew between the streams. It is assumed that a permafrost layer under the ground was the primary source of water supply, since there were only bare rocks around this valley nor glacier ice was developing in the neighboring mountains. In the upper part of the valley that was curved like an arch, gramineous grasses came out which fed ungulates and hare. Here was Selukluk Boyan (4790m) – yellowish nape – so called by a muleteer being named after color of the grasses. The watershed between east and southeast tributaries of Keriya River is widely open and flat as a plain. A small salty lake was there and a herd of Kulan (wild ass) were grazing around the lake.

At last a magnificent panorama of Qong Muztag came into view before them to the left direction. It was a really breathtaking moment after 8 days caravan from Karasai.



Pic.1 The highest peak of Qong Muztag (6962 m).

From "First Ascent of Qong Muztag (6962)" Waseda University Alpine Club, 2000

Captain Deasy had been here, but he could not see such panorama nor take photos due to bad weather. His mention in his book is; "Then we climbed the long ascent to Kumboyan, where, close to the head of the pass, we found antelope, abundance of grass and, by digging, a sufficiency of water. Descending the slope on the other side, we crossed a tiny tributary of the Keriya River system. A mere brook, quite shallow and less than ten feet broad. In crossing this stretch of country we had to contend with heavy rain and sleet, but now, at Yepal Ungur," (*In Tibet and Chinese Turkestan*, Page 176-77)

They descended to Keriya River and pitched tents on the windswept place – Sarkuchi. They could see the great Keriya River depression and alluring white mountains. The

following two days were spent for reconnaissance into the untouched area.

The meaning of Qong Muztag is “ice covered great mountains” in Turkish/Uigurish. The main peak of the mountains is the highest 6962m peak – a rock peak with ice and snow. To the west the main peak links to the twin peaks of 6740m and to the east the main peak links to 6845m beyond a big gap and further stretching to the second highest peak of 6942m. A viable climbing route to the main peak would presumably be the north ridge with heavy snow. The north face and the north glacier must be avoided because of the danger of crevasses and avalanches. Qong Muztag is surrounded by huge volumes of glacial moraine that heaps up old and new deposits. The foothill of the mountains is a heavenly place for wild animals, in particular, for ungulates such as Chirus, Wild Yak, Picas and carnivores. The base camp can be set up among the moraines.

First Ascent – July to August 2000

The climbing expedition led by Shin Yamada (55) was sent in the summer of 2000. The party was composed of 13 members including 5 university students and 2 TV crews. The approach and climbing record are summarized as under:-

July 18: The main party left Japan. (The advance party departed on July 11.)

- “ 21: Move from Hotan to Niya.
- “ 22: Move from Niya to Kyantokai. The rising of water as a result of heavy rainfall having continued for a week had them take a time to ford rivers and streams.
- “ 23: They started the 220km approach march from Kyantokai (just before Karasai) to the Base Camp (4850m). The caravan consisted of 90 donkeys, 61 for baggage and 29 for riding, 17 muleteers and the party members. 12 days were needed to reach Base Camp from Kyantokai having crossed the desert of high altitude. Rainy weather affected adversely the progress of the caravan. The rushing torrents of rivers retarded them and let them wait for 2 days on the river bank.

Aug. 3: Base Camp was set up at the northern foot of Qong Muztag.

- “ 5: Advance Base Camp was set up at 5200m. Donkeys carried the baggage to this camp.
- “ 9: C1 was pitched at 5900m on the north ridge.
- “ 12: C2 was pitched at 6400m on the north ridge. The north ridge was broad and covered with deep snow.
- “ 15: The first ascent of Qong Muztag was accomplished. Yamada wrote:-

The first assaulting party of Eiho Otani (53), Hiroaki Kino (37) and Yasushi Tanahashi

(37) left C2 for the summit. They fixed ropes for several pitches on the steep Snow Dome (6650m) to avoid the danger of avalanches. Unstable weather often made them stop going forward. Snowstorm shut the visibility. They reached the lowest col in rock ridge at 12:00 when it began to snow fiercely. They stayed there for 2 hours waiting for clear view. They resumed climbing at 14:00. They tackled the most difficult part to climb. They took a route along the contact line of rock ridge with cornices and steep snow slope where they fixed 50m rope. The final leg to the summit was steep snow slope too. At 15:30 they stood on the top. However the weather was not improved. At 19:00 Otani decided to bivouac beside the large rock on the saddle between the summit and the junction peak extending to the west peak of 6740m. They returned to C2 at 10:30 on the following day.

Aug. 18: Yamada and Inaba moved from Base Camp to C2 for the second ascent and 4 members including 2 students came to C1 for targeting the west peak. Bad weather continued.

“ 20: The both parties retreated from the Snow Dome as the weather was getting worse and visibility deteriorated. They decided to terminate the climbing.

“ 23: The caravan left Base Camp for return way. “ 29: They came back to Karasai.



Pic.2 A panoramic view of Qong Muztag (6962 m) massif from the upper Keriya basin.
From "First Ascent of Qong Muztag (6962)" Waseda University Alpine Club, 2000

