

TO THE ALPS OF TIBET

Quest for Veiled Mountains in Nyaiqentanglha East

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“Today the map has no more secrets.” Idle minds repeat that parrot phrase. But who knows all Tibet, or its far-away frontier on western China? Even its own prayer muttering tribes know only bleak, wind swept valleys.

National Geographic Magazine, February 1930

An explorer-plant hunter, Joseph F. Rock so described the area on an expedition to the Amnyi Machen Range on the China-Tibet borderland. Three-quarters of a century rewrote Chinese history. The current of reform transformed Tibet too. The open-door policy launched by Deng Xiao-ping has enabled foreign climbers to visit the greater ranges in Tibet since 1980. However, there still exist veiled and little known mountains In East and Southeast of Tibet. One of these is Nyainqentanglha East of Eastern Tibet, the last field remaining unexplored in China which will no doubt invite climbers' attention in the near future. I travelled to the region twice in May to June and October to November 2001.

Straight after coming back home from Tibet in mid November, I e-mailed the photos to Mr. Christian Beckwith, AAJ Editor. He kindly commented by return “Mr. Nakamura, I am incredibly impressed. I expect the world's exploratory climbers will be in your debt again.” The journey of three elderly members in the fall of 2001 was to their entire satisfaction thanks to fine weather and good fortune.

Mountains and Glaciers

If you fly over from Chengdu to Lhasa on a fine morning, your eyes will be glued to magnificent snow peaks with large glaciers - “giant white dragons” - appearing one after the other. Nyainqentanglha is a huge mountain range 750km in length overall, extending from west to east in between latitude 30 ° N and 31 ° N. The westernmost end is a massif of four 7000m peaks south of the Tibetan sacred lake, Nam Tso, while the easternmost end extends to Rawu that is to the east of Tsangpo Great Bend. The mountain range is divided into two parts, West and East, near Lhari.

1. Nyainqentanglha West

The western part of the range forms a part of the high altitude Qinghai-Tibetan Plateau.

Tohoku University of Japan made the first ascent of the highest peak, Nyainqentanglha (7162m) in 1986. All of the other 7000m peaks had already been climbed. Glacier development is concentrated only in the vicinity of the mountain tops. Snow lines are as high as 5700m.

2. Nyainqentanglha East

The eastern part of the range is located on the southeastern rim of Qinghai-Tibetan Plateau. The upper tributaries of Yalung Tsangpo erode the plateau into deep valleys like seams. The topography becomes complicated. The climate is humid and brings much snowfall, which develops glaciers, makes enchanting snow peaks and grows beautiful conifer forests. The highest peak on the main range is Sepu Kangri (6956m) that was challenged by the British party of Chris Bonington and Charles Clarke three times in 1996, 97, 98 successively. They reached very close to the summit in 1998. (*TIBET'S SECRET MOUNTAIN, The Triumph of Sepu Kangri*, 1999)

From the point of view of a water drainage system, the main range of Nyainqentanglha East forms the watershed between Yalung Tsangpo and Salween River (Nu Jiang). There are the upper Salween in the north and two tributaries of Yalung Tsangpo, Yigong Tsangpo and Parlung Tsangpo in the south. Countless peaks exceeding 6000m exist still untouched. Almost all except for Sepu Kangri massif are veiled and unvisited till today. Glaciers are well developed. One of them, Qiaqing Glacier, which is the largest one in the mountain range, has a length of 35km. The glaciers are summarized below.

The sub-range that separates from the main range near Lhari to the east in the south of Yigong Tsangpo is to be included in Nyainqentanglha East. Here are many fascinating lofty snow peaks too. Mountains and valleys that surround a scenic and historical spot with a lamasery, and Basong Lake of turquoise blue bring to mind the European Alps. I call them "The Alps of Tibet". The highest peak, Nenang (6870m) is guarded by a precipitous snow face and a treacherous ridge. The breathtaking pyramid, Jajacho (or Kajaqiao 6447m) soaring into the sky is most impressive, and many other alluring peaks are awaiting climbers.

A Japanese party from Nagano went twice in 1994 and 2000, but no outcome to be noted has been reported. In 1999 a New Zealand party led by John Nankervis challenged two peaks to the east of Basong Lake (New Zealand Alpine Journal 2000).

According to "An Introduction to Glaciers in China"(Langzhou Glaciers Research

Institute, Chinese Academy of Science, Beijing 1988), there are 2,905 glaciers in the Nyainqentanglha Range, of which the total area amounts to 5898k m² covering approx. 7% of the total area of the mountain range. If 1638k m² of the adjacent Kangri Garpo is added, the total area of glaciers becomes 7536k m² which ranks fourth among 12 glaciated regions in China. The total area is 1.7 times as large as that of the European Alps. Glaciers in Nyainqentanglha East are of an oceanic type and exceed those of West in terms of the number and area as well. They are concentrated in Yigong Tsangpo and Parlung Tsangpo that flow into Tsangpo Great Bend. The glaciers in the 200km between Lhari and Qingdo account for 30% of the total glacier area of the range.

Main Glaciers of Nyainqentanglha Range

Name of Glacier	Glacier End	Main Peak	Snow Line	Length	Area	GL. End Height
	E - N	(m)	(m)	(km)	(k m ²)	(m)
<u>West</u>						
Xibu	90 ° 36'E – 30 ° 23'N	7162	5717	12.7	18.3	5072
<u>East</u>						
Qiaqing	94 ° 50'E – 30 ° 23'N	6356	4510	35.0	151.5	2530
Jiangpu	94 ° 33'E – 30 ° 26'N	6382	4495	21.0	132.7	3160
Zepu	95 ° 15'E – 30 ° 17'N	6349	4683	19.2	65.8	3420
Nalong	94 ° 57'E – 30 ° 30'N	6132	4732	18.0	95.0	3580
Jiabiegong	94 ° 58'E – 30 ° 28'N	6349	4553	15.0	46.6	3076
Maguolong	95 ° 06'E – 30 ° 29'N	6252	5000	14.0	58.2	4060
Daoge	94 ° 33'E – 30 ° 25'N	6000	4816	14.0	63.3	3950
Aigagong	93 ° 37'E – 30 ° 23'N	6620	4929	13.0	46.0	3800
Ruoguo	94 ° 45'E – 30 ° 32'N	6026	4715	14.0	47.2	3630
Gongpu	94 ° 44'E – 30 ° 21'N	5900	4221	12.0	30.1	2700

Distribution of Current Glaciers in China

No.	Mountain Range	Snow line	Nos. of glacier	Area of Glacier	Volume of ice
		(m)		(k m ²)	(km ³)
1.	Altay Shan	2800 – 3350	416	293.20	16.49
2.	Tianshan	3600 – 4300	8,908	9,195.98	1,010.67
3.	Qilian Shan	4400 – 5400	2,859	1,972.50	95.44
4.	Kun Lun Shan	4500 – 6000	7,774	12,482.20	1,302.08
5.	Pamir	4200 – 5900	2,112	2,992.85	248.73

6.	Karakoram	5000 – 5600	1,848	4,647.17	604.49
7.	Chang Tang Plateau	5100 – 6200	1,821	3,108.81	263.01
8.	Tanglha Shan	5400 – 5700	936	2,082.00	62.00
9.	Gangdise Shan	5800 – 6000	3,099	1,667.75	50.32
10.	Nyainqentanglha	4600 – 5600	2,966	7,536.00	377.00
11.	Hengduan Shan	4600 – 5500	1,680	1,617.62	106.99
12.	Himalaya	4300 – 6200		11,055.00	995.00
	TOTAL			58,651.00	5,132.22

Note: **Nyainqentanglha** includes glaciers of Kangri Garpo.

Journey in October – November, 2001

With the objective of preliminary reconnaissance, we planned our trekking in two stages. The party of three elderly members (67, 68, 69), T. Nakamura, T. Nagai and M. Kasugai, and Shaohong Zhang entered into the valley to the north of Basong Lake, and then traced F. Kingdon-Ward's footsteps of 1924 from the lake, crossing a high pass of 5200m down to Lhari.

As soon as we arrived at a rest house in a resort place on the south bank of Basong Lake on October 21, 2001 we inquired "Where is Namla Karpo?" On the following day, we put the same question to villagers of Juba, the starting point for our caravan northwards. However, we could not hear the said name of mountain, in place of which they replied "Jieqinnalagabu". Kingdon-Ward mentioned "The Pasum lake occupies a long narrow ice-worn valley between steep mountains. Toward the head are several snow-peaks, the most conspicuous of which is Namla Karpo" (*THE RIDDLE OF THE TSANGPO GORGE*, 1926). ANZ party reported in the NZAC journal that they had attempted Namla Karpo. But we presume, as far as we know, that their Namla Karpo must be Jieqinnalagabu (6316m), which name is employed in *IMMORTAL MOUNTAINS IN THE SNOW REGION* (China Mountaineering Association and Mountaineering Association of Tibet Autonomous Region of China, Tibet People's Printing House, 1995).

The mountains surrounding Basong Lake are in the Gongpo region of Tibet. The Gongpo is known for its King Gesar, tales of poisoning strangers and large circular forts built as stone towers (defense towers) used for protection against invaders. The towers are not so high as those of West Sichuan. Local people advised us to be careful about poisoning while we were trekking.

On the 24th we departed from Juba in a caravan of eight horses with four muleteers. The first stage was to follow the main valley to the north of Basong Lake and search the headwaters of the valley to the west where several high peaks over 6500m with prominent glaciers are concentrated. We passed by Zhonggo village at the northern end of the lake and entered into the valley to the north. We were stationed in Tsongba village.

On the 25th we proceeded up the valley to Lamayalung, summer camp for pasturage via Tsala village. The autumn weather was fine, the air was clear. It was really enjoyable. As we progressed, absolutely stunning 6000m snow peaks were unveiled and came into sight one after another in all directions. The horse riding was quite comfortable. On the next day we continued up the valley toward the headwaters, but we failed to reach its glacier end as trails were suddenly lost. We only had a view of Jiongmudazhi 6582m. On the 28th we returned to Juba and on the 29th moved to Jula to the northwest for the second stage to trace an old trade path to Lhari.

In Jula, Kingdon-Ward's Drukla, now a center of the sub-district of Gongpo-Gyamda County we gathered information on the highest peak, Nenang 6870m in the north, and the road to Lhari. On the 30th Kasugai left Jula for the return journey whilst Nakamura and Nagai went up the valley to the north to reconnoiter Nenang, but we were forced to abandon our jeep on the way as it ran onto a rock and the vehicle was too badly damaged to continue. Nenang would seemingly be the most challenging and formidable peak amongst all the others. A roadway has been newly opened some 40km from Jula to Punkar up the Jula stream to the northwest and then northward. This is a part of the old trade route.

On October 31 we departed from Jula to Punkar by a strong 6 wheel-drive truck which was being used for timber transport. It took six hours to cover 40km. It was quite lucky for us that we chose a powerful vehicle with a driver who had years of experience. The last half of the road through forested valley was the worst and if we had used an off-road car such as a Pajero or Land-Cruiser, we would never have got to Punkar. We lodged in a house of Tibetan farmers, who warmly welcomed us and arranged to organize our caravan. Punkar is the last village up this valley and the people are friendly. Donations of medicines to the villagers definitely worked in our favor. Each family has many children, four to five on average. They flocked in force to meet us as if a visit by strangers was a rare event. Punkar village has a population of 230 people belonging to 34 different

families.

To the east of Punkar there are a couple of magnificent snow peaks of 6500m with glaciers of considerable magnitude. One of these is Chauchepo 6552m which resembles a beautiful peak on South Georgia Island near Antarctica. The mountains range eastwards up to Nenang which is the highest in the area. In the southeast the massive ice and snow giant of Birutaso 6691m rises close to the village.

On November 2 we left Punkar in a caravan of eight horses and five muleteers. We would say the weather was stable as we had sunshine almost every day, although it could change quickly in a day. We crossed over a small ridge behind the village to avoid a deep gorge of the main stream of the valley to Keng La pass. We forded the stream twice and marched up the valley northwestwards. The upper part of the valley was glaciated. We passed numerous hanging valleys. A muleteer pointed out a branch valley leading over Lachen La pass to Yigong Tsangpo. We camped at the junction.

On the 3rd we continued up the valley to the headwaters at the foot of Keng La pass 5200m, and on the 4th we left camp during a snowfall and ascended to the pass. From the pass we could see the sharp-pointed tower of an unnamed peak 6203m to the east that was just emerging from the mist. From a hill 70m above the pass, we also had a view of several blunt-nosed glaciers flowing from Nepa 6131m toward the valley, which runs northwards. The landscape changes from forest country to arid high plateau. To the north of the pass, barren scree and moraines spread in all directions. Not a bush or an undershrub remained as far as the eye could see. Now we entered into a colder and harsh land with Yak dung for fuel, and turf, and flowers, but scarcely a stick of wood. Kingdon-Ward wrote that a dwarf prickly blue poppy, bearing many blooms (*meconopsis horridula*) was abundant on the moraines in the summer.

Having crossed the pass, we descended hundreds of meters and joined the main old trade road near a small village at the junction. We went further down the main road and halted for the night. On the 5th we marched along the southern bank of a lake, Atsa Tso and safely arrived at the new Lhari, a new center of administration and economy of Lhari County. The new Lhari (or Chali) was built on the site of Asta village in 1988.

On the 6th we enjoyed an excursion to Banda La 5300m. On the way we had a view of unbelievably fascinating Jajacho (or Kajaqiao) 6447m, a little way to the east, the complete shape of a pyramid soaring into the blue sky. The mountain was blessing the success of our journey. On the following day we left the forbidden land for Lhasa with a feeling of entire satisfaction.



Jiomgmodazhi, 6582m south face near the headwaters
of the valley to the north from Zhonggo village (Tamotsu Nakamura)



Unnamed 6180m north face, southwest of Lamayalung village
(Tamotsu Nakamura)



Neuzang 6870m, the highest peak in the massif, north of Juba (Tamotsu Nakamura)



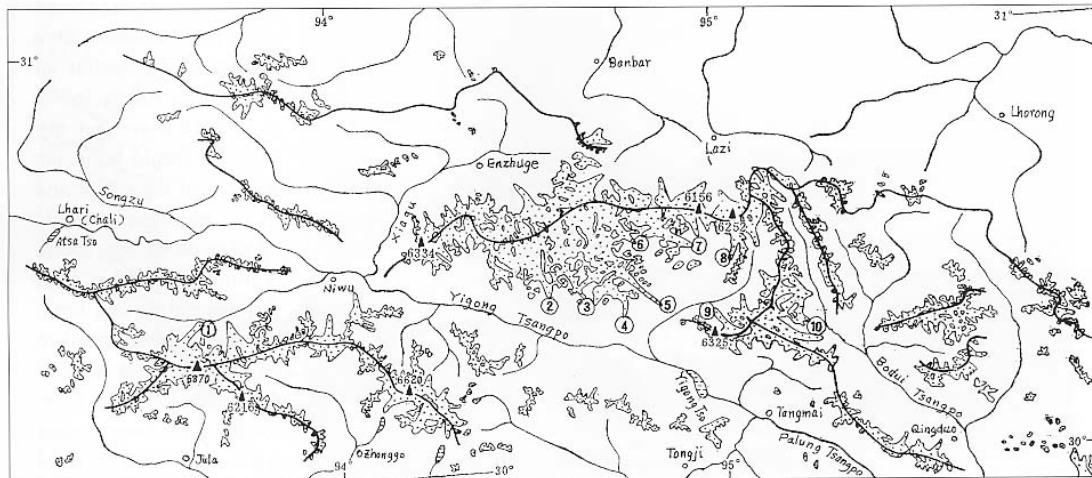
Soamareze 6132m to the north of the Lake Basong (Tamotsu Nakamura)



Chauchepo 6552m in the headwaters of the valley to the east of Punkar village (Tamotsu Nakamura)



Lumboganzegabo 6620m to the northeast of Lake Basong (Tamotsu Nakamura)



Nyaiqentanglha East: Main Glaciers between Lhari & Qingduo

1. Aigagong 2. Jiangpu 3. Daoge 4. Gongpu 5. Qiaqing 6. Ruoguo 7. Nalong 8. Maguolong 9. Qiabiegong 10. Zepu