

# **New Zealand Nyambo Konka Expedition 2009 (MEF reference 09/19)**

## **Post-expedition report**

- Attempt on the east face of Nyambo Konka (6114m), Daxue Shan Range, Sichuan province, China, and
- Ascent of an unknown peak (~5020m) near the villages of Gouza and Bi'a Ba in the Qionglai Range, Sichuan Province, China, during April and May 2009



Nyambo Konka – photo Lydia Bradey

## Expedition Members

Penny Goddard (NZ)  
Lydia Bradey (NZ)  
Mark Jenkins (USA)  
Kenny Gasch (USA)  
Zheng Ling Cheng (Lenny) – liaison officer and cook  
Cheetah Dorje - liaison officer, Ganzi Tibetan Autonomous Province  
Joey – interpreter and guide

## Acknowledgements

Without the generous support of the following organisations, the expedition could not have taken place. The expedition is extremely grateful to all supporters.

### Principal Supporters



SPARC New Zealand



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New Zealand Alpine Club

Others who kindly supported us include: the students of Sichuan Agricultural University in Ya'an: Jasmine, Lily, Roger, Joey, XiaoXiao, the foreign teachers: Jim and Jinny Batterson, Jim, Lawrence, Pierre and DiaOu, Backcountry Cuisine, Marmot, Tim Barry, Monique Bolweg, Abel Roche, Outside Sports Queenstown, and countless Tibetan and Chinese people who gave us tea, food, shelter, advice and transportation.

The compilers of this report and the members of the expedition agree that any or all of this report may be copied for the purposes of private research.

## Trip itinerary

**April 22:** Team arrives at Holly's Hostel, Chengdu, in the evening.

**April 23:** Team meets with the Liaison Officer, organises transport to T'sau Ku for the following day, and shops for food and fuel.

**April 24:** Travel by private vehicle to T'sau Ku (an 11 1/2 hour journey). Meet Tibetan Liaison Officer.

**April 25:** Further shopping for fresh food and fuel in T'sau Ku. Travel by private vehicle to the road end (45 minutes). Walk to a Tibetan camp (3455m) (re-named Caterpillar Camp; two hours) carrying loads and using motorbikes to carry further loads.

**April 26:** Reconnaissance and load carrying up Bawangou Valley to find a Base Camp location. Kenny and Penny sleep here. Mark and Lydia return to Caterpillar Camp.

**April 27:** Kenny and Penny walk down to Caterpillar Camp. Problems with Liaison Officer and the location of Base Camp, eventually resolved enough to continue the expedition. Load carrying to Base Camp (4010m) (re-named Sunshine Camp). Use porters to carry additional loads. All sleep at Sunshine Camp.

**April 28:** Load carrying and reconnaissance to 5000m below the east side of Nyambo Konka (all). Sleep at Sunshine Camp.

**April 29:** All move up to a new camp (4850m), named Cirque Camp. More reconnaissance and team decision on a route.

**April 30:** Lydia and Mark leave on a reconnaissance of the route, carrying a tent and enough equipment to allow them to push to the summit if conditions allow. Kenny and Penny prepare to ascend the following day from Cirque Camp. Lydia and Mark reach the summit ridge at 5800m after 8 1/2 hours of mixed climbing and realise the route to the summit is impassable. They signal the others and descend to a camp at 5380m.

**May 1:** A snow storm arrives. Lydia and Mark elect to abandon their camp in the early hours of the morning, in order to descend lightly and quickly through the difficult terrain below, before conditions become too dangerous. Lydia and Kenny descend to the valley with loads and sleep at Caterpillar Camp. Penny and Mark stay at Cirque Camp with the aim of climbing up the following day to retrieve the abandoned camp.

**May 2:** A very heavy snow storm sets in. Once again, Mark and Penny elect to descend out of the way of rising avalanche danger, this time in the middle of the night, with loads. The high camp (5380m) is considered too dangerous to reach and is abandoned. Penny and Mark sleep at Sunshine Camp (which is damaged by snow) and descend to Caterpillar Camp with loads.

**May 3:** Kenny, Mark and Lydia return to Sunshine Camp to retrieve the camp and equipment. Penny organises all the equipment at Caterpillar Camp for transport out by horse. The team walks out to the road end and takes a private vehicle to T'sau Ku.

**May 4:** The team terminates its employment of the Liaison Officer and travels to new destinations – Kenny to Chengdu, and Lydia, Mark and Penny to Ya'an.

**May 5 – 8:** Rest, recuperation, research and planning our next climb (Lydia and Penny only; Mark is also in Ya'an but has also left the expedition, and is working as a writer, researching a local story).

**May 9:** Penny and Lydia encounter some difficulties with unofficial travel restrictions for foreigners but eventually travel by bus to Gouza with Joey, a local English-speaking

student, who we have employed as a translator to guide us to an obscure village at a road end. Joey's surname is unknown in an English script.

**May 10:** Penny and Lydia travel by private car to a last village (name unknown) after first being misdirected up a steep hill to a different village. Begin walking up valley, carrying very heavy loads (3 hours) and stay in a local Tibetan house.

**May 11:** We employ a porter to help carry our loads to a camp by a lake at about 3400m. Joey leaves to travel back towards Chengdu. Penny and Lydia make a reconnaissance of the upper part of the valley, and decide on a climbing objective.

**May 12:** Lydia and Penny haul packs up to a high camp at about 4200m and sleep there.

**May 13:** Summit day. We climb for about five hours up steep rocky terrain to reach the summit (~5020m, name unknown, probable first ascent) around midday. We descend to our high camp.

**May 14:** We descend to a Tibetan stone village/camp and spend the night there.

**May 15:** We walk out to the road end and are offered motorbike rides to meet a mini-van. We arrive in Gouza that night.

**May 16:** Travel by bus back to Ya'an.

**May 17-19:** Rest, recovery, thanking all our helpful support people in Ya'an, report writing.

**May 20:** Travel to Chengdu.

**May 21:** Penny departs China.

**May 22:** Lydia departs China.



View of Tai Shan from Cirque Camp on the east face of Nyambo Konka. Bawangou valley (approach) below.

Photo Penny Goddard

# **Climbs and exploration in the mountains West of Chengdu**

## **Nyambo Konka (6114m)**

Route attempted: East Face from the Bawangou valley.

Climbing activity in the Daxue Shan range in western China and east of the Himalaya has been well documented by T. Nakamura and others. The region has seen increased activity in recent years since the first ascent of Minya Konka (Gongga Shan) by an American team in 1932. Of six named unclimbed peaks published by Hideki Nadaka in the early 2000s, only Nyambo Konka (6114m) and Longshan (6684m) are believed to remain unclimbed.

In 2007, a US team of two including Mark Jenkins attempted the first ascent of Nyambo Konka, first from the east side from the Bawangou valley, then later from the south. The time spent on the east side was limited to simply one good weather day, and they had not been high enough to see the route options clearly from their position. They moved up in poor visibility (i.e. the tops were obscured) and camped in a position they considered safe where they were subsequently nearly hit by an avalanche caused by a cornice breaking off the summit ridge above them. In the ensuing storm and snow fall they retreated, choosing instead to move around the peak to the south (SW) side.

In 2009, our team again attempted the east face. The technical climbing effectively started from our third camp (Cirque Camp, at 4850m). The walls on the eastern slopes of Nyambo Konka steepen from approximately 4800m to the summit ridge at about 5800m. The rock quality was poor and the obvious routes were on small ribs that seem to offer fairly non-technical climbing on mixed terrain. The face was scored by avalanche runnels. Very limited terrain was found which was safe from the considerable hazard posed by frequent snow avalanches and the threat of large cornice or ice cliff fall. Our team chose what we considered the only feasible route given the conditions – a spur north of the summit comprising mixed snow, rock and ice, which met the summit ridge at a rare spot which was not overhung by a huge cornice.



Route taken on the east face of Nyambo Konka. Photo taken from Cirque Camp (4850m).  
Photo Penny Goddard.

Mark and Lydia climbed this relatively avalanche-safe rib on poor quality snow and rock to the summit ridge, gaining about 1000m. They were intending to put a camp on the summit ridge and climb the remaining 400m to the summit the next day, during which time Kenny and Penny would ascend and swap camps with Mark and Lydia. Upon reaching the summit ridge they saw that the way to the summit was excessively long, very steep blue ice and would involve traversing across huge couloirs between ridges coming up to the summit ridge from the other side. In addition, the route was corniced on both sides and proved un-climbable for that team of two.

In an ensuing electrical storm Mark and Lydia retreated to the single bivouac spot on the rib, and descended to the high camp where Penny and Kenny waited very early the next morning in initially significant snow fall. The snow cleared that day. Kenny and Lydia retreated to Base Camp that afternoon, and Penny and Mark remained, aiming to return back up to the east face camp to retrieve some equipment and provide Penny with acclimatisation and the opportunity to do some climbing.

That night it began to snow so heavily with quite wet snow that tents began to collapse at Base/Caterpillar Camp (3455m). Mark and Penny decided to descend from 4850m at midnight in 60cm of new snow, with heavy snow fall continuing. Remaining equipment was carried down to BC over the following few days and the team decided to disband their efforts in light of conditions.



Mark Jenkins descending the Bawangou after heavy snow.

Photo Penny Goddard

Considerable discussion was had over whether to attempt the south ridge of Nyambo Konka, but again very poor conditions and ongoing bad weather high on the mountain dissuaded the team.

Alternative routes on the eastern faces of Nyambo Konka definitely exist. There is considerable cornice threat along much of the face, but on the aspect east-south east in the cirque (standing at the Cirque Camp at 4800m, on the climbers' left looking towards the summit) there seems to be a logical snow route weaving between ribs and exiting steeply onto the summit ridge. Once the ridge is achieved at this point, we think travel along this part of the summit ridge may be a lot easier than where we were (climbers' right of the summit). This cirque wall snow route is steeper but shorter than the route we took, perhaps only 800m, and if the snow conditions were a little better than those we had, could be a fast route to the top.

The south side of Nyambo Konka offers its own challenges. Up to approximately 4800m, it is a simple rocky ridge, the lower slopes barricaded by 600m of thorn trees and tightly woven bush. The approach to the south ridge might be made by walking further up the Bawang Hai valley where yak trails and caterpillar fungus harvesters' trails may lead from the western aspect towards the base of the ridge, avoiding the dense and prickly bush. Higher up the ridge is non-technical until it steepens to scrambling and then climbing on fairly rotten rock. This continues to a huge gendarme, and a deep notch, before continuing up apparently a steep ice or mixed face to the summit ridge or plateau.

In 2007, Mark and his climbing partner made a valiant attempt to climb the south ridge. They were forced to carry all of their water for three days as there are no snow patches or run-off water-courses to provide melt water. His partner resting at 4500m, Mark reached about 5000m, at the end covering some technical scrambling terrain towards the gendarme. Mark considered he would turn this on east side, climbers' right. He retreated, not wishing to leave his partner, running out of time and having finished his water supply.

From consulting maps and indistinct photos, and a very limited view from the valley floor, the gendarme then appears to lead to a large rock notch. It is impossible to know whether this notch can be passed easily or with difficulty. The terrain climbs out of this notch on rotten rock to an ice cliff or steep ice slope. The section comprising the gendarme and the notch, and getting onto the summit plateau/ ridge appears to be the main difficulty on the south ridge. After climbing out of the notch, we think that the summit is some way back on a glaciated plateau, and then the main issues would be crevasses. The issue of no water or snow might be overcome if the ridge was attempted very early in the season; otherwise there seems no option other than climbing very quickly and/or being able to enlist support to carry high on the ridge.

There are plenty of other dramatic and beautiful peaks in the vicinity of Nyambo Konka, most of which have been climbed from the west. Taishan and Longshan offer considerable obstacles from the Bawangou Valley. These are in the form of complex ice falls across the lower slopes, and poor quality steep snow routes in terrain very exposed to avalanches. Good conditions and fast travel could transform these mountains. There is not a great deal of rock, and the rock integrity is poor.

## **Unknown peak, ~5020m, in the Qionglai Mountains**

With time and enthusiasm on our hands, Lydia Bradey and Penny Goddard decided to attempt a climb in the southern Qionglai mountains, a region which was extremely difficult to get information about. We spotted a peak marked on a road map to the west of Ya'an and set off to Ya'an city to see what information we could gather.

Considerable time was spent consulting with locals, searching for maps (none were found at a useful scale) and peering at Chinese-scripted *Google Earth* images in the local cyber-cafes. Print-outs of *Google Earth* ended up being our main source of maps. These were difficult to navigate by to say the least. We enlisted the help of some local students to help us translate village names and hired one student, Joey, to accompany us to the road end at a village interpreted as 'Bi'a Ba' past Gouza as a translator and guide. He also joined us for one day's trek and a night in the valley, which was a great adventure for him.

Initial attempts to leave Ya'an and travel west were blocked by a new restriction on foreign travel into the region. We went to the police for a letter of approval of our travel, but were denied this, with the justification given that there was no official restriction. However, clearly there was – local drivers told us it was “too dangerous” for them to take us west of Ya'an as they would be arrested. We were denied boarding of our bus and had to use cunning means to circumvent the officials, board the bus outside of the city and finally reach our destination.

Joey's *Blackberry* (which incidentally is illegal in China, as it can get through the 'great firewall') turned out to be a valuable navigation tool, as he could connect to satellite internet, upload *Google Earth* and pinpoint our location in a way that related directly to our maps. This was particularly useful after ending up stranded without transport in



completely the wrong village due to a misinterpretation of the *Google Earth* map and corresponding village names.

With this strange intrusion of technology upon our feeling of total remoteness, we found our way to the appropriate valley (no name was ever discovered) and followed Tibetan villagers' trails up it. We were welcomed into locals' houses and given information about two high peaks at the head of the valley. After camping for two nights higher up the valley, we decided on a steep rocky peak to the east of the valley which seemed to match the one on our maps, and climbed steep grassy hillsides to a camp at 4200m. On the following day with good weather, we made our ascent up scree slopes to a col, along a rocky (non-technical) ridge and then up a long steep rocky gully to a high col. From the col to the summit was rocky scrambling. Nowhere was the route technical enough to require the use of a rope. The summit afforded incredible views over the mountains of the Daxue Shan, and other ranges spread themselves above the valley cloud for miles.

We consider it likely that this peak has not been climbed before given the dearth of information on the area and the fact that locals spoke of only one other known time when there were foreigners in the valley, who were not climbers and came to look at the alpine lakes. The locals did not know of anybody who had climbed these mountains. Altimeter readings at the top ranged from 5005m to 5025m. A GPS reading at the summit of 0251412/3356359 was recorded.

Locals informed us that a road is planned to be developed in this valley in the next few years. Some impressive 250-300m rock walls form the sides of magnificent gorge sections in two parts of this valley. Locals described very thick ice development in the winter as well. The potential for some fantastic rock and ice climbing exists.



Lydia Bradey approaching the peak. The route takes the obvious gully, then ascends the back (hidden) face of the right-hand peak. Photo Penny Goddard

## Finances

Expense	Cost USD	Cost GBP (Aug 09)
Peak Fee 6000m	1500	
Agent Fees	2310	
Agent expenses inc food	4400	
High altitude food	160	
High altitude food bought in China	375	
Food/accommodation in towns	1112	
Travel in country	343	
Flight NZ-China return	1284	
Flight Canada - China return	1084	
Flights USA- China return	2850	
Rescue/med insurance	180	
AAC insurance	195	
Sat phone rental	100	
Guide/ translator "Joey"	107	
Horses and porters	153	
Equipment purchased for expedition	922	
Miscellaneous	250	
<b>Total cost</b>	<b>13,086</b>	<b>7,838</b>
Total less SPARC grant	6686	
Total less SPARC + MEF grants	4162	
<b>Total less SPARC + MEF + NZAC grants (met by personal contributions)</b>	<b>3662</b>	<b>2,194</b>

## Conclusions and recommendations

**Team unity:** Undertaking an expedition in China, including forays into Tibetan regions, brought us an abundance of political and bureaucratic difficulties. During these sometimes trying setbacks, the unity and communication within the team was very strong. This enabled us to continue working towards our goals. It is essential to have a cohesive team like ours under such circumstances.

**Weather:** The weather in the Nyambo Konka region was unexpectedly warm in April. This meant that even when skies were clear, snow conditions were often unsuitable for climbing. We experienced several snow storms, which produced significant amounts of precipitation, and found that valley cloud was present on many days, often causing drizzle and obscured visibility while travelling at lower elevations. We believe that a better climbing season may be during the post-monsoon months of October and November, when temperatures are colder, although more snow cover is likely.

**Maps:** Maps for climbing in China are very hard to come by. Maps need to be sourced outside of China, prior to the expedition. We found Mr. Tomatsu Nakamura (Japan) to be the best source of local climbing route information and overview maps. We were also able to access Russian and Chinese topographic maps, which are about as good as it gets, but were fairly vague for our purposes. We found *Google Earth* to be quite helpful as well. Essentially, exploring seldom-visited regions requires an acceptance that you will be truly exploring, without the guidance of accurate or detailed maps.

**Culture:** Saving face is an important aspect of Chinese culture. This made dealing with problems with our Liaison Officer's performance difficult, as it is culturally insensitive to outline faults in an individual's performance. An awareness of this helped us interpret his reactions.

While we were negotiating with porters, horse herders and motorbike drivers, we found these negotiations took a very long time. Often the Tibetan people would prefer to discuss these arrangements after the evening meal, which led to some late nights. A Chinese phrasebook was useful, but many Tibetan villagers cannot read. They also cannot read maps, which makes requests for portage to certain destinations difficult.

**Currency:** Travelling with US dollars worked well. However, currency cannot be exchanged outside of big cities.

**Environmental protection:** Our environmental policy did not match local customs of dumping rubbish, littering and burning plastics. We were often pressured to conform to local customs instead of carrying our rubbish out. This we resisted strongly, and often picked up our Liaison's personal rubbish for portage from Base Camp to a city or town disposal.

**Climbing style:** It is possible to explore interesting areas but the team must be mobile and self-sufficient, as horses and porters are not always available. This would make very technical climbing (with a very heavy load of equipment) difficult, so it is easier for a

lightweight, alpine-style team to travel and climb non-technical peaks. We occasionally used the help of porters or horses to establish a base camp, and continued alpine-style from there. Even this approach proved problematic as we needed to haul our excess base camp food and equipment around in ferry loads.

**Liaison Officer and permit:** We are disappointed not to be able to recommend our Liaison Officer to others due to what we consider very poor service. This included: suddenly cancelling the expedition based on what appeared to be annoyance at the team's chosen Base Camp location, refusing to accompany us to our Base Camp and therefore not providing any services while on the mountain, engaging the services of a second liaison officer without notifying us and then charging us for his expenses, not helping us to hire local porters, and then becoming incensed when we employed them ourselves, not understanding the basic local topography or topographical maps and accusing us of climbing a peak other than Nyambo Konka, not providing us with a copy of our permit until the end of the expedition, and generally hampering our forward progress on the expedition. Previous expeditions have recommended Lenny's services. However, another recent expedition to China which employed Lenny also reported some concerns about his changing attitude.

**Equipment:** Some climbing equipment is available in Chengdu, but at a higher cost than in New Zealand. Camping gaz cylinders are also available, for about NZ\$6-7 each.

**Cultural exchange:** One of the most rewarding aspects of the expedition was our many interactions with local people. In particular, we spent time with local students, who gave us a good insight into modern Chinese culture and who benefited from being exposed to active, independent women.

# Appendices

## 1. Reference material

*First Ascent of Reddomain –Minya Konka Massif* by Hideki Nagata  
*Japanese Alpine News, Vol 4. May 2003 Special Submission – “East of the Himalayas – To the Alps of Tibet”* by Tamotsu Nakamura.  
*Die GroBen Kalten Berge von Szetschuan* by Eduard Imhof.  
*American Alpine Journal 2004 – “East of the Himalaya”* by Tamotsu Nakamura.  
New Zealand government travel advisory.

## 2. Contacts

### **Sichuan Mountaineering Association**

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### **Sichuan International Medical Centre & Foreigners Clinic**

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### **The New Zealand Embassy Beijing, China**

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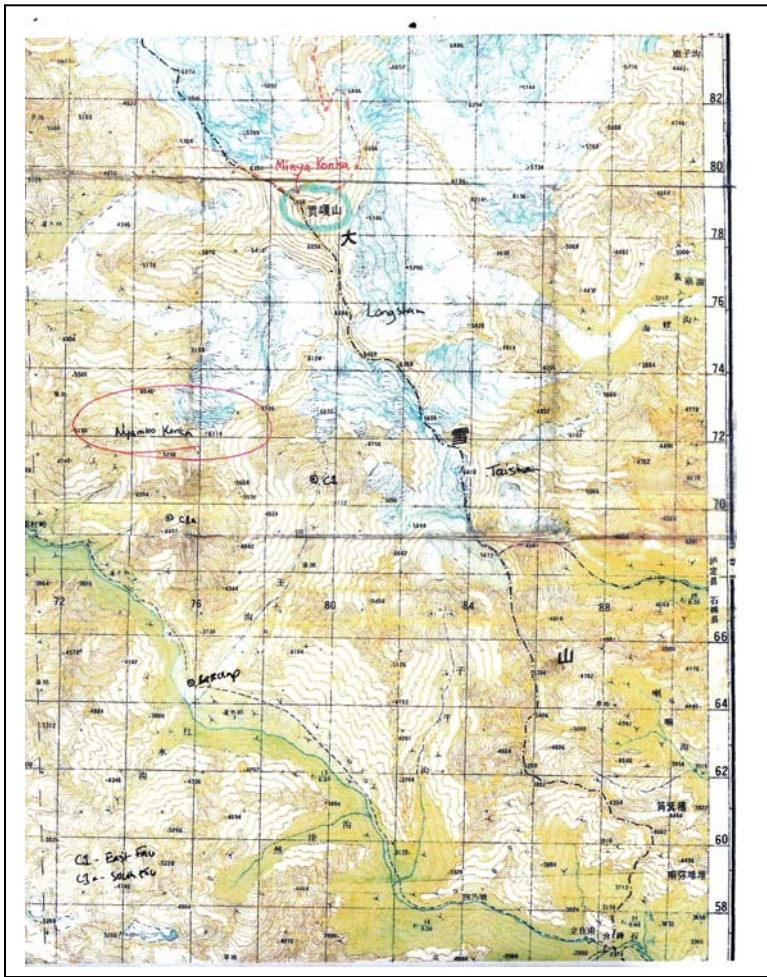
### **Liaison Officer**

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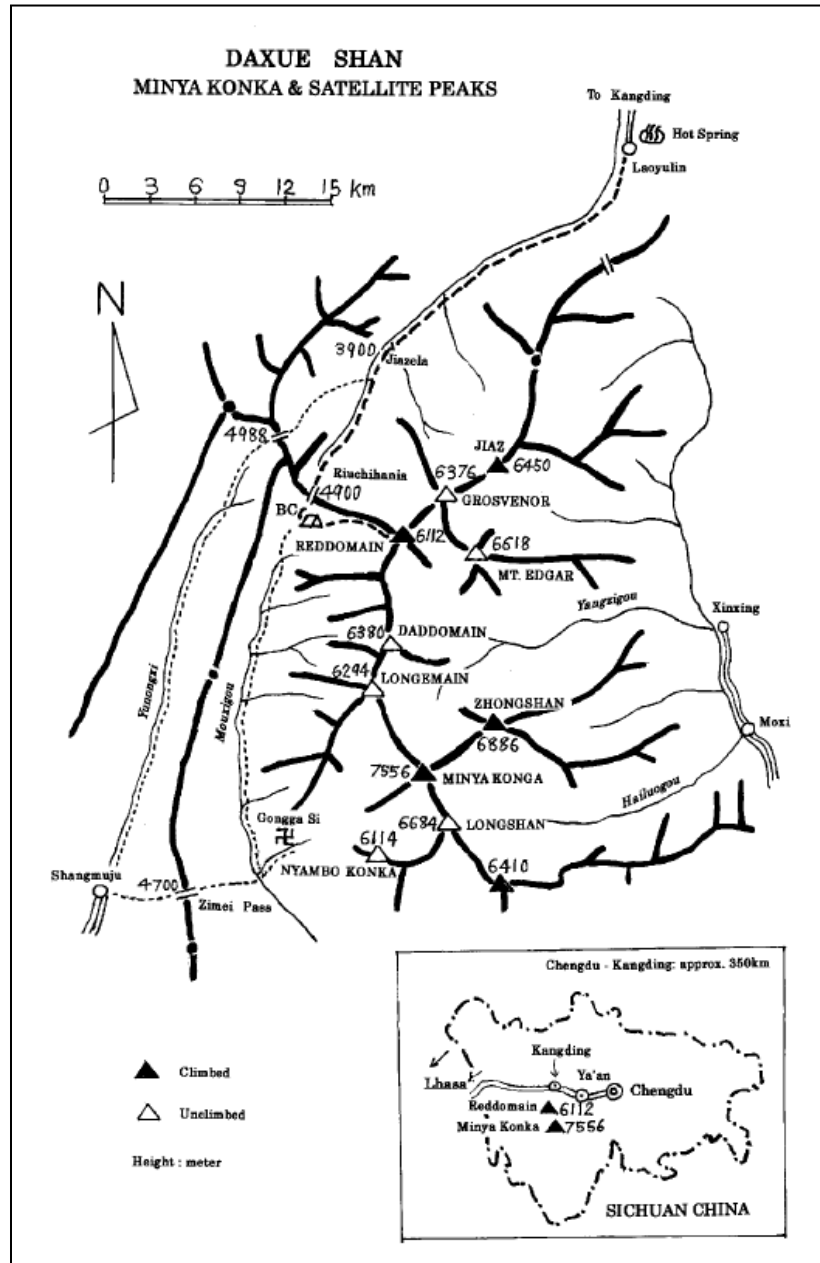
### 3. Maps



Map showing approximate location of unknown peak climbed by Penny and Lydia.



Russian topographical map used on Nyambo Konka.



T Nakamura

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