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# British Nyanchen Tangla Expedition

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## Expedition Report

Patron: Sir Chris Bonington CBE FRGS

Supported by the British Mountaineering Council & Mount Everest Foundation

Members: John Town, Huw Davies

Sponsors: Murr Elektronik, Karrimor, Wogen

Persimmon PLC, Pressbar Diecasting

Supporters: Mr A C W Peck, Mr & Mrs Charles Stewart

+676



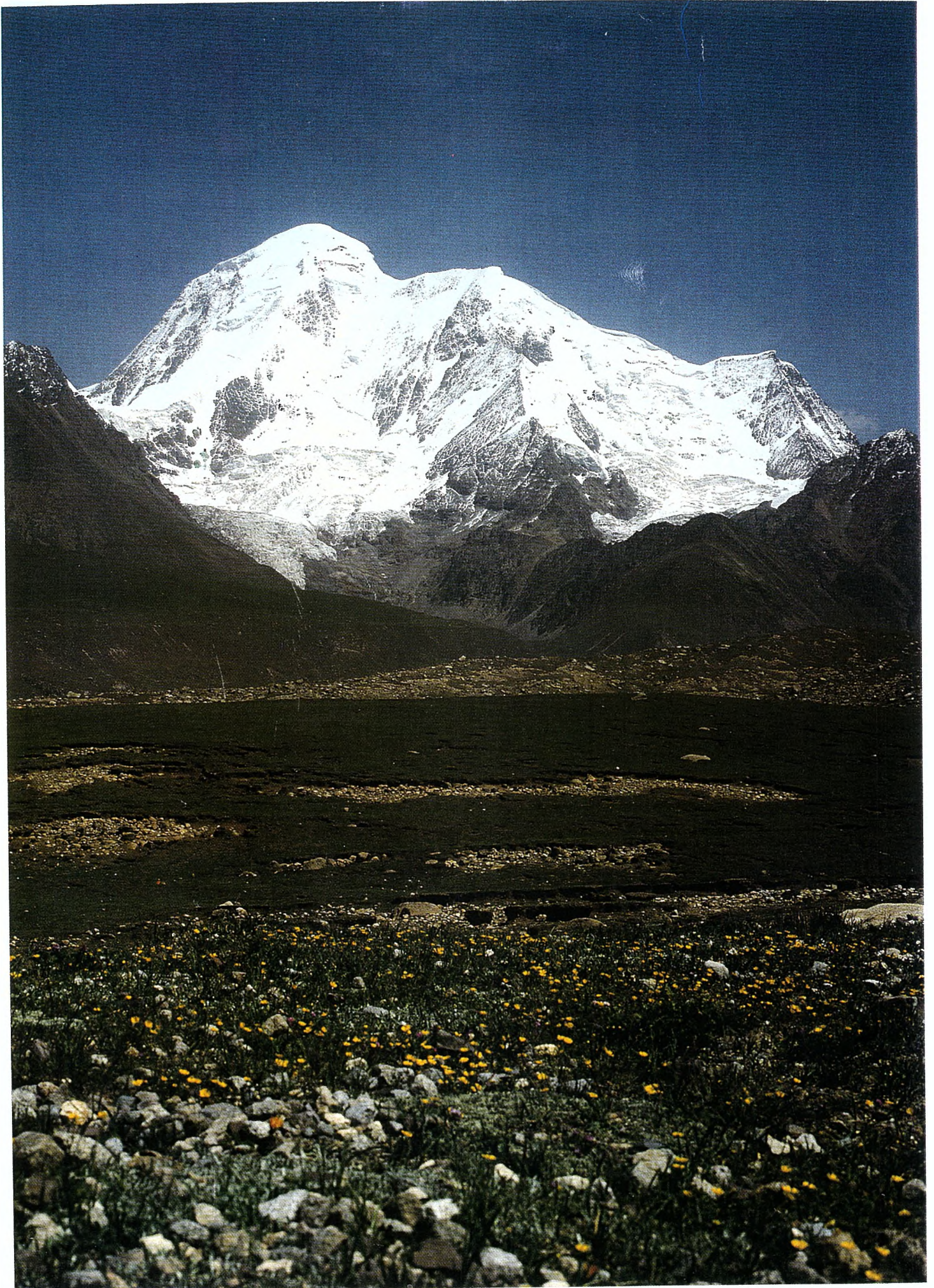
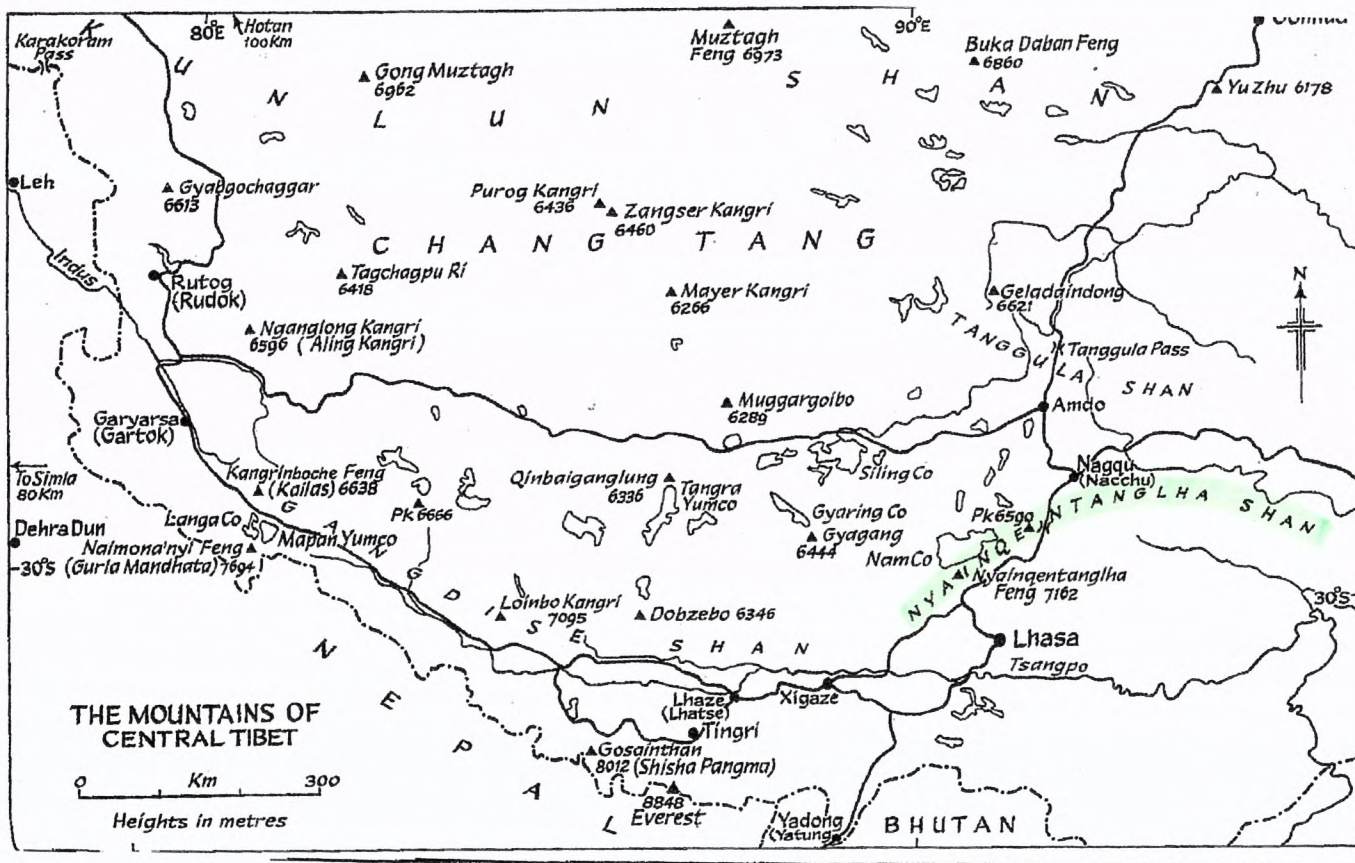


Plate 1





## The Nyanchen Tangla Range

Tibet is one of the two last great frontiers for mountain exploration. Only in Antarctica are there comparable spaces which remain almost untouched by mountaineers. The Tibetan Plateau covers perhaps half a million square miles, much of it covered by mountain ranges whose heights, names and locations still remain more a matter of conjecture than established geographical certainty. Much of the documentary material dates from before the turn of the century.

One of the areas which one might describe as 'better known', is the Nyanchen Tangla Range, which stretches in a long arc to the north of Lhasa, separating the desolate high plateau from the more hospitable hills and rivers of central Tibet. The western part of the range runs about 200 miles NW from the area of the Zhogu La, on the little-used northern branch of the Friendship Highway from Lhasa to Shigatse, towards the town of Nagqu. This is one of the most accessible ranges in Tibet, with a major highway running the length of the Yangpachen valley along the southern foot of the range, which can be reached in about 3 hours drive from Lhasa. To the north of the range lies Tibet's largest lake, the 70 mile long Nam Tso.

The range bends back SW to the south of Nagqu and runs for another 200 miles through much less accessible country, which has remained little-known until recent times (see below).

Several of the explorers taking part in the 'Race to Lhasa' at the end of the 19th Century crossed the Nyanchen Tangla, which formed the last major geographical barrier in their southward quest, though few got much further. After the Younghusband expedition, access became temporarily easier, allowing British explorers E.A Ryder and H.Wood to fix a number of peaks from Lhasa, to follow up on initial surveys carried out clandestinely by the Pundits. These are listed in Burrard & Hayden's book, published in 1907. Ryder identified two peaks of about 23,000 feet, R210 and R217, the latter being the highest and lying mid-way along the western half of the range (Plates 3 and 4). This has since become known as Nyanchen Tangla (7162m)

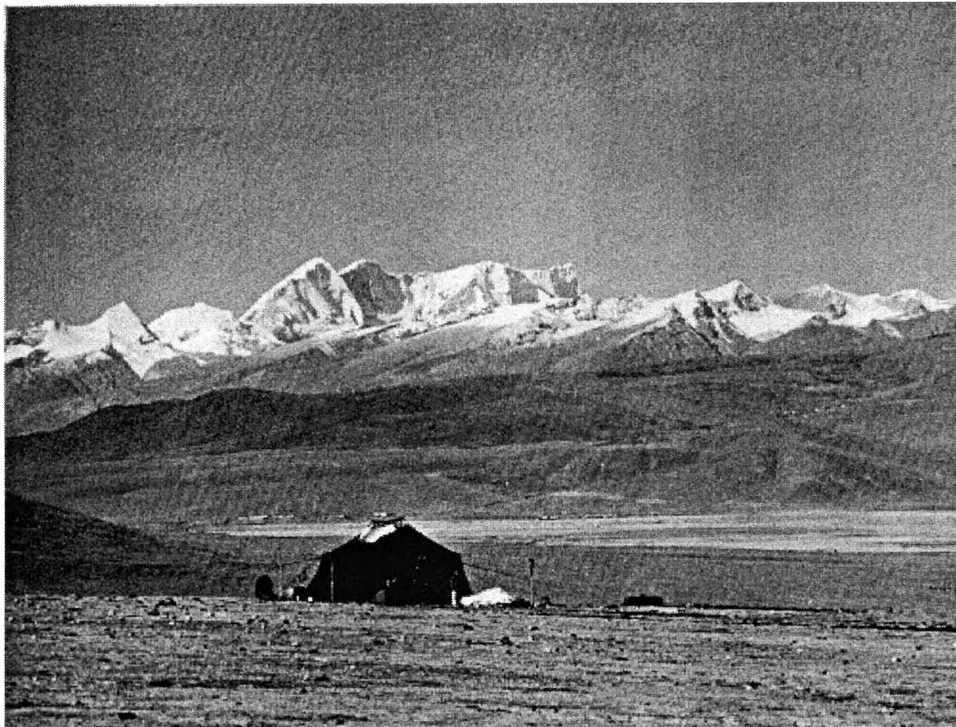


Plate 3: Nyanchen Tangla Group from E (Yangpachen Valley)

With the opening of Tibet to climbers at the start of the 1980s, and the downgrading of most of the Tibetan plateau's other 7000m peaks to 6000m status, the highest group was bound to become a target for climbers, especially the Japanese. The main peak (7162m) was climbed by a Tohoku University expedition in 1986 and the Central Peak (7117m) by Austrians lead by Wolfgang Axt in 1989. The unclimbed East Peak (7046m) is the nearest to the main valley and rises abruptly from the foothills as the starting point of a high ridge, which runs on over several miles to take in the other three main peaks.

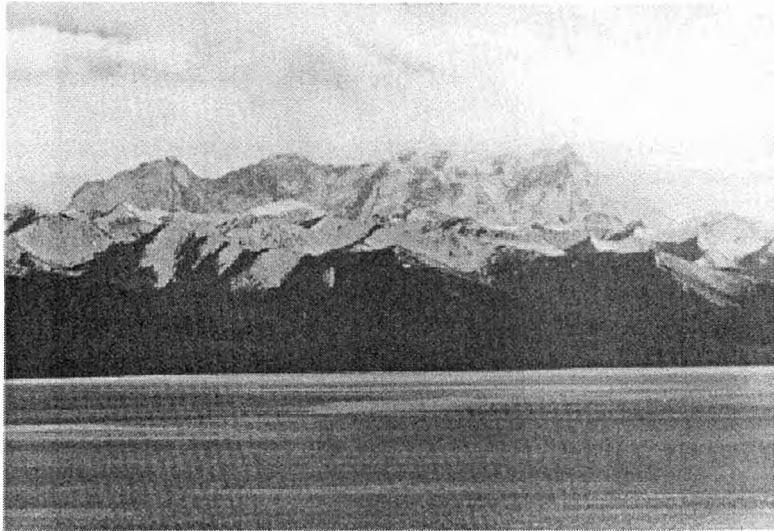


Plate 4: Nyanchen Tangla Group from N (Nam Tso lake)

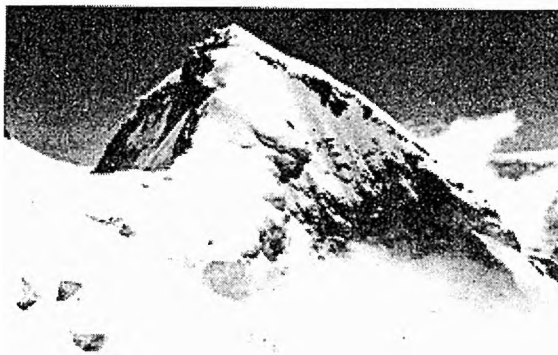


Plate 6: Unclimbed Nyanchen Tangla E Peak from SW  
(Photo: Axt expedition/Iwa To Yuki)



Plate 7: Climbing on the W Ridge of Nyanchen  
Tangla at 6550m  
(Photo: Tohoku University party))

### The Eastern Nyanchen Tangla – Sepu Kangri

In 1982, during a flight from Chengdu to Lhasa, Chris Bonington spotted a spectacular peak in the largely unknown eastern part of the range, which was marked on the air maps as above 7000m. His continuing perseverance was eventually rewarded with permission for a reconnaissance expedition, which he undertook with Charles Clarke in August 1996. After many trials and tribulations they succeeded in getting close enough to view the peak from two sides and establishing it as Sepu Kangri (6950m, 22,802 ft). Chris returned with a 7 man expedition in Spring 1997 and at the time of writing (Autumn 1998) is making a second attempt.



## Jomo Gangtse - Qungmogangtse - A 'Forgotten' Peak

The sketchy reports of a second 23,000 foot peak in the Nyanchen Tangla arose from a survey by E.A. Ryder and H.Wood - their peak was identified as R210, (22,950 ft), also described in 1872 by the pundit A.K as Jhomogangar. It lay at the western end of the range, near the Zhogu La. No evidence or large scale maps appeared to confirm this, though the Times Atlas marked a 7000m contour in the general area, as it did in numerous other false locations.

As more recent surveys whittled the number of 7000m peaks inexorably downwards - there now appear to be just 4 groups N of the Tsangpo valley - the USDA chart showed several 6000m peaks in the region but nothing approaching 7000m and no permanent snow (Plate 10). The best source until very recently, Jill Neate's comprehensively researched 'High Asia', recorded the peak as 6139 meters. It is not even mentioned in Michael Ward's authoritative survey of the peaks of Central Tibet in the 1996 Alpine Journal.

There matters rested until, during a visit to the RGS Library in 1996, I noted a 7048m peak in this location, marked as Qungmogangtse, on a recently published Chinese Map of Tibet. This was corroborated by an annotated Chinese edition of Landsat images of Tibet, on which they had marked the line of the friendship Highway and of the 7048m, 23,124 ft peak (Plate 11). A look at two detailed guidebooks to Tibet published that year provided further confirmation of the peak's height and accounts of 'stupendous views of the Jomo Gangtse snows' from the nearby Zhogu La.

Searching for better pictures I started to look on the Web at recently declassified intelligence satellite photographs from the Corona programme in the '60s. These provide far higher resolution than Landsat, though they are not for the fainthearted:

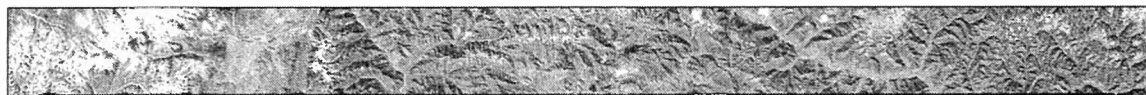
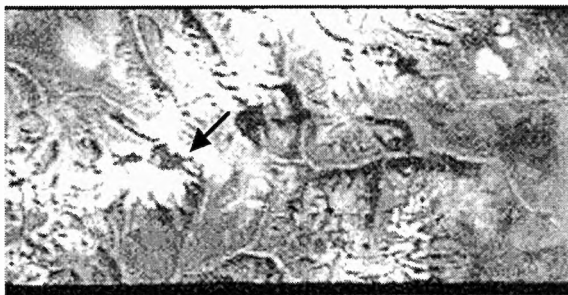


Plate 10: WWW browse image of declassified intelligence satellite photo DS1049-2168DA078



A closer look at the above revealed the Jomo Gangtse massif – glaciated and with a steep N E face in shadow, shown by the arrow in this enhanced section.

Before departure we obtained a huge and very detailed enlargement of the negative which proved extremely useful in assessing the topography of the mountain, if not in climbing it...

Plate 11: Enhanced section of above showing Qungmo Massif

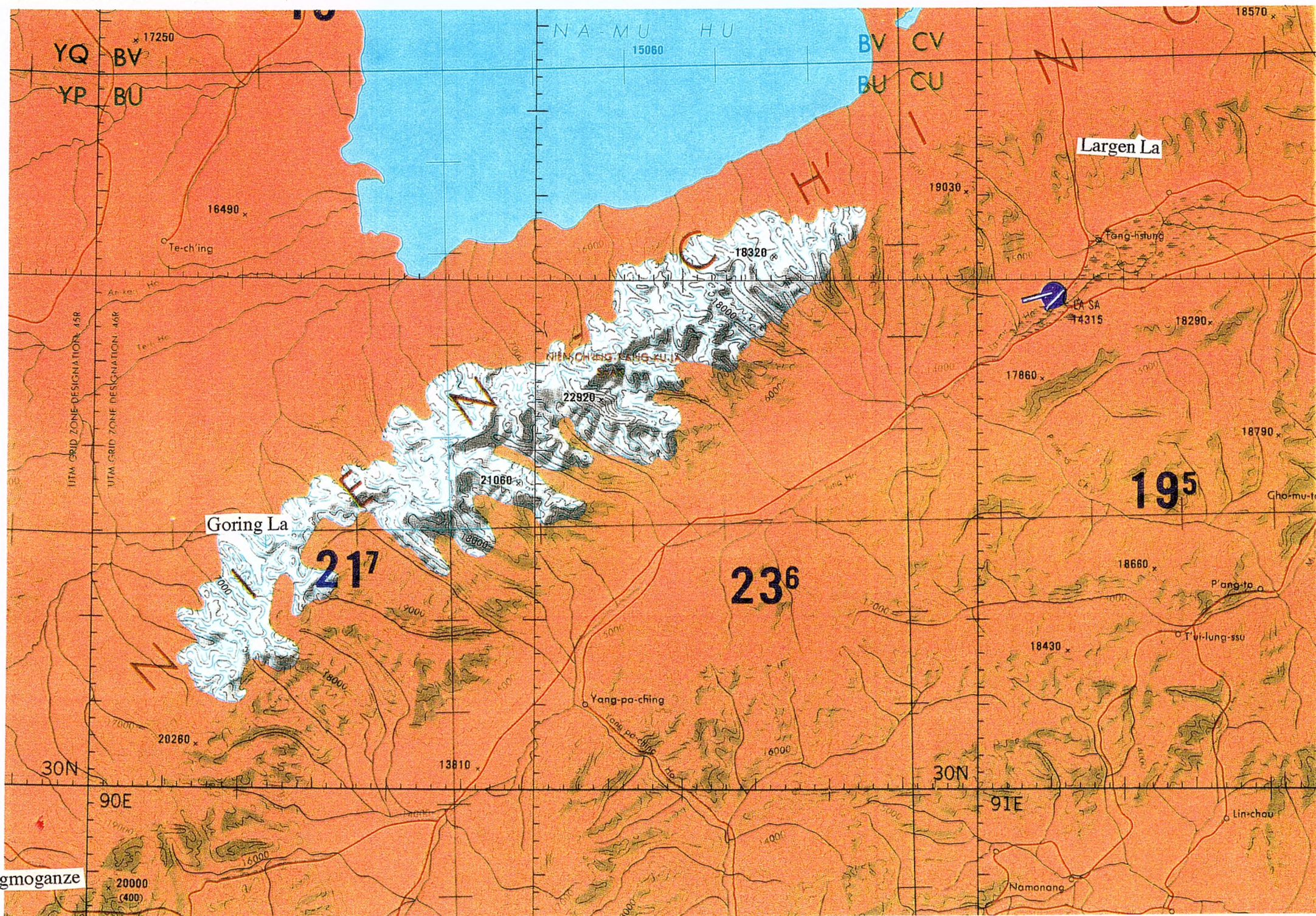
It is a sobering, though perhaps encouraging thought, that the second highest peak in one of the most extensive and highest mountain ranges in the world, should have disappeared from the map for a good part of recent mountaineering history.

## Preparations

Planning for the Expedition began in the Summer of 1996, with a team of 4 comprised of John Town, Huw Davies, Richard Wojtaszewski and Alyson Starling, the members of a 1994 expedition to Kamchatka. John and Rick had also climbed together in Mongolia and the Caucasus in 1991 and 1992. Tony Ward joined as a fifth member of the team in the Autumn.

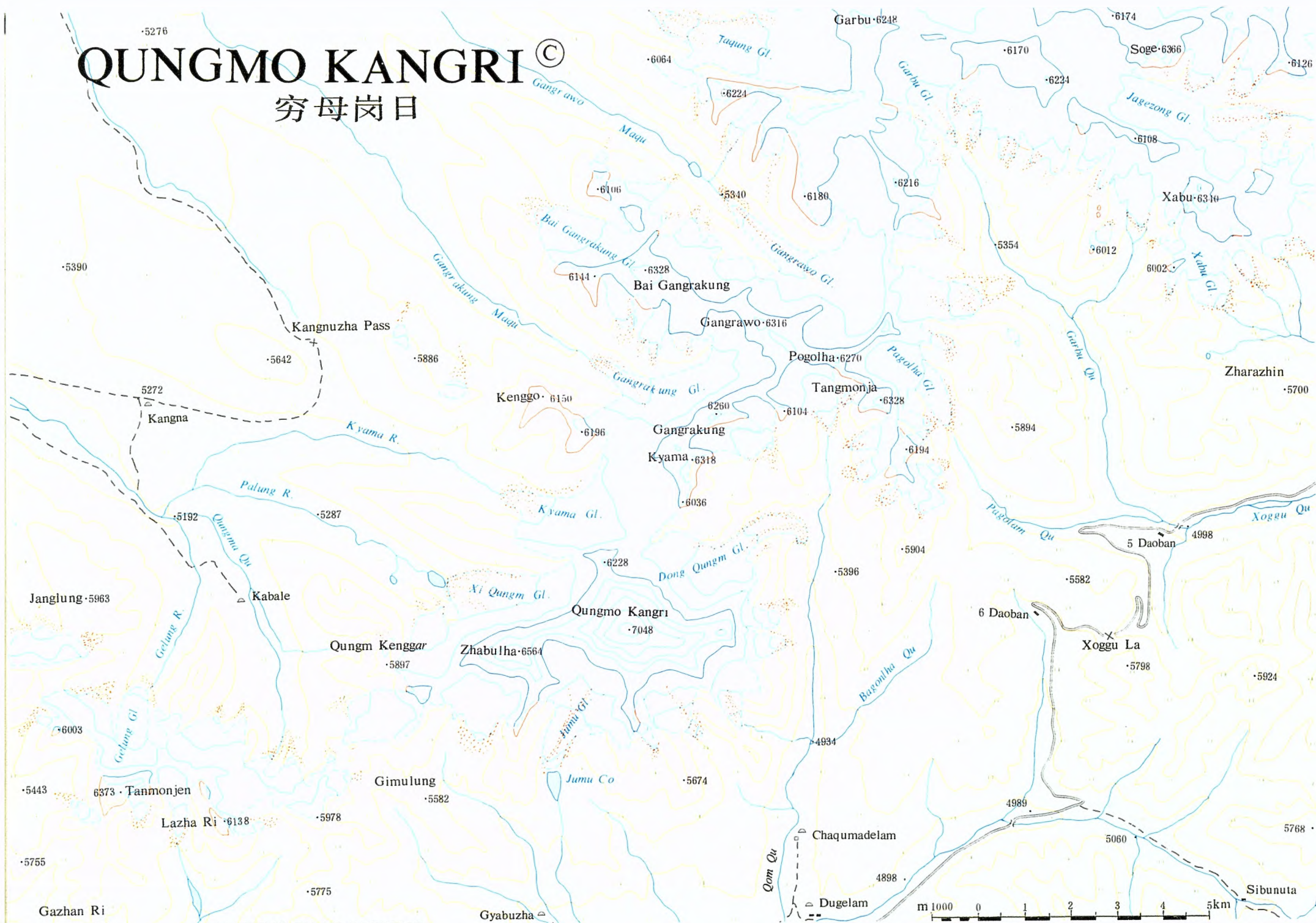
The major problem was finding the large amounts of funding required, and after initial grants from the MEF and BMC things went very slowly. A press bonanza in May 1997, including a piece in the Times and a spot on the John Dunne Show on Radio 2, yielded a promise of full funding for the Expedition but within days we received the bombshell that a joint Chinese-Korean Expedition had made the first ascent in October 1996. They were followed, it later transpired, by a successful Japanese Expedition in Spring 1997. The prospective sponsor not unreasonably withdrew funding and Rick, Alyson and Tony







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were left without any alternative but to cancel their plans. The MEF/BMC grants, Murr Elektronik's contribution and Karrimor's generous donation of two full sets of gear now made a vital difference in allowing at least two of us to go.

On 25<sup>th</sup> July, Huw and I, having mortgaged ourselves to the hilt and re-negotiated with a helpful TMA, set off as the remnants of the Expedition, hoping to make the first ascent of the peak by Westerners.

## **Journey to the Mountain**

### **Friday 25<sup>th</sup> to Monday 28<sup>th</sup> July: Kathmandu**

We fly with Royal Nepalese from London and suffer the 14 hour 'direct' flight with lengthy stops in Frankfurt and Dubai. In Kathmandu, Himalayan Kingdom's agent Bikram Pandey does a wonderful job with our freight, which left England two days late, and has to be retrieved from customs under unusual circumstances. His staff cap this by circumventing 70 kg of excess baggage charges on the flight to Lhasa. They also got our all important permits for Tibet. Huw gets the shits and drinks a lot of beer.

### **Tuesday 29<sup>th</sup> to Thursday 31<sup>st</sup> July: Lhasa**

The flight to Lhasa gives stunning views of Everest, Lhotse, Cho Oyu and Makalu. We delay for a day to get acclimatised. I go to the Potala while Huw stays in sick. On the 31<sup>st</sup> we do a mammoth shop – supplies in Lhasa are plain but adequate.

### **Friday 1<sup>st</sup> August: To Base Camp**

We embark in a Mitsubishi Shogun, followed by our gear in a lorry. We have two Tibetan companions – Dorje, who is not a climber but speaks good English and is good companion, and Mr G., who is (was?) a climber but has little interest in or knowledge of the area. (He will spend most of the expedition mysteriously absent, but does bring back some beer). Two hours tarmac drive up the river valley takes us to Yangpachen and lunch. Another two hours of good dirt road and we are at the summit of the Zhogu La (5700m) getting our first view of the mountain in partial cloud. It looks big, serious and more complicated than we thought. What else did we expect? The road spirals down into the valley of the Jomo Chu which we descend a couple of miles until a bridge takes us across to a large village. We climb above it to a site at about 4710m, a gain of 1050m in the day.

## **Attempt on Jomo Gangtse**

### **Saturday 2<sup>nd</sup> and Sunday 3<sup>rd</sup> August: Advanced Base**

The locals sit and stare at us for hours, interrupted only by occasional quiet attempts at pilfering, which we discourage. A sheep is purchased, slaughtered and hung in bits from the mess tentpole. After a day's acclimatisation, the yaks arrive and we walk leisurely up to Advanced Base in 3-4 hours, at 5290m at the start of the Jumu (?) glacier running down from the SW basin of Jomo Gangtse. Zhablha, 'the Barber', 6564m is a fine unclimbed pyramidal peak which dominates the W side of the basin. It looks technical

### **Monday 4<sup>th</sup> and Tuesday 5<sup>th</sup> August: Reconnaissance**

Huw has given me his diarrhoea, so I sit tight while he looks round. The next day we climb onto the glacier and retrace the way forward. Our aim is to reach the snowy col at about 6000m between the main peak and the rocky outcrop of Chomri Momo to its south, from which the route to the summit runs up straightforward snow slopes. Chomri Momo is the rock outcrop seen well in Plate 13, with the col hidden behind. The E side of the col is well seen at the left of Plate 1. The W side of the col is anything but straightforward, being blocked by a crowning serac wall for much of its breadth. We identify a gully to the right which looks as if it will go and climb up it a little way.

### **Wednesday 6<sup>th</sup> – Tuesday 12<sup>th</sup> August: High Point and Retreat**

We run about 150m of rope up the gully, which is straightforward apart from occasional stonefall. We return next day hoping to make the col, but the gully runs out into a steepening ice slope and we are forced out to the left across the upper part of a couloir which drops in one sweep all the way down to the glacier. Beyond this the ground becomes considerably steeper, comprised of rocky ribs. We have



used up our 200m of fixed rope and are considerably worried about the prospect of descending the ground ahead in bad weather after a summit bid, without the back-up of any fixed line. We are at about 5900m but the location of the elusive col is anybody's guess. We descend to Advanced Base.

Tired and demoralised, we take a day off to recover, but on the next day the weather is bad. On the 10<sup>th</sup>, we look at an alternative route, following a Japanese fixed rope up the ice-fall just to the left of our gully. This leads to the first tier of the glacier and the base of the couloir crossed a few days before. From here it is apparent that the 8 member Japanese team ran at least 600m of fixed rope all the way up the couloir and up the rock ribs above. Most of it is still in place, but we have no stomach for using their handrails. We clean up what we can on our way back down, collecting some useful kit. They have left a real mess behind including sweet wrappers and toilet rolls. The locals will be glad of the rope we take down.

Next day we clear the gully of our own fixed rope in deteriorating weather, and on the 12<sup>th</sup> descend to Base Camp. There is heavy snow overnight.

## **Exploring the Northern Side**

### **Wednesday 13th – Saturday 16th August: Exploration**

On the 13<sup>th</sup> we walk over the southern flank in heavy rain and cloud. I return the next day and complete a big circuit, spotting 2 attractive wedge-shaped granite peaks to the E of the upper Jomo Chu river (Plate 16). I descend to the valley floor and climb up the other side to get a superb view (Plate 14) of the E flank of Jomo Gangtse and the subsidiary summits of its E ridge, Derjak Zabda (c6600m) and the shapely Lawo Shelkar (c6400m).

Next day, we procure 3 horses and a horseman and ride up to camp at the head of the Jomo Chu at the foot of the 'Dong Qungma' (?) glacier. Rushing onwards on foot we find a beautiful moraine valley and succeed in reaching the glacier cirque to the N of the massif. We get a magnificent view of the glaciated N Face of Jomo Gangtse (Plate 15) and the surrounding citadels of shattered granite, including Gangrakung (6260m) and Kyama (6318m). To be the first foreigners to penetrate this magnificent arena makes the whole trip worthwhile.

### **Saturday 16th – Sunday 24th August: The Long Trip Home**

There is a spectacular thunderstorm during the night. The horseman, as he later confides to his colleagues, will not join us in our tent because we smell so bad. From there, it is all downhill.



## Expedition Diary

Day 1	Friday	25-July	plane	flight to Kathmandu		
Day 2	Saturday	26-July	Kathmandu, Nepal	flight to Kathmandu		
Day 3	Sunday	27-July	Kathmandu			
Day 4	Monday	28-July	Kathmandu	chasing freight		
Day 5	Tuesday	29-July	Lhasa, Tibet	flight to Lhasa	3660m	
Day 6	Wednesday	30-July	Lhasa		3660m	
Day 7	Thursday	31-July	Lhasa		3660m	
Day 8	Friday	1-August	Base Camp	journey to Base Camp	4710m	+1050m
Day 9	Saturday	2-August	Base Camp	acclimatisation day	4710m	
Day 10	Sunday	3-August	Advance B.C.	trek to Advance Base	5290m	+580m
Day 11	Monday	4-August	Advance B.C.	diahorrea, Huw reconnaissance	5290m	
Day 12	Tuesday	5-August	Advance B.C.	recce on glacier	5290m	
Day 13	Wednesday	6-August	Advance B.C.	work on gully	5700m	
Day 14	Thursday	7-August	Advance B.C.	high point	5900m	
Day 15	Friday	8-August	Advance B.C.	rest day	5290m	
Day 16	Saturday	9-August	Advance B.C.	bad weather	5290m	
Day 17	Sunday	10-August	Advance B.C.	recce Ice Fall & Japanese route	5700m	
Day 18	Monday	11-August	Advance B.C.	clear gully, deteriorating weather	5290m	
Day 19	Tuesday	12-August	Base Camp	descend from A. Base, heavy snowfall overnight	4710m	
Day 20	Wednesday	13-August	Base Camp	explore southern flank, heavy rain and low cloud	4710m	
Day 21	Thursday	14-August	Base Camp	John explores Jomo Chu and east side	4710m	
Day 22	Friday	15-August	Jomo Chu	ride to head of Jomo Chu & penetrate glacier cirque		
Day 23	Saturday	16-August	Base Camp	return to Base Camp		
Day 24	Sunday	17-August	Lhasa	return to Lhasa	3660m	
Day 25	Monday	18-August	Lhasa		3660m	
Day 26	Tuesday	19-August	Lhasa		3660m	
Day 27	Wednesday	20-August	Lhasa		3660m	
Day 28	Thursday	21-August	Kathmandu	flight to Kathmandu		
Day 29	Friday	22-August	Kathmandu			
Day 30	Saturday	23-August	Kathmandu			
Day 31	Sunday	24-August	UK	flight to UK		

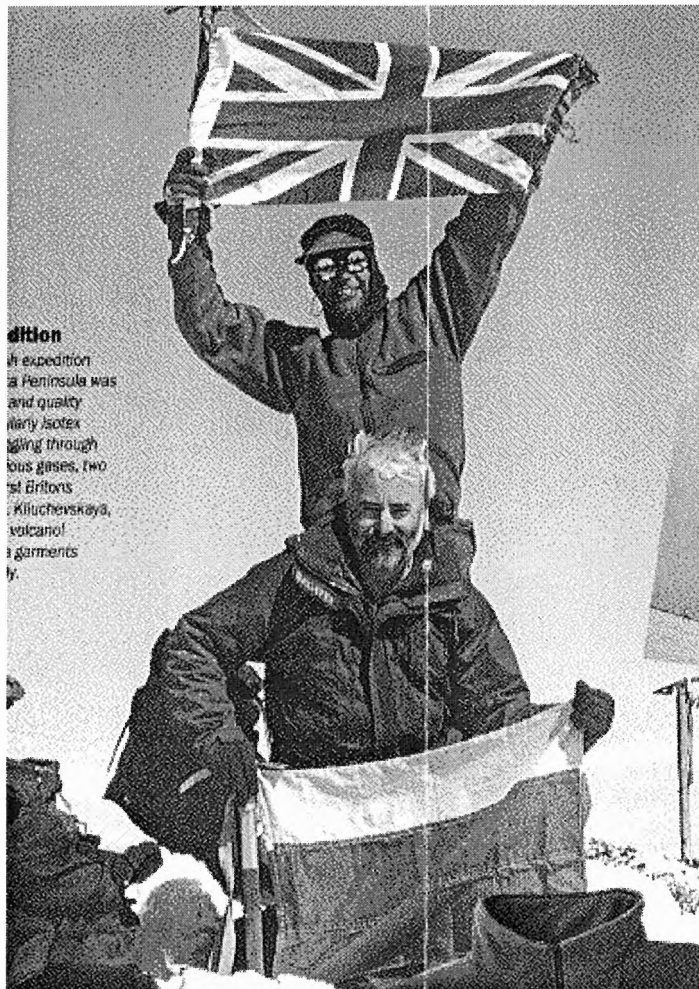
## Climbing in Tibet

Climbing in Tibet is not without its frustrations - detailed information can be difficult to come by and negotiations with the Chinese annoyingly vague - but most things are possible if you persevere. The rewards are tremendous - unclimbed peaks stretch in every direction with not another expedition for miles - and all this within four hours' drive of Lhasa.

Kathmandu forms the obvious route into Tibet, being relatively cheaply and easily accessible by air from Europe and elsewhere and with twice weekly flights to Lhasa. Equally important there are a number of agencies with good contacts in Tibet and able to help with permits. The only alternative air route to Lhasa is via Chengdu in western China which poses greater challenges in terms of booking flights from abroad.



## Expedition Members



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### Huw Davies (33)

*Lecturer in Building at Oxford  
College of Further Education.*

Resident in Oxford, Hugh has climbed  
in the Alps, Norway, Canada, Ladakh  
and southern China.

In 1994, together with John, Rick  
Wojtaszewski and Alyson Starling, he  
took part in the first British Expedition  
to the massive active volcanoes of the  
Kamchatka peninsula in eastern  
Siberia and made the first British  
ascent of Mt. Kliuchevskaya, the  
highest peak in NE Asia (see left).

### John Town (44)

*Registrar at the Queen's University of  
Belfast.*

Married, with 2 children, John is a  
member of the Alpine Club with  
climbing experience in the Alps,  
Pyrenees, USA, Atlas, Himalayas,  
Caucasus, E Turkey & South America.  
In 1984 he was the first British climber  
to visit the Siberian Altai for 80  
years and made the first British ascent  
of Bielukha (14,783 ft), its highest  
peak. In 1987 he organised the first  
British expedition to the Amne Machin  
range of NE Tibet.

## Accounts

### Expenditure

Flights	£ 1,800
Freight	£ 479
T.M.A.	£ 4,979
Hotels	£ 220
Food	£ 266
Equipment	£ 310
Yaks/Horses	£ 48
Medicine	£ 100
Film	£ 145
Visas	£ 200
Permit	£ 692
Insurance	£ 182
Fund-raising/Research	£ 1,176

**£ 10,597**

### Income

Mount Everest Foundation	£ 400
British Mountaineering Council	£ 400
Persimmon PLC	£ 100
Pressbar Diecasting	£ 100
Murr Elektronik	£ 650
Wogen	£ 250
Mr. ACW Peck	£ 50
Mr. & Mrs Charles Stewart	£ 50

**£ 2,000**

Expedition Members	£ 8,597
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**£ 10,597**



## Plates

Plate 1	Jomo Gangtse group from the SE, p117 '..'
Plate 2	Mountains of Central Tibet (Alpine Journal)
Plate 3	Nyanchen Tangla Group from E above Yangpachen Valley
Plate 4:	Nyanchen Tangla Group from N beyond Nam Tso lake
Plate 5	Japanese map of Nyanchen Tangla Group (Iwa To Yuki)
Plate 6	Unclimbed Nyanchen Tangla E Peak from (Photo: Axt expedition/Iwa To Yuki)
Plate 7	Climbing on the W Ridge of Nyanchen Tangla at 6550m (Photo: Tohoku University party /Iwa To Yuki)
Plate 8	Meta-image of Declassified Intelligence Satellite Photo DS1049-2168DA078 of strip of central Tibet downloaded from World Wide Web
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Plate 13	Jomo Gangtse (7048m) and Chomri Momo from the S, p118 '..'
Plate 14	Jomo Gangtse (7048m) from the ESE, telephoto JMT
Plate 15	NE face of Jomo Gangtse group and 'Dong Qungmo' glacier, JMT
Plate 16	Pogolha (6270m) & Tangmonja (6328m) from S, JMT
Plate 19	Cutting from The Times, 19th May 1997

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12. Declassified Intelligence Satellite Photo Ref: DS1049-2168DA078 of Qungmo Massif (detailed enlargement, purchased from US Geological Survey Eros Data Center, held by author)
13. Chinese Edition of Landsat Images of Tibet (RGS Library)

### Maps

14. USDA Tactical Pilotage Chart
15. High Mountain Peaks of Tibet, Chinese Map, (RGS Library)



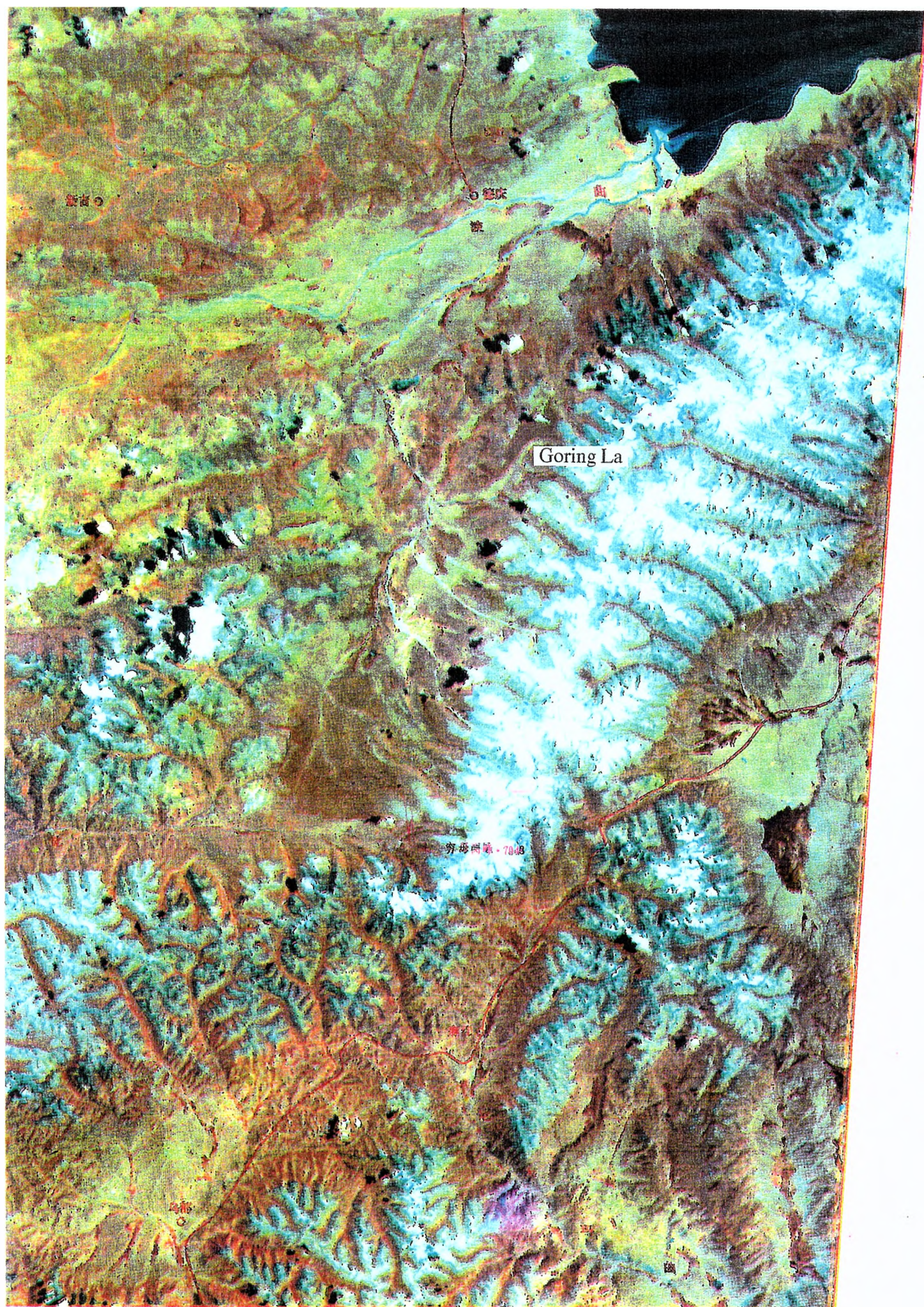


Plate 11: Chinese Landsat Image of Tibet

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Plate 13: Jomo Gangtse (7048m) and  
Chomri Momo from the S





Plate 14: Jomo Gangtse (7048m)  
from the ESE (telephoto JMT)





Plate 15: NE face of Jomo Gangtse group  
& 'Dong Qungmo' glacier, (JMT)





Plate 16 : Pogolha (6270m) & Tangmonja  
(6328m) from S, (JMT)



## Because it's there (and nobody knew it was)



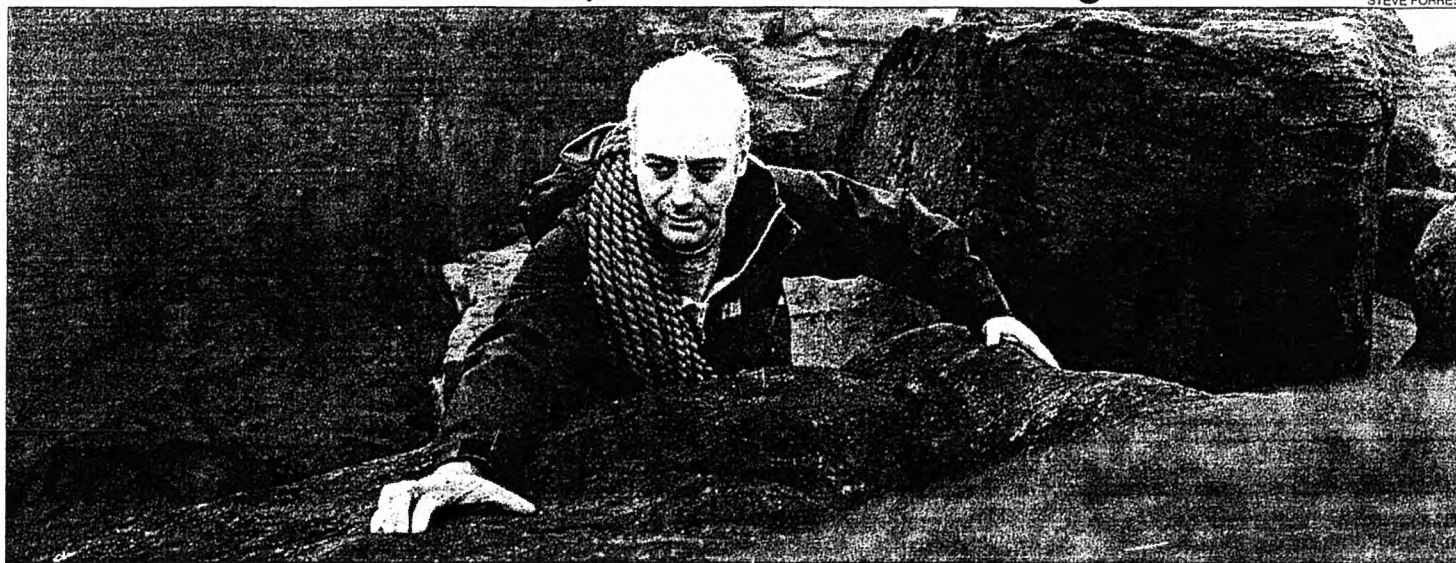
By DANIEL MCGRORY

A BRITISH climber plans to be the first to scale a peak in Tibet that nobody in the West knew existed. John Town believes that at 23,124 ft. Jomo Gangtse — "Mother of Snow Hill" — is the highest unscathed mountain in the world.

He "found" the peak by chance while poring over satellite maps in the archives of the Royal Geographical Society. Mr Town, 44, noticed the 7,048-metre peak jutting above a range that neither explorers nor climbers had heard of.

"I stared at it several times, turned the map upside down until I was sure," he said. "It is like an astronomer finding a new star, a once-in-a-lifetime experience. But the advantage for a mountaineer is that we can reach our discovery."

Mr Town, who is the Academic Secretary for Bradford University, has been given permission by China to lead a British expedition



John Town will lead an expedition to Tibet's Jomo Gangtse mountain, previously unknown to the West. He believes it is the world's highest unclimbed peak

to make the first attempt to climb Jomo Gangtse in July. "There is a race on. The Japanese are furious we found it and unless we climb it at our first attempt, then you can be sure they will be right behind us."

The Chinese authorities confirmed the existence of Jomo

Gangtse on a 1989 military map after charting the remote Tibetan plateau with the help of American satellite technology. Previously the peak had been mistaken for a much smaller neighbour.

"The Chinese are still very sensitive and secretive about this area and we climbers are not

meant to see such detailed maps," Mr Town said. "This is still such a mystery mountain in that there are only satellite images of it and no photo. We won't know what it looks like or the best way to climb it until we get there."

His expedition will begin its journey on yak and will have just a

month to discover a route across a glacier to the upper snow slopes and then to complete its climb to the summit. "The money will run out after that and none of us can get any more time off work," Mr Town said. "The weather will not be at its best but we cannot delay any longer or somebody else will

beat us to it." He expects the expedition to cost £23,000 but so far only half the money has been raised.

There are 14 peaks, including Everest, that are more than 8,000 m high. "The trouble is they have all been surveyed and climbed so many times there is

nothing new to discover about them," Mr Town said. "It is thought that there are 400 peaks that rise above 7,000 m and all are in Central Asia but only a handful appear on the Tibetan plateau."

The other members of the expedition will be Richard Wojtaszewski, 32, his wife Alyson Starling, 33, Huw Davies, 33, and Tony Ward, 29. None has climbed such a high peak before.

Jomo Gangtse lies at the southern end of the Nyanchen Tangla range at its junction with the 600-mile long Gangtse chain, a day's drive from the capital, Lhasa. Mr Town is relying on Chinese maps to guide him, many of which date from the past century. Most were compiled by Indian travellers, known as Pundits, who dared not spend much time calculating heights accurately. They surveyed the area for the Raj in the 19th century, disguising themselves as local people and their instruments as religious artefacts for fear of being captured.

Mr Town, from Ilkley, west Yorkshire, who is married with two children, said: "It's thrilling to think old Jomo has been there for thousands of years and no one knew it. The Chinese are still very secretive about it all but there is no doubt they have had help from American satellite technology, so we are sure we won't find it is a mountain mirage."

STEVE FORREST