

British Jomo Chu Expedition

Expedition Report

Supported by the British Mountaineering Council & Mount Everest Foundation

Members:

John Town, Gary Hill, Richard Wojtaszewski,
Derek Buckle, Alyson Starling, John Whiteley

Sponsors: Whiteley & Green Leeds & Holbeck Building Society

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Bikrum Pandey, Himalayan Expeditions, Kathmandu – Pelican Cargo – Barry Roberts/Jon
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– York College of FE –



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.

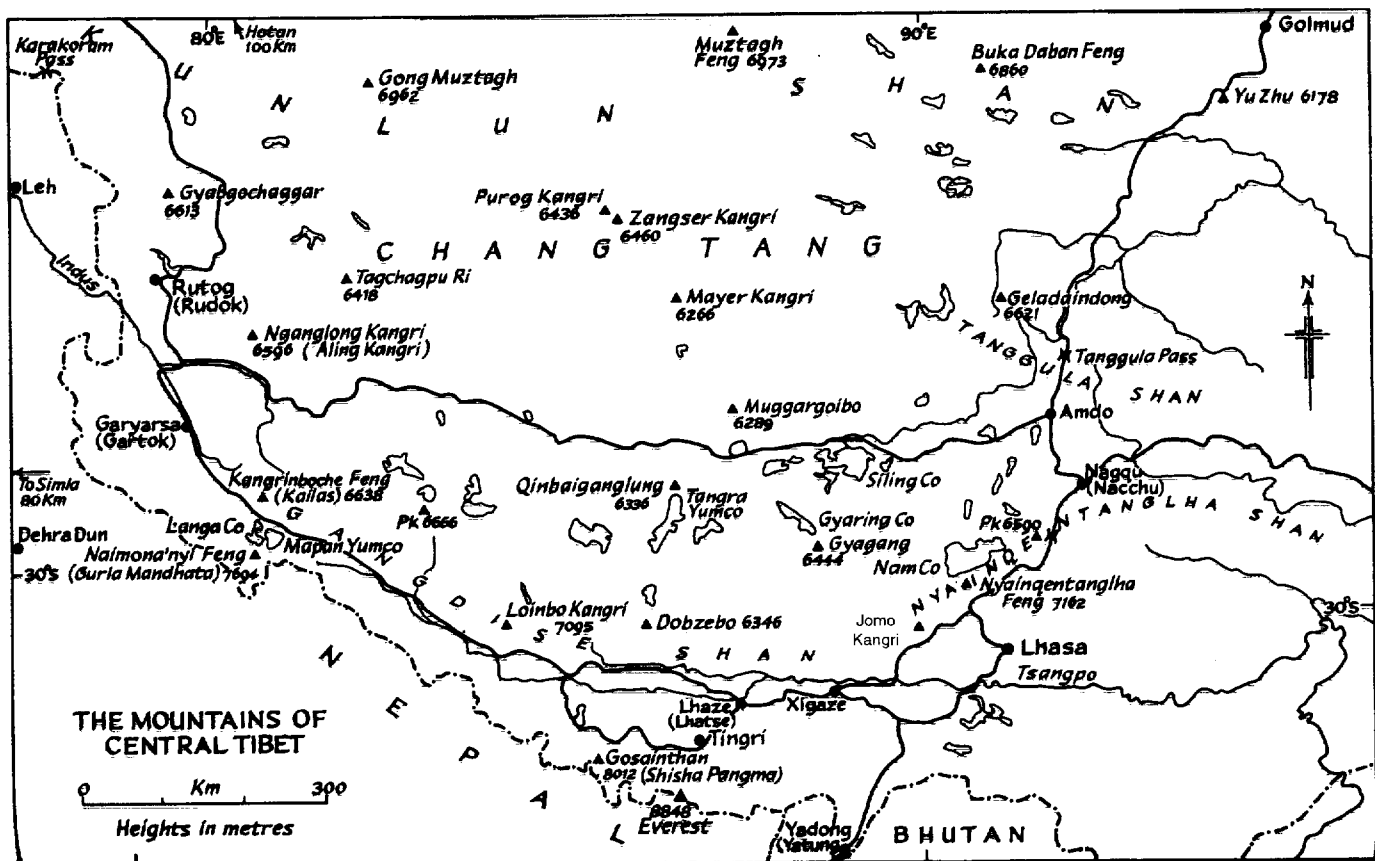
The range bends back SW to the south of Nagqu and runs for another 200 miles through much less accessible country, which has remained little-known until recent times (see below).

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.



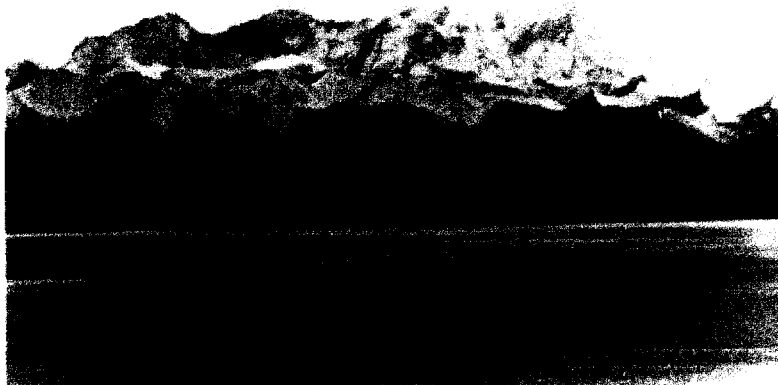


Plate 4: Nyanchen Tangla Group from N (Nam Tso lake)

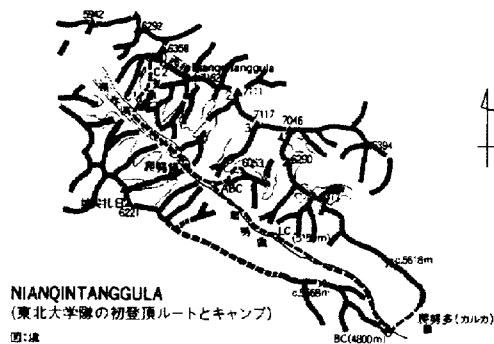


Plate 6: Unclimbed Nyanchen Tangla E Peak from SW
(Photo: Axt expedition/Iwa To Yuki)



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 in Autumn 1998 made a second attempt which reached 6800m. The fascinating story is told in the book 'The Triumph of Sepu Kangri' (see below).

Section of US Defence Mapping Agency TPC H10A

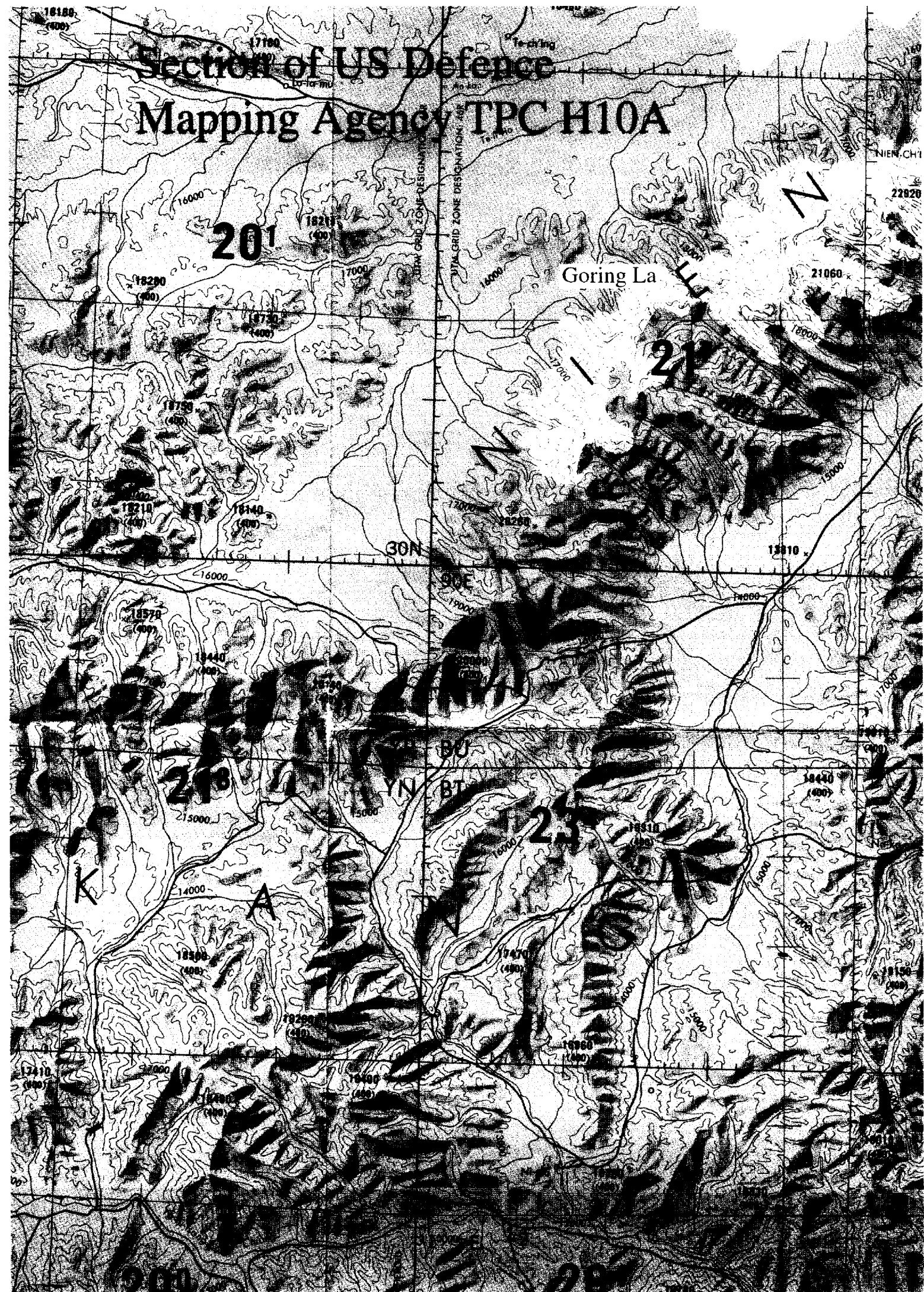




Plate 11: Chinese Landsat Image of Tibet

The Jomo Gangtse Massif - 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 8: 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 the departure of the 97 Expedition 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 9: Enhanced section of above showing Qungmo Massif

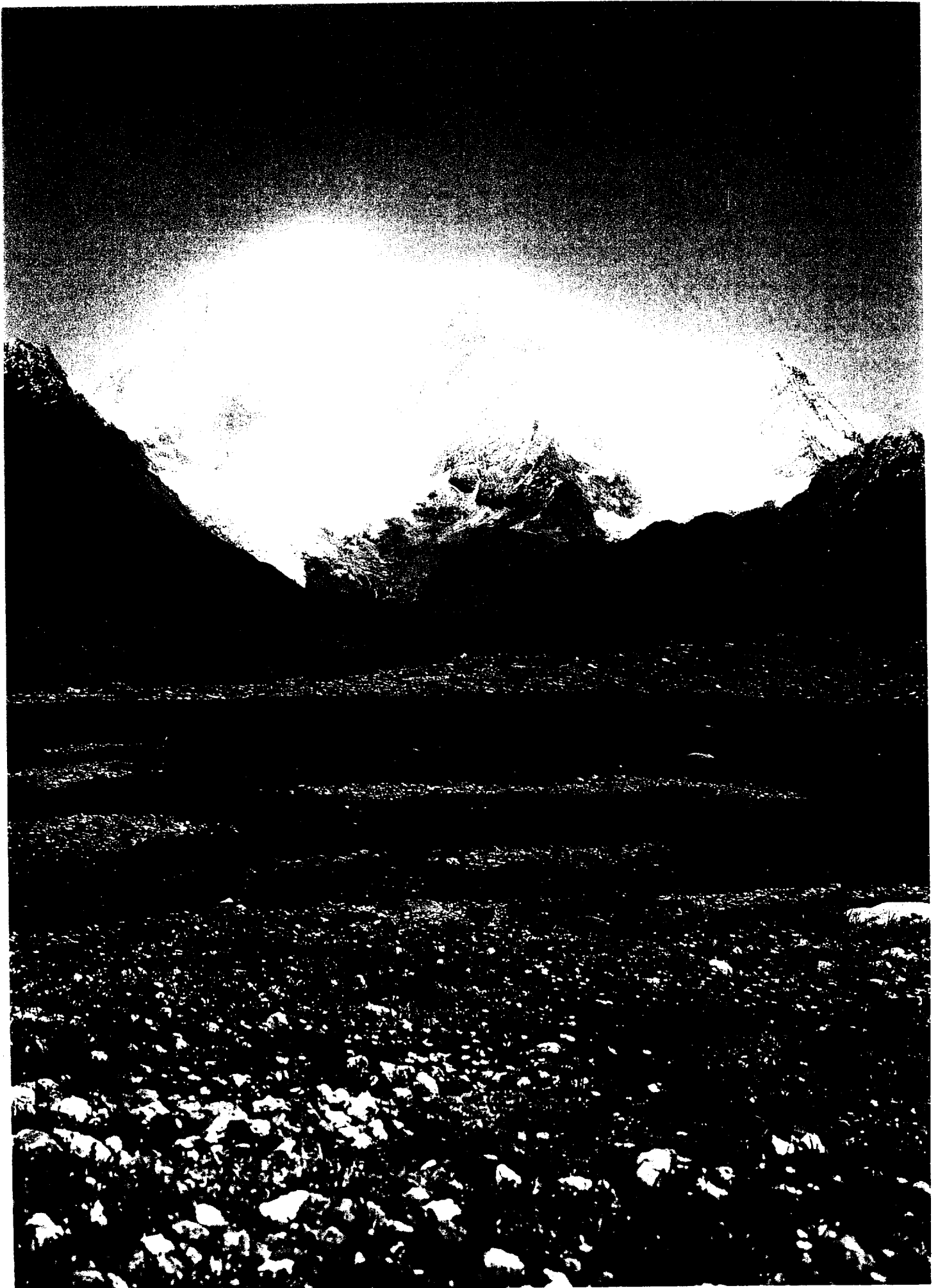
It is a sobering, though perhaps encouraging thought, that the second highest peak in one of the most extensive and highest mountain ranges in the world, should have disappeared from the map for a good part of recent mountaineering history.

The 1997 Expedition

In 1996 plans were started to try and reach the mountain but funding became a problem after it became apparent that a joint Chinese-Korean Expedition had beaten us to the first ascent in October 1996. In the end only Huw Davies and I made the trip in July/August 1997, hoping to make the first ascent of the peak by Westerners. The trip was highly successful in terms of exploring the area but the route and the weather proved more formidable than expected.

Objectives for 1999

The 1997 expedition revealed a wealth of attractive unclimbed 6000m peaks surrounding Jomo Gangtse. Attempts to get back in 1998 proved abortive but plans were laid to attack three or four of the peaks in 1999. Obvious targets were Kyama, a shattered granite fortress directly to the N of the main peak, which might offer a route from the SW – Pogolha, a serious granite spire above the head of



the Jomo Chu valley – Tangmonja, another sharp summit to its S, which looked to have a straightforward route up its long W ridge – and Xabu, a fine peak lying to the NE of the main massif, which would require a mini-expedition of its own. We requested and gained permission for Kyama, Tangmonja and Xabu, though once in Lhasa we had to explain where and what they were.

Journey to the Mountain

Saturday 10th to Thursday 14th July: Kathmandu

We flew with Qatar Airways to Kathmandu where Bikram Pandey of Himalayan Expeditions arranged our visas, freight collection and onward flights to Lhasa. They had been unable to get us on the Tuesday flight to Lhasa but we were away swiftly on the Thursday

Thursday 14th - Monday 19th July: Lhasa and Journey to the Mountain

The flight to Lhasa gave views of Everest, Lhotse, Cho Oyu and Makalu. After two days acclimatisation and sightseeing, we head off in two landcruisers and a lorry to spend a night at Yangpachen (4300m), two hours drive north. Our translator/liaison officer, Tachi, is a Tibetan who has spent ten years in India – our talented Sherpa cook Pemba Chiring looked after Chris Bonington's group on Sepu Kangri. Both are great fun and do a lot to keep us sane in the days to come. Yangpachen's thermal baths are something of a local tourist spot, but the guest house lacks running water or inside toilets. Next day, two hours of dirt road takes us the summit of the Zhogu La (5700m) and we descend to the Dugelam, the first big village. There is nowhere to camp here so we retreat up the road a couple of miles to put up the tents (5045m).

Frustration

Tuesday 20th - Monday 26th July

The following day brings beautiful weather as load the yaks and climb over the hill from Dugelam into the Jomo Chu valley. A four hour walk brings us to a site we used in '97, about a km below the moraine dam holding back the large lake at the end of the Dong Qungmo Glacier. The next day it rains and hails and this continues for a week. We establish a camp at 5525m below the W Ridge of Tangmonja but low cloud and fresh snow keep us at ABC.

Attempt on Tangmonja

Tuesday 27th - Friday 30th July

With signs of better weather, we occupied Camp 1, and on the 28th and 29th carried up to an equipment dump at about 5800m, at the start of the difficulties on the W Ridge of Tangmonja. The weather deteriorated badly during the afternoons of these two days, but we felt we had to go for it on the 30th. Despite low cloud and some fresh snow John, Richard, Gary and Derek set out on the initial horizontal arete of the W Ridge. The rock proved to be extremely loose and friable schist and after two hours the team had covered only half of the horizontal section. Conditions were dangerous and the chances of climbing the remaining 500m of rock in the day were zero. We turned back and Rick and Aly descended from Camp 1 the same day to join John W at ABC.

Machag

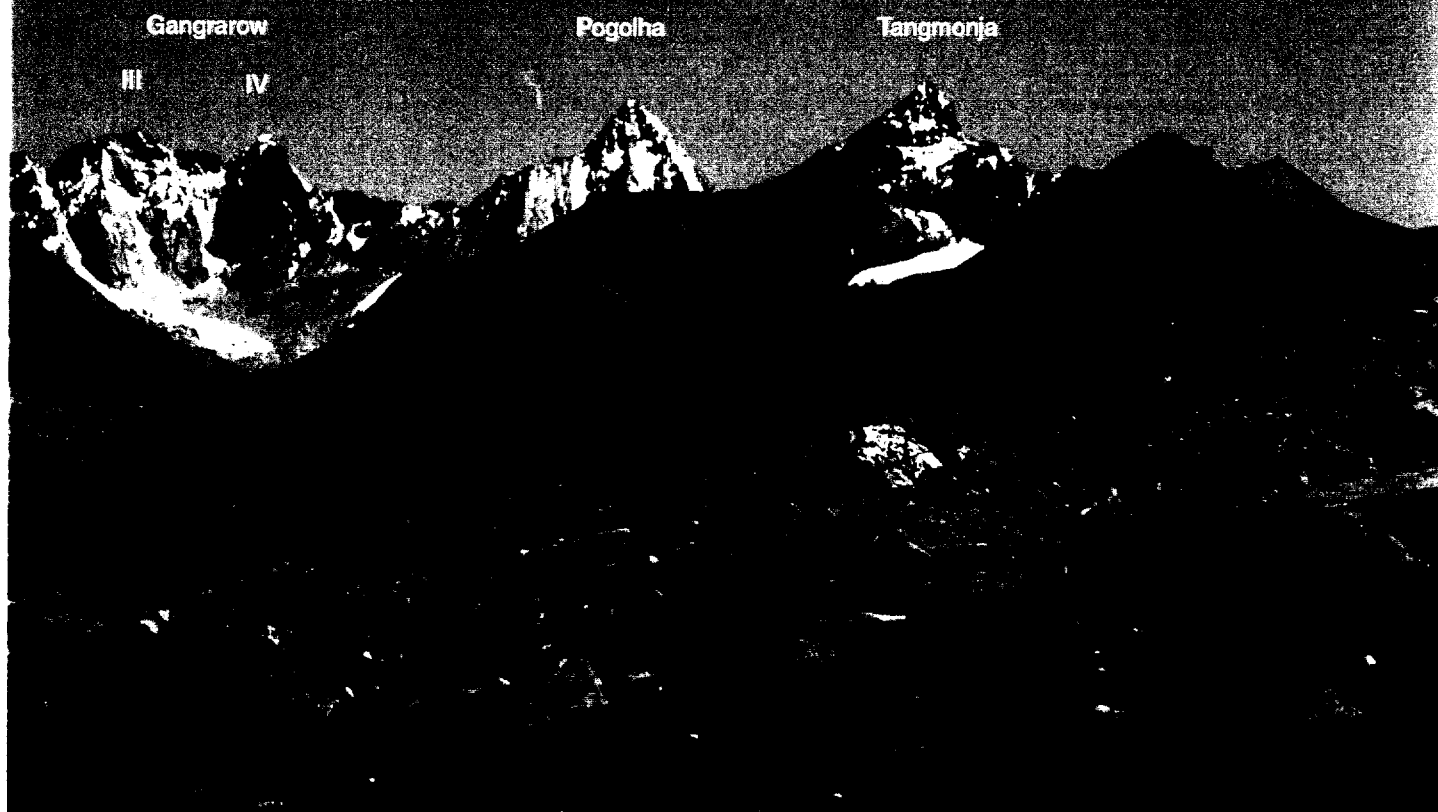
Saturday 31st July – Monday 2nd August

That night brought the heaviest overnight snow of the expedition, reinforcing the wisdom of turning back, but the sun came out later in the day, giving the chance of some kind of outing on the 1st August. Gary, John and Derek set out with the idea of scrambling to one of the lesser peaks on the ridge running S from Tangmonja, but then decided to try Machag (the Anvil – our name) the best looking one. This gave about 400m of excellent climbing at about AD- on mixed ground, first up ramps on the W face and then over granite pinnacles on the S Ridge to an improbable projecting 'cannon' of a summit. A descent of the full length of the shattered S ridge was abandoned in favour of returning via the route of ascent.

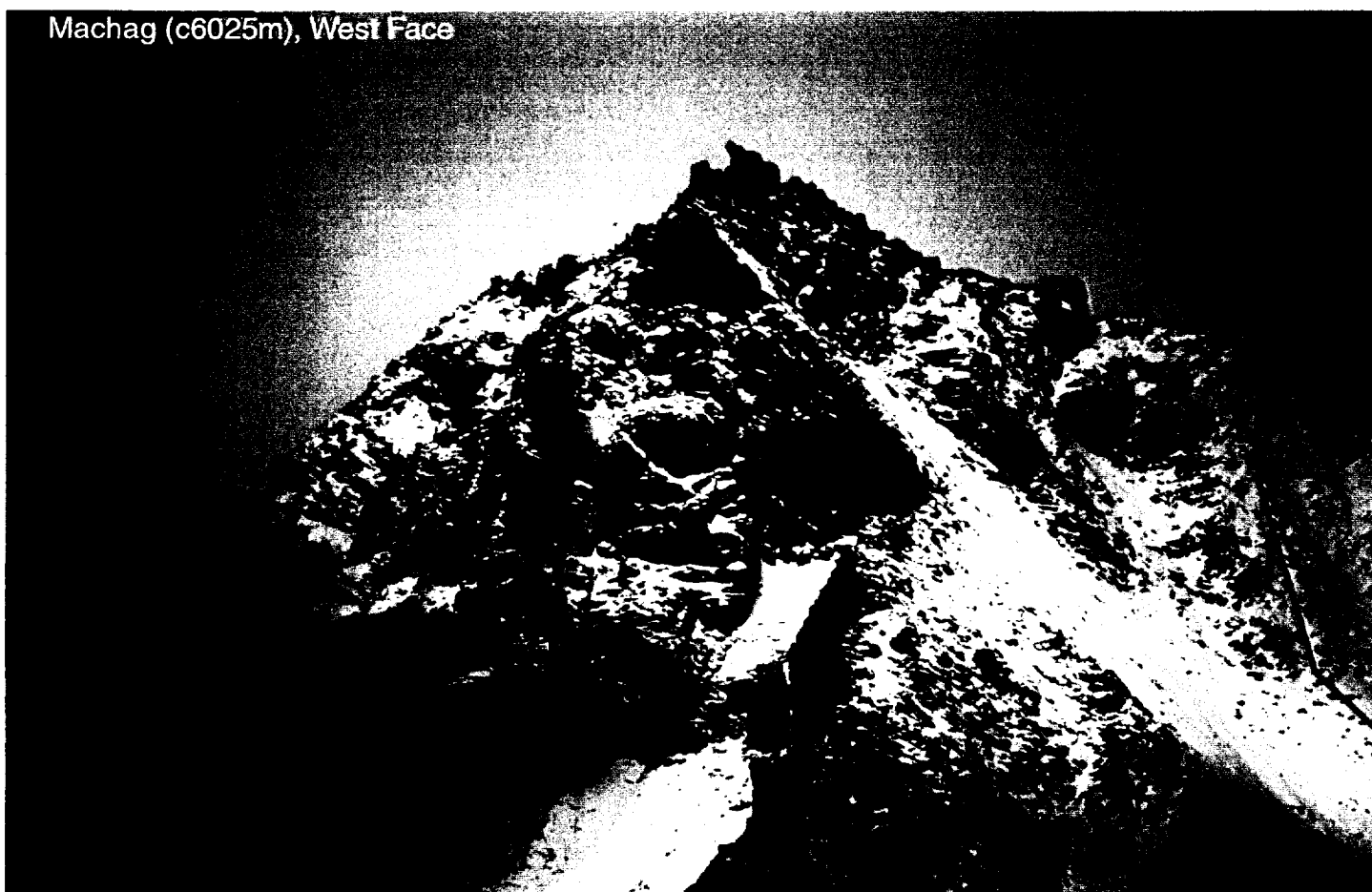


Climbing on W Ridge
of Tangmonja

Tangmonja (c6328m), West Ridge

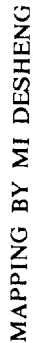


Machag (c6025m), West Face



田
返
中
坊

Map from 'Immortal Mountains of the Snow Kingdom', modified



5770, Gokaxa

Overland to Kathmandu

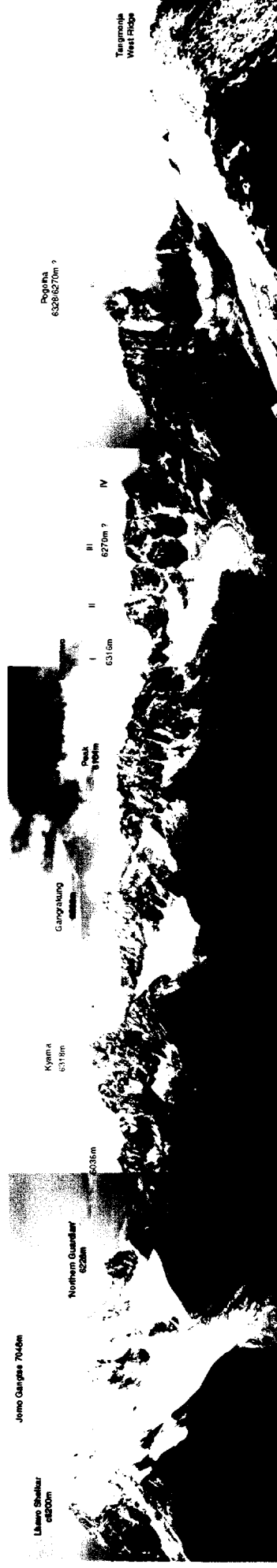
Tuesday 3rd – Tuesday 10th August

A last day was spent exploring the head of the Jomo Chu and possible alternative routes on Tangmonja from the N. Our chosen route home direct to Shigatse was barred by high water levels at the Tsangpo and we descended from ABC and drove back to Yangpachen in one long day. Another extended day took us round the long way to Shigatse via Lhasa. Heavy rain and no views made the bad road on to Tingri seem even worse, and this continued as we crossed the last pass and descended to Zhangmu

Expedition Diary

Day 1	Friday	July 9	Redhill			
Day 2	Saturday	July 10	transit		flight to Kathmandu, Qatar Airways	
Day 3	Sunday	July 11	Kathmandu			
Day 4	Monday	July 12	Kathmandu			
Day 5	Tuesday	July 13	Kathmandu		planned flight to Lhasa booked up	
Day 6	Wednesday	July 14	Kathmandu			
Day 7	Thursday	July 15	Lhasa		flight to Lhasa	3700m
Day 8	Friday	July 16	Lhasa		sightseeing and acclimatisation	3700m
Day 9	Saturday	July 17	Lhasa			3700m
Day 10	Sunday	July 18	Yangpachen		road journey in, hot springs	4300m
Day 11	Monday	July 19	Road Camp		road journey in	5045m
Day 12	Tuesday	July 20	ABC	totally clear	walk-in	5030m
Day 13	Wednesday	July 21	ABC		acclimatisation	5030m
Day 14	Thursday	July 22	ABC	rain/hail p.m.	establish C1, rain/hail p.m.	5030m
Day 15	Friday	July 23	ABC	rain/snow/hail		5030m
Day 16	Saturday	July 24	ABC			5030m
Day 17	Sunday	July 25	ABC			5030m
Day 18	Monday	July 26	ABC			5030m
Day 19	Tuesday	July 27	Camp 1	mixed	climb up to C1	5525m
Day 20	Wednesday	July 28	Camp 1	winds/snow late a.m.	recce to 5800m on Tangmonja	5525m
Day 21	Thursday	July 29	Camp 1	winds/snow late a.m.	recce to 5800m on Tangmonja	5525m
Day 22	Friday	July 30	Camp 1	low cloud	attempt reaches 5920m on Tangmonja, 3 members descend to ABC	5525m
Day 23	Saturday	July 31	Camp 1	heavy overnight snow		5525m
Day 24	Sunday	August 1	Camp 1	good, thunder p.m.	ascent of Machag 6025m	5525m
Day 25	Monday	August 2	ABC		others descend to ABC	5030m
Day 26	Tuesday	August 3	ABC	OK, overcast	Jomo Chu exploration	5030m
Day 27	Wednesday	August 4	Yangpachen	good	walk-out, drive to Yangpachen	4300m
Day 28	Thursday	August 5	Shigatse	good	drive to Shigatse via Lhasa	
Day 29	Friday	August 6	Tingri	heavy rain	drive to Tingri	
Day 30	Saturday	August 7	Zhangmu	rain		
Day 31	Sunday	August 8	Kathmandu			
Day 32	Monday	August 9	Kathmandu			
Day 33	Tuesday	August 10	home			

Panorama from West Ridge of Tangmonja c5800m



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.

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Plate 19	Tangmonja, telephoto, JMT
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Sources

Books

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2. 'A Sketch of the Geography & Geology of the Himalaya Mountains & Tibet',
3. S.G.Burrard & H.H.Hayden, Govt. of India, Calcutta, 1907-1908
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6. 'The Mountains of Central Tibet', Michael Ward, Alpine Journal 1996, p ? -219
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10. Iwa To Yuki ?, p75, Chronicle, first ascent Nianqingtanggula
11. Iwa To Yuki, Review of the Year 1986,, p42-43, Nianqingtanggula
12. AAJ 1990, p308, Axt report
13. AAJ 1987, Tohoku Expedition report
14. Report of the British Nyanchen Tangla Expedition 1997, Alpine Club Library

Satellite Imagery & Maps

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

Maps

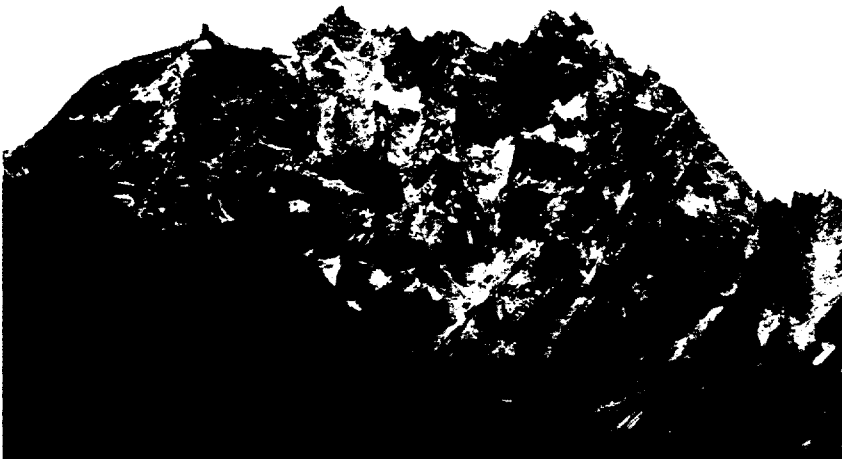
14. USDA Tactical Pilotage Chart
15. High Mountain Peaks of Tibet, Chinese Map, (RGS Library)



Xabu, telephoto from below Xogu La



Xabu from Machag



Kyama from the SE

Expedition Members

John Whitely (52)

Company Director

John, from Holmfirth, runs the family firm producing high quality woolen cloth for export. He has traveled and climbed widely, not all of it on business. He remains on speaking terms with fellow Holmfirthers the Burgess twins

mountaineering and has taught outdoor pursuit activities for several years.

John Town (46)

Registrar at Loughborough University.

Married, with 2 children, John is a member of the Alpine Club who has organised expeditions to a wide variety of little explored areas.

Derek Buckle (55)

Research Chemist.

Married, with two grown up children, Derek retired from a career with Smith Kline Beecham to climb and consult. A member of the Alpine Club he has climbed widely in the Alps, Caucasus, Canada and elsewhere

Gary Hill (36)

Lecturer at University. College Northampton

A member of the Alpine Club, Gary has climbed extensively in the Alps, Caucasus, and Himalayas



Tachi

Pemba Chiring

Richard

Wojtaszewski (34)

Lecturer at York College of Further Education.

Born and brought up in Oldham, Richard has climbed in the Alps, Peru, Ladakh, Mongolia, Caucasus, & Karakorum. Richard is a qualified instructor of rock-climbing and

Alyson Starling (36)

Teacher/ Further Education Lecturer

Alyson has a variety of UK climbing experience and is qualified to teach rock-climbing and canoeing. She has experience in the Alps, Indian Himalayas and the Kamchatka

Accounts

Income

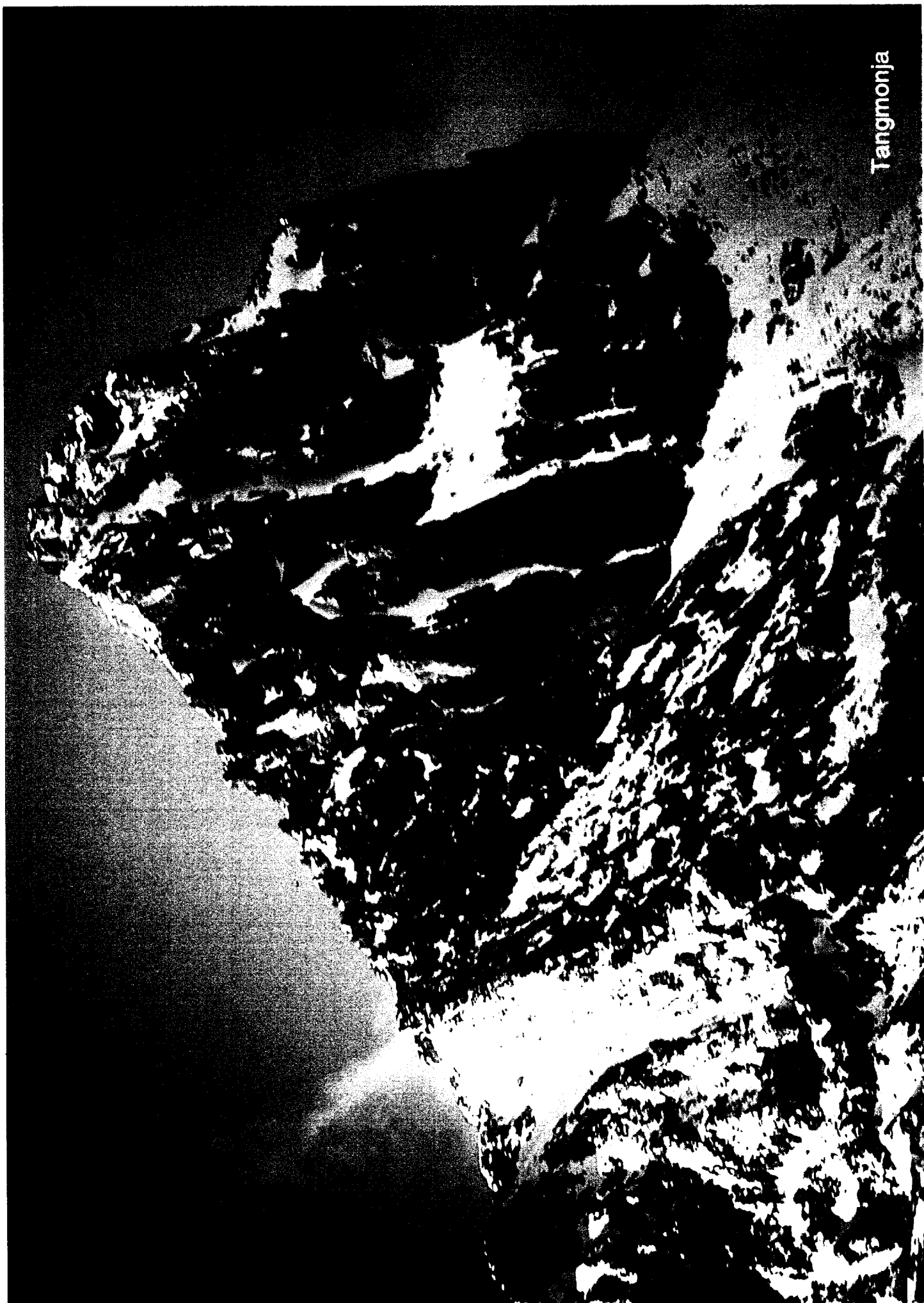
Members contributions	£ 16,272
B.M.C	£ 2,300
Mount Everest Foundation	£ 700
Leeds & Holbeck BS	£ 600
Whiteley & Green Ltd	£ 1,500

£ 21,372

Expenditure

Permits, Transport, Accommodation and Subsistence in Tibet	£ 15,398
Flights	£ 3,487
Freight	£ 477
Visas	£ 536
Mountain Food	£ 274
Equipment	£ 89
Medicines	£ 138
Accommodation in Kathmandu	£ 402
Office, Fundraising and Misc Costs	£ 571

£ 21,372





Machag