

Book Reviews

EDITED BY JOHN THACKRAY

Mountains of the Middle Kingdom: Exploring the High Peaks of China and Tibet. Galen Rowell. Sierra Club Books, San Francisco, in association with The American Alpine Club, 1983. XV + 191 pages, 47 black and white and 85 color photographs, 2 maps. \$40.00.

In the preface to this well-researched, beautifully-published and magnificently-illustrated book, the author quickly tells us that he has not written a mountain book or a travel narrative about China. Instead, he has attempted "to rediscover these mountain regions, to blend their history, geography, culture and environmental and political change during the Communist regime into a modern parallel of an old-style expedition narrative." It is Rowell's goal "to recreate the past journeys of explorers and mountaineers in six major mountain regions, then to follow each with my own modern counterpart . . . to show how the land, the peoples, the wildlife and mountain experiences have changed."

This is a large order but Rowell throws himself into it as eagerly as he has assaulted dozens of mountains in his career. At one moment, he is telling the story of Terris Moore and the remarkable four-man Sikong Expedition that climbed Minya Konka (Gongga Shan) in 1932; soon after, he is in another wild part of the Szechwan western border, making a possible first ascent of what he calls Anye Machin, and making friends with the fierce Golok tribesmen who live in the area. Rowell does not use the Pinyin system of romanizing Chinese names; instead, he uses classical spellings. However, when he finds that these do not fit local usage, he makes minor alterations. (Thus, Amne becomes Anye and Takla Makan becomes Taklimakan.) I found myself particularly interested in the book's useful and well-researched "Chronology of Mountain Exploration" by John Martinek, its section on the "Exploration of the Tian Shan" and another section on the "Exploration of Tibet": all are at the end of the book.

Most readers will be drawn to what Rowell writes about Tibet's highest mountain, known variously as Chomolungma, Jomolungma, Sagarmatha or Everest. He deals with the early British expeditions and, later, focuses on the successful Chinese expedition of 1960. During this expedition, Chu Yin-Hua distinguished himself by taking off his clumsy boots and climbing the Second Step of the north ridge in his stockings, thereby losing all of his toes. He was, however, able to bring Gongbu and Wang Fu-Zhou up to him, thus enabling the three to make the first ascent from the Chinese side. There is further concentration on the Mallory-Irvine story and the mystery that's been compounded by the ice axe found at 8500 meters by the second successful Chinese expedition of

1975. There's further mystification when Wang Hong-Bo, of the same climbing party, said he found the corpse of a long-dead Englishman at 8100 meters and buried it in a crevasse—a story later denied by the party leader.

Rowell does not try to sort out what these stories mean. Nor does he try to judge the good and bad features of the Chinese annexation of Tibet. He was not in Tibet prior to 1979 and never saw the old Tibet; however, he sees and photographs the destruction of beautiful monasteries. He deplores this and the almost complete annihilation of the once abundant wildlife, although domestic cattle certainly now provide more meat for Tibetans. He may not realize that many Tibetans who were urged or forced by the Chinese to kill wild animals believed that the pressure was aimed at destroying their religion rather than aiding their diet, for the Buddhist religion considers all life to be sacred.

The section on the Goloks, who live miles from what we consider civilization, is gripping. Offhand, one might not think that we and the Goloks share modern problems in common, but when a companion of Rowell's checked some fresh rain water for acid content in a small Golok village where much coal is burned, he found a pH reading of 2.25, "one of the most acidic precipitation samples ever recorded." One world indeed!

ROBERT H. BATES

Nepal Himalaya. Shiro Shirahata. Yama-Kei Publishers, Tokyo, 1983. In the United States, Heian International, P.O. Box 2402, South San Francisco. 232 pages. 115 full-page color plates (10" x 14½") with commentary on each, map showing geographic positions and altitudes of 140 peaks, plus introductory essay and photographer's notes. Boxed. Price \$75.

The superb pictures in this outstanding book are the result of three years of arduous and dedicated effort, whose purpose it is to show the major peaks of Nepal and as far as possible the variety and personality of each. Shirahata separates his mountains into eight regions, marks their heights and locations on a map and gives special information about each peak pictured, such as the routes of ascent, expeditions involved or circumstances connected with the taking of the photograph. This book is not only one of the most splendid collections of photographs yet published of the Nepalese Himalaya but is also a pictorial dictionary of Nepal's mountains for anyone interested in climbing there. It should be noted that it limits itself to the mountains themselves in all their stark beauty. There are few foregrounds and no pictures at all of the people of the country in all their rich variety. This important book, except for a brief introduction, is about the mountains only and as such should be admired and used for years to come. The superlative quality of the photographs and their superb printing deserve special recognition.

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