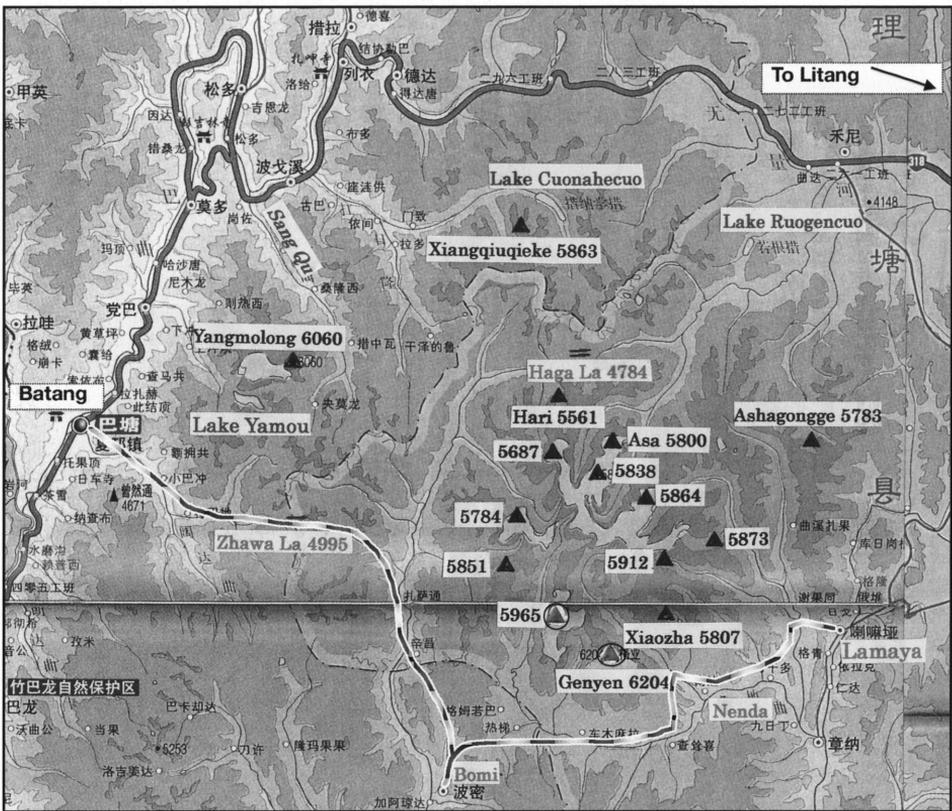


# A JOURNEY TO WESTERN SICHUAN

*A return visit to the Shaluli Shan reveals troublesome changes in the mostly unclimbed peaks of the Litang Plateau, China.*

TAMOTSU NAKAMURA



Peak identification of the Shaluli Shan, on the Litang Plateau of the West Sichuan Highlands. Nakamura believes only four or five peaks in this region have been climbed, including Dangchezhengla and Central Peak, both lower summits of the Yangmolong massif. The dashed line south of the peaks is Nakamura's horse caravan route in 1999 to retrace the footsteps of early explorers from Lamaya to Batang. *Tamotsu Nakamura*

**A**fter a fascinating visit to the eccentric collection of Christian churches in the upper Salween basin of northwest Yunnan, this pair of old explorers, Tsuyoshi Nagai (77) and I (75) headed to the Litang Plateau. We wanted to explore the Xiangqiuqieke massif (5,700–5,800m) from the southern side, which no climber has visited, and Yangmolong (6,060m), which no climber has

summitted. We then planned to horse-caravan through the heart of the Litang Plateau from west to east in 10 days, crossing two high passes between 4,800m and 5,100m.

Things went wrong very quickly.

First, hostile Tibetans blocked us from entering one southern valley. Then, we could not organize a caravan across the Litang Plateau because a nomad chief refused us horses and muleteers, saying that villagers would not travel to distant places no matter what we paid them. This seems to be the paradox of development in Tibet and West China: the frontiers are becoming less accessible.

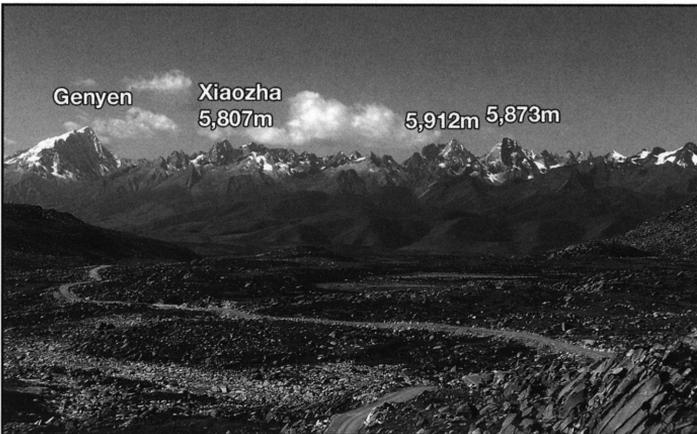
Two decades have passed since I started my odyssey of discovery to the borderlands of West China. The changes have been drastic. When I think of my early visits, beginning in 1990, it feels like a different world. The Chinese national project called the “West Development Drive” has transformed the lifestyle of Tibetans in remote regions.

Twenty years ago there was only one shabby rest-house in Lijiang, a homeland of the Naxi Minority’s Dongba culture, located at 3,200 meters near the foot of the Jade Dragon Snow Mountains (Yulong Xueshan) in Yunnan. Originally an arid, windy, dusty Tibetan town like you might see in a Western movie, Lijiang is now a large city with new Tibetan-Chinese buildings designed for visitors. The old town of Lijiang is listed as a UNESCO World Heritage Center and attracts thousands of tourists each year. But artificial Tibetan villages have sprung up specifically for sightseeing. Purely for marketing reasons, in 2001 the Chinese government changed the name of another town on the Zhongdiang Plateau from Zhongdiang (the historical local name) to “Shangri-La.” And then there is the newly registered UNESCO World Natural Heritage protected area called the “Three Parallel Rivers of Yunnan”—the gorges of the Yangtze, Mekong, and Salween rivers—which are surrounded by the sacred “Meili Snow Mountains” on the Mekong-Salween Divide near Deqen County. These areas, too, are in a great bustle today.

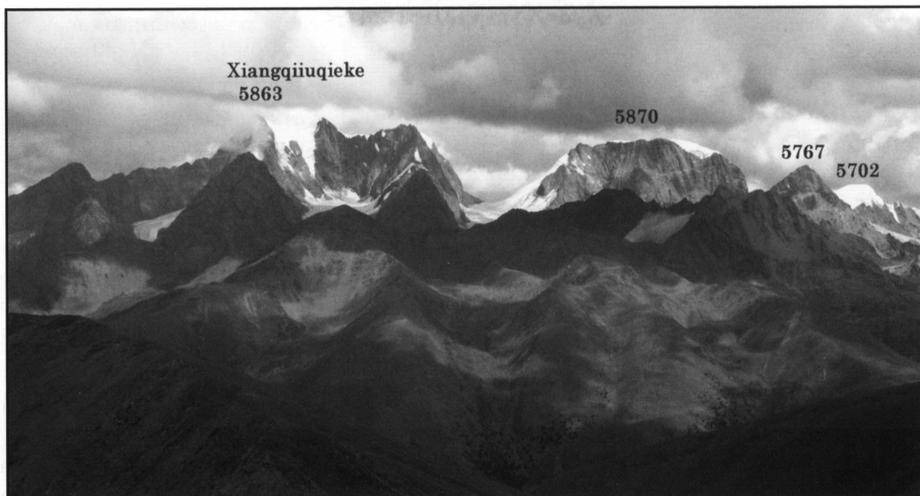
Near Chengdu in Sichuan, Siguniang National Park is crowded with trekkers and climbers. Modern hotels provide every comfort. Minya Konka and neighboring mountains in Daocheng County are in the same situation. Access roads now speed domestic and foreign tourists from site to site and sight to sight.

Ironically, as development progresses with modern conveniences, many of the remote areas are growing more isolated and depopulated. Old trade paths are abandoned in favor of modern roads. Motorbikes replace horses.

In the autumn of 1999, our already



East flank of Genyen (6,204m) and neighboring peaks to the northeast, including the spectacular unclimbed Peak 5,873m. Photo taken from Three Smith Brothers Pass, 4,830m. Tomas Obtulovic



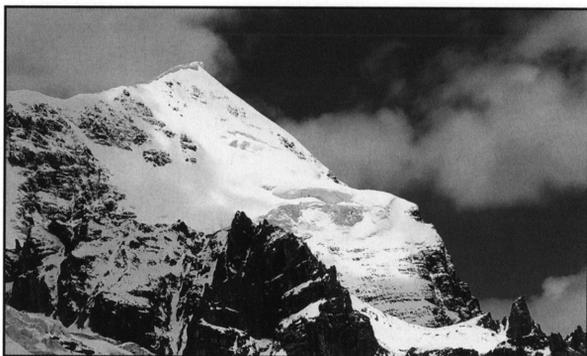
South-southeast face of Xiangqiuqieke (5,863m). *Derek Buckle*

elderly team retraced an old trade path westward from Lamaya (southwest of Litang) to Batang. It required a weeklong horse caravan detouring south of Genyen (6,204m) over two high passes. Many early explorers who traveled to Lhasa from Chengdu (or vice versa) used this difficult trunk route, including Gabe and Yuc, Hamilton Bower, T. T. Cooper, William Gill, F. M. Bailey, Japanese monks, and more. A Nepalese delegation followed this path to reach Beijing. However, in recent years the only travelers you'll see on the historic route are nomads pasturing their yaks. Everyone else, including local Tibetans, reach Batang from Lamaya in an easy day by driving a well-maintained road.

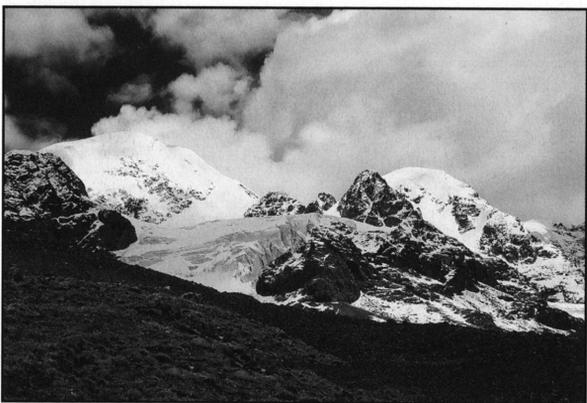
Another change is that villagers are growing rich off the caterpillar fungus, a strange fungal growth that consumes moth larvae at a certain altitude. The fungus-caterpillar is used in traditional medicine to provide energy, especially of the male erotic kind, along with other medical benefits. Younger generations of Tibetans have been infected with a worship of money from the caterpillar-fungus trade. The young Tibetans want very high rates for hiring their motorbikes, while horses are no longer available. A 2009 British expedition suffered serious robbery at their base camp in a valley beneath Yangmolong in the northern side.

Tibetan villages used to welcome us into their houses, where we could spend the night. But now the government's control over eastern Tibet is tight and strict, so everything is much more sensitive. In 2009, we were not allowed to stay in any Tibetan villagers' houses in the upper Yi'ong Tsangpo, presumably because of an order from the Public Security Bureau. Permits for foreigners to unopened areas in eastern Tibet are affected. We did not hear of any expedition, either climbing or exploration, in eastern Tibet in 2010.

Compared with the serious flood damages from extraordinary weather in Yunnan, the 2010 climate in the West Sichuan Highlands was rather stable. At least the roads were not blocked up. On July 27, before we even imagined our troubles to come, Nagai and I departed Chengdu in the company of staff from Sichuan Earth Expeditions Inc. Our guide was Pan Yayu (47, Han), our cook Zhong Jinbing (41, Han), and our driver Wang Yonglian (43, Han). Pan Yayu speaks perfect Japanese and has an excellent reputation as a guide. Unfortunately, his



South face of the still-unclimbed main peak of Yangmolong (6,060m).  
*Tamotsu Nakamura*



Dangchezhengla (5,833m) on left, and the central peak (Makara, 6,033m) on right. Both are lower peaks of the Yangmolong massif and have been climbed, though the ascent of Makara has not been confirmed.  
*Tamotsu Nakamura*



Northeast face of the main peak of Yangmolong. *Derek Buckle*

Han Chinese ethnicity makes it hard for him to negotiate with Tibetans, which makes him unsuitable for the sensitive areas of eastern Tibet. As the great British explorer F. M. Bailey suggested a century ago, you had better employ a Tibetan guide while traveling off the beaten track in Tibetan regions.

We drove 520 kilometers to Yajiang in a day. On the next day, July 28, we reached a village north of Batang by driving the Sichuan-Tibet Highway through the fertile Litang Plateau. The plateau's summer landscape is stunningly beautiful: green pastures, gentle streams, and hundreds of grazing yaks, all at 4,000–4,600m of elevation. We were surprised to see many Chinese university students bicycling to Lhasa. They told us that it would take 25 days to get there from Chengdu and that this has become a modern pilgrimage. We also found an abundance of blue poppies (*Meconopsis*). The Sichuan-Tibet Highway has received new tunnels between Haizi Shan Pass and Batang, an important shortcut.

The world-famous "Litang Horse Festival," which draws foreign tourists on the first of August each year, was suddenly canceled in 2010 for reasons unstated, but probably political. The authorities may have seen signs of unrest and resistance among the warlike Khampa people (ethnic Tibetans), but no

one responded to my questions on the topic.

When we reached the access to Tarilong Valley at road maintenance station 336, a local district secretary advised us against entering this valley because the villagers were excluding outsiders. He told us that not even the villager's chief could administrate them. This is where we gave up on our plan to unveil Xiangqiuqieke.

*"Anything happens in China; nothing is impossible in China."*

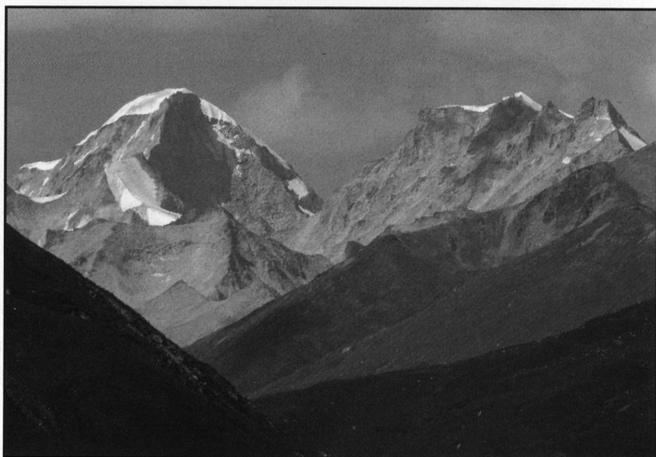
When faced with difficulties during my Tibetan travels, I always repeat these words. I cannot return home from an expensive expedition to the eastern Tibetan plateau without some kind of fruit. Having resigned our original plan to explore the Xiangqiuqieke massif from the south and to traverse the Litang Plateau from west to east, we decided to survey and identify peaks of the Shaluli Shan in Litang Plateau as best we could, since many peaks here remain unknown. As usual, I carried with me maps of the mountains for the identifications.



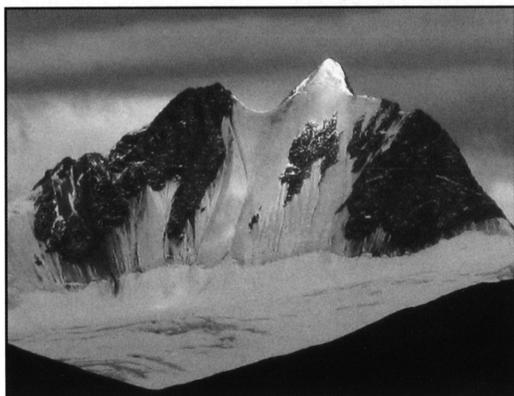
The southeast face of Peak 5,687m, as seen from Zhawa La (4,995m).  
*Tamotsu Nakamura*



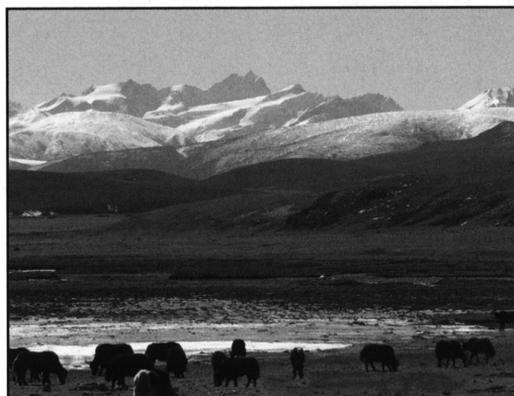
West flanks of peaks 5,838m (left) and 5,784m. *Tamotsu Nakamura*



North face of Asa (5,800m) on left and northeast face of Hari (5,561m) on right, taken from Heranseba. *Tamotsu Nakamura*



Telephoto of north face of Ashagonge in summer. *Tamotsu Nakamura*



North face of Ashagonge (5,783m) in autumn. *Tamotsu Nakamura*

In order to make this survey, I viewed the Xiangqiuqieke and its eastern peaks from the Sichuan-Tibet Highway, taking pictures of as many as I could. I also visited the Genyen massif to photograph its little-known rock peaks. And I gathered and reviewed as many pictures as possible from past expeditions to Genyen, Xiangqiuqieke, and Yangmolong. Very helpful for peak identification were a panorama from Genyen in 1988, my journeys in 1999 and 2000, photos from the 2005 Yamanashi expedition, Tomas Oblutovic's visit in 2009, Derek Buckle's in 2009, and Tim Boetler's in 2010.

After we changed plans, we first ascended from a monastery in the new nomad village of Muye (Deda District, Batang County) to 4,700 meters. From here we could take photos of the north face of Xiangqiuqieke massif. The next day we reconnoitered the prominent three peaks south of the Sichuan-Tibet Highway. My pictures were taken from a Tibetan village at 4,310 meters. After that we drove to Lamaya to have a grand panoramic view of the east face of the Genyen massif from Three Smith Brothers Pass, at 4,830m. Road

conditions have improved considerably from my previous visit here in 1999. The driving time in 2010 was one-fourth what it had been.

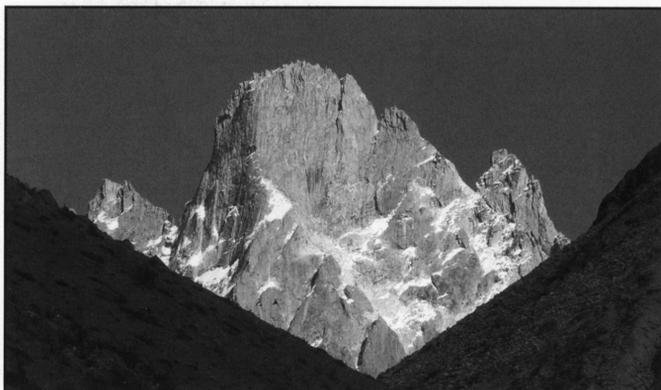
#### APPROACHES TO XIANGQIUQIEKE AND YANGMOLONG

I would like to describe the available information about these exceptional and little-known neighboring massifs with their collection of peaks.

Only two parties familiar with climbing have approached the peaks of Xiangqiuqieke (5,863m), the first being Nagai and me in the autumn of 1999. We saw two 5,700m peaks from the south while making the horse caravan journey from Lamaya to Batang. Next came a Japanese party from the Yamanashi Mountaineering Federation, in 2005; they reconnoitered the northern side. From the Sichuan-Tibet Highway, they reached a lookout point with a panoramic view of the north face beyond Lake Counahecou. But their weather was not very good.

In 2009 a British expedition to Yangmolong did not approach Xiangqiuqieke, but they managed to photograph its south-west face from their advanced base camp. A New Zealand team plans to attempt the main summit in September-October 2011.

There are five routes for approaching the massifs of Xiangqiuqieke and Yangmolong. Though all are inhabited by ethnic Tibetans, their nature and attitude toward foreigners varies from valley to valley. I'll introduce the valleys from north to south.



Peak ca 5,600m in the Garmunei Gou drainage. *Tomas Obtulovic*



West face of Peak 5,851m from trail to Zhawa La. *Tamotsu Nakamura*

#### XIANGQIUQIEKE:

1) One can reach the north side of Xiangqiuqieke from the entrance to a new nomad village at 4,300m on the Sichuan-Tibet Highway, 10km east of the Haizi Shan Pass. A Japanese team from Yamanashi followed this route with no problem in 2005.

2) One can approach both the north and south sides from road maintenance station 336, which leads to the Tarilong Valley. This is where Tibetan intransigence forced us to abandon our plan.

#### YANGMOLONG:

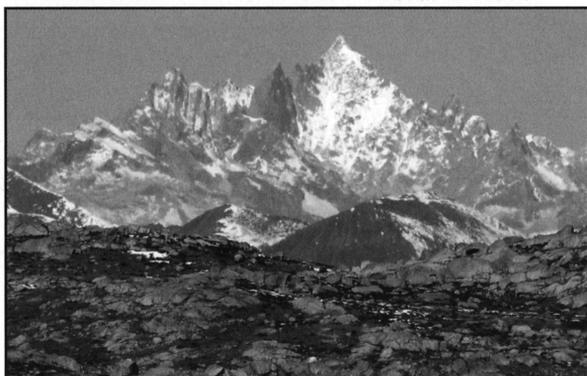
3) Geographically, the Sang Qu-Sanglongxi valley between station 336 and Dongba is the best route to reach the north side of Yangmolong. But it is the most dangerous due to the bad nature of villagers. This is where in 2009 a British party was robbed and levied extraordinary expenses for motorbikes. That same year American and German parties were forced to turn to the southern side of Yangmolong. Villagers told them that foreigners would cause catastrophe. Since then the Batang County government has prohibited foreigners from entering this valley. Several years ago a British party encountered a similar reaction from locals who had been agitated by lamas when they entered a valley to attempt the unclimbed Kawarani (5,992m) in the Gonkara Shan range.

4) A route from Dongba in the east leads to the north-west side of Yangmolong. In this valley the Tibetans are friendly and welcome foreigners. In autumn of 2010 two groups used the route: a Japanese student party from the Waseda University that reconnoitered an unclimbed 5,850m peak and an American-Chinese expedition that went to the north face of Yangmolong.



East face of Peak 5,912m. *Tamotsu Nakamura*

5) The easiest access is from Dongba in the east via Zhongba to reach the south face of Yangmolong. Villagers here are cooperative and support expeditions. Nagai and I followed this route to reconnoiter the south face of Yangmolong in June, 2000. Since then several parties have used this approach. A Japanese party from the Hengduan Mountains Club reached the south side and made the first ascent of Dangchezhengla (5,833m) in October, 2002. They experienced no conflicts with villagers.



Southeast face of Peak 5,912m. *Tamotsu Nakamura*

#### A BRIEF HISTORY OF CLIMBING IN THE YANGMOLONG MASSIF

The following is a brief chronicle of climbing and explorations in the Yangmolong massif. The high points of the Yangmolong massif consist of Yangmolong (6,060m) in the east, Dangchezhengla (locally known as Bongonzhong, 5,833m) in the west, and Central Peak (locally known as Makara, 6,033m) in between.

1991: A Japanese party from Nippon University approached from the north and attempted the north face of Yangmolong's main peak (6,060m). Bad weather and avalanche danger forced their retreat from about 5,400m.

2000: In June Tamotsu Nakamura and Tsuyoshi Nagai reconnoitered access to the south face.

2002: In June a Japanese expedition of the Hengduan Mountains Club (Kyoto) made the first ascent of Dangchezhengla at the western end of the Yangmolong massif. They climbed from the south via the central glacier between Dangchezhengla and the central peak (Makara), and reached the summit via the east ridge from the col. There is a detailed account of this climb in the 2008 *AAJ*, pg 422.

2003: There is information that a Korean party made the first ascent of the central peak (Makara) from the south via the central glacier and west ridge. The 2010 *AAJ* mentioned this briefly (pg 338), but the information has not been confirmed.

2007: In March a three-person Chinese team unsuccessfully attempted Makara, probably on their way to Yangmolog. Liu Xinan, a top Chinese climber, fell to his death during the descent (originally reported in the *AAJ 2008*, pg 422, and corrected in the *AAJ 2010*, pg 338).

2007: In October four members of a British-American expedition led by Dave Wynne-Jones approached from the north. During their acclimatization they made the first ascent of a 5,600m snow peak south of Peak 5,850m. They then made the second ascent of Dangchezhengla, via a new route on the northeast ridge to east ridge. They also challenged the main summit (6,060m), but gave up at 5,400m due to cold and unstable snow conditions (*AAJ 2008*, ppg 420–422).

2009: In autumn the British party of Dave Wynne-Jones, Derek Buckle, and friends revisited the north face of Yangmolog's main peak. This is when they encountered serious trouble with the villagers of Sang Qu, who had treated them well in 2007. They then attempted the north ridge but again failed (*AAJ 2010*, ppg 335–336).

Also in 2009, an American-Chinese team led by Jon Otto attempted the south face of Yangmolog's main peak. They started to climb the south face just beneath the summit, but were unable to break through the lower part of the fragile and dangerous rock wall (*AAJ 2010*, ppg 336–338). A German party also came to the south side, but left with no result.

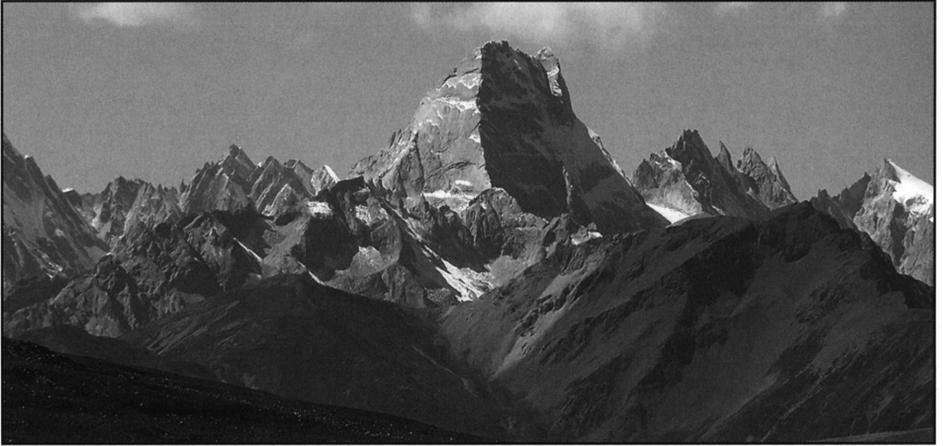
2010: In November, Jon Otto, Tim Boetler, and Chinese climbers again challenged the main summit. They entered the north side from a valley east of Dongba after crossing a high pass at about 5,000m. The descent from the pass was so steep that they had to rappel into the valley. They attempted the north ridge but did not surpass the elevation reached by the 2007 British expedition. Dave Wynne-Jones appreciates that they found an alternative access route to reach the north face.

The Yangmolog main peak has refused several attempts and still remains untrodden. Who will challenge it next?

## CLIMBING PARADISE OF THE FUTURE

Thanks to its easy access from the large city of Chengdu, the Qionglai Mountains of Mt. Siguniang National Park have become very popular for tourists and rock climbers. Almost all the outstanding rock peaks above 5,500 meters have already been climbed here. To the best of my best knowledge, only Goromity (5,609m) remains virgin now that attractive Seerdenpu (Barbarian Peak, 5,592m) was scaled by an American party in 2010. [Also in 2010, a Japanese party put up a beautiful new route Niuxinshan (4,942m). Both ascents are in the China section of this *Journal*.]

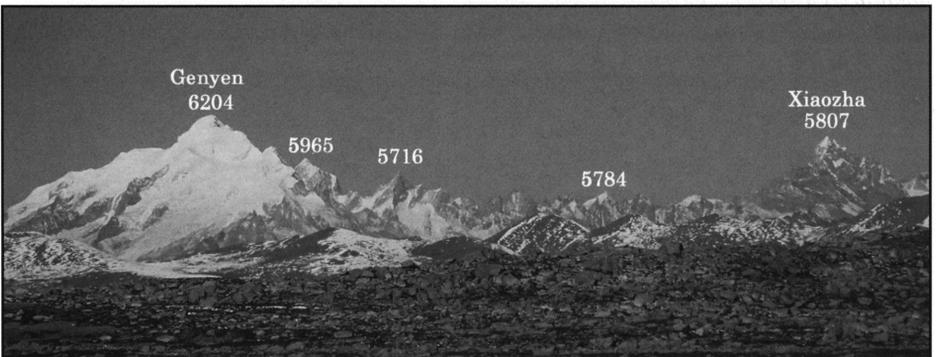
One of the finest climbing fields after the Qionglai Mountains is a group of rock peaks in the Genyen massif of the Shaluli Shan, also on the Litang Plateau. The main peak of Genyen (6,204m) was first climbed by a party from the Himalayan Association of Japan in 1988. The next visit by climbers came in 2006, when an Italian party led by Karl Unterkircher made the second ascent via a new route on the north spur (*AAJ 2007*, p. 408 with summary of 1998 Japanese ascent on p. 409). The Italians thought they had made Genyen's first ascent, leading to some confusion in the initial reporting. Later that year, a party of Americans climbed Sachun (5,716m), as well as a peak they called Phurba (ca 18,650/ ca 5,685m) and came within eight



East face of Peak 5,873m. *Tomas Obtulovic*



Peak 5,965m (left) and west face of Genyen (6,204m) from Zhawa La. *Tamotsu Nakamura*



The southeast side of the Genyen massif seen from about 4,500m near Daocheng. *Tamotsu Nakamura*

meters of another summit they called Damaru (ca 18,550'/ca 5,654m). In Molly Tyson's feature article in the *AAJ 2007* (p. 79), Sachun is given the erroneous height of 19,570' (5,965m); in fact, Sachun is a neighboring summit connected to Peak 5,965m by a long ridge. Even later in 2006, Americans Charlie Fowler and Christine Boskoff were killed by an avalanche on Genyen.

The Genyen massif's second highest summit, Peak 5,695m, was climbed by Peter Inglis and Joe Puryear in 2007 (*AAJ 2008*, p. 427). These seem to be the only 5,500–5,900m peaks that have been climbed in the entire massif.

The whole northern aspect of Genyen is a climbing paradise, with outstanding granite towers surrounding a beautiful valley with a 600-year-old monastery, Rengo Gompa. Most of these fantastic peaks have never been touched by climbers. In the near future they will surely become known as an alpine rock paradise like the Qonglai Mountains.

Unfortunately, the rules and official prices for climbing in Sichuan have just increased significantly (see “New Regulations” on p. 343 of this *Journal*). This might be a good time to remember my motto, “Anything happens in China; nothing is impossible in China.”

*Editor's note: The AAJ will compile an extensive collection of photos of the Genyen massif from various expeditions, including panoramas from the summit of Genyen. Look for this on aaj.americanalpineclub.org late in 2011.*

#### SUMMARY:

Area: Shaluli Shan (mountains), Litang Plateau, Ganzi Prefecture, West Sichuan, China.

Events: A survey of development and cultural trends in West Sichuan as they affect climbers and explorers, along with a review of access, history, and mountaineering potential on unclimbed peaks in the Shaluli Shan, in particular the Yangmolong (6,060m) and Xiangqiuqieke (5,863m) massifs, along with the granite peaks north of Mt. Genyen (6,204m).

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

*Tamotsu (Tom) Nakamura (75) is an honorary member of the American Alpine Club, and was recently elected an honorary member of the New Zealand Alpine Club. He has received many awards from exploration and alpine clubs around the world. He has made 32 exploratory journeys into what he calls “East of the Himalayas – the Alps of Tibet,” which more broadly include the mountains of east and southeast Tibet, the Hengduan Mountains of northwest Yunnan, and the peaks of West Sichuan and Qinghai. Nakamura's work is almost an annual fixture of the American Alpine Journal, but our most extensive look*

*at this region is his definitive compilation “East of the Himalaya” in the 2003 AAJ. Nakamura has written, “Some convince themselves that veiled mountains in the greater ranges are an experience of the past. But [the eastern] Tibet [Plateau] has an incredibly vast and complex topography that holds countless unclimbed summits, and beckons a lifetime's search. The peaks there are stunning and magnificent, and many of them will remain enigmas for generations.”*

