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Journey through south Yushu of Qinghai Province, eastern Tibet Nangqen to Mekong Headwaters, July 2019

Tamotsu (Tom) Nakamura

Part 1 Buddhists' Kingdom – Monasteries, rock peaks, blue poppies

“Yushu used to be a strategic point of Qinghai, explorers' crossroads and killing field of frontier.”

Geography and Climate of Yushu

With an elevation of around 3,700 metres (12,100 ft), Yushu has an alpine subarctic climate, with long, cold, very dry winters, and short, rainy, and mild summers. Average low temperatures are below freezing from early/mid October to late April; however, due to the wide diurnal temperature variation, the average high never lowers to the freezing mark. Despite frequent rain during summer, when a majority of days sees rain, only June, the rainiest month, has less than 50% of possible sunshine; with monthly percent possible sunshine ranging from 49% in June to 66% in November, the city receives 2,496 hours of bright sunshine annually.

The monthly 24-hour average temperature ranges from $-7.6\text{ }^{\circ}\text{C}$ ($18.3\text{ }^{\circ}\text{F}$) in January to $12.7\text{ }^{\circ}\text{C}$ ($54.9\text{ }^{\circ}\text{F}$) in July, while the annual mean is $3.22\text{ }^{\circ}\text{C}$ ($37.8\text{ }^{\circ}\text{F}$). About three-fourths of the annual precipitation of 486 mm (19.1 in) is delivered from June to September.



Above is Jeku Monastery in Yushu town

Geography and Potentials of Nangqen

Nangqen County is located in the southeast of Yushu Prefecture, its south and southeast are adjacent to Tingchen, Chamdo, Riwoche consists of the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR), and its west and northwest connects with Dzato (Zadoi) County, north and northeast with Yushu County. The Nangqen County has nine townships and one town with a total population of 105,800.

The county seat Shamda Town is located in the river valley of Upper Mekong area, agriculture is its major economy with supplements of animal husbandry. The average elevation is 3644m above sea level and average temperature is $3.8\text{ }^{\circ}\text{C}$.

With a warm and moist Climate Nangchen is very rich in natural resources:

The county has available pastures of 442,413 ha or 86% of total area of the county, and arable land of 7,333 ha. In addition to abundant precipitation, there is abundant surface water, all belonging to the Mekong River water system. Zachu, Zichu, Palchu, Rechu and Jichu rivers flow in parallel from northwest to southeast throughout the county, and they reserve 142.59kw hydrological energy in theory. The County provides 65,500 cubic meters of water for per person, which is 7.4 times of the world's average per capita water amount and 24 times of that for China.



Nangchen lies in the southern rim of Qinghai Province with fertile borderlands adjacent to the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR). In 1922 two explores met together by chance at Yushu (Jekungdo). They were Parisian traveler, David Neel and British military-explorer, Brigadier George Pereira. They headed to Lhasa for being the first to reach Lhasa from east. Russian explorers entered Yushu. A French explorer was killed at Yushu. He traveled to seek for the source of the Mekong River His partner Bernard could fine one the Mekong headwaters as the first westerner. After a half century a tragedy took place. New China sent

Mongolians to south Yushu for mass slaughter of Tibetans.

A glance at contemporary Tibet

The incorporation of Tibet into the People's Republic of China, (called the "Chinese invasion of Tibet" by the Tibetan Government in Exile; called "Peaceful liberation of Tibet" in China, was the process by which the People's Republic of China (PRC) gained control of Tibet. These regions came under the control of China after attempts by the Government of Tibet to gain international recognition, efforts to modernize its military, negotiations between the Government of Tibet and the PRC, a military conflict in the Qamdo area of Western Kham in October 1950, and the eventual acceptance of the Seventeen Point Agreement by the Government of Tibet under Chinese pressure in October 1951. Scholars call the incorporation a Chinese annexation of Tibet. The Government of Tibet and Tibetan social structure remained in place in the Tibetan Autonomous Region under the authority of China until the 1959 Tibetan uprising, when the Dalai Lama fled into exile and after which the Government of Tibet and Tibetan social structures were dissolved.

Nangqen Kingdom – No longer frontier

Nagai (86), Nakamura (84) and Kakihara (71), an elderly group left Chengdu for Xining on July 3. I already visited Nangqen twice in 2018. We stayed at Xining 2,165m for acclimatization. Fortunately, we could view Maqin Kangri from the flight Xining~Yushu as below. Photos of developing Xining are shown too.





Tar Monastery with many Han tourists



Fast developing Xining city

Our most capable Tibetan guide Awang received us at the Xining airport. On July 4 we flew to Yushu 3,600m and first paid a visit to the monument of Wen Cheng of Tang Dynasty who got married with Tibetan king in the 7th century. Yushu town has already thoroughly been reconstructed from the 2011 big earthquake.



Road to Wen Cheng monument with thousands prayer flags and monks at Yushu

Whenever I come to the west China I am overwhelmingly moved by the fastest change of development and really feel “Here is no longer frontier”. Construction of infrastructures are going on throughout the borderlands of China. High speed railways, highways and paving of ordinary roads are accelerated. We come across boards of “One belt one road” here and there. 800km highway from Yushu to Xining is now in services.

High speed railway connects Xining~Urumuch and Chengdu~Xi’an in 8 hours.

Journey starting from Yusha passes highlands 3,700m to 5,000m. The first objective was a historical Tana Monastery near to south Tibet Autonomous Region. The second objective was the Mekong headwaters to the upper Yangtze River.



Highway Yushu to Xining



Right-up of Yushu town



Rock peaks on the way from Yushu to Nangqen

On July 6 we departed from Yushu to Nangqen. We crossed a pass 4,493m and upper Mekong River.





Meconopsis-blue poppy



Primula



Meconopsis blue poppy

Qinghai highland is a paradise for the lover of Blue Poppy. It is “The Land of the Blue Poppy” named by Frank Kingdon-Ward.



After passing a junction to Zadoi we crossed a couple of 4,000m passes and the upper Mekong. It took four hours to drive from Yushu to Shamda town, county capital of Nangqen, Buddhists kingdom.

Nangqen is fertile borderlands and Buddhists Kingdom. There are 93 monasteries in Nangqen County (This is the greatest number as one county).

In the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) under strong influence of Dalai Lama 13th, monasteries are strictly watched and controlled, and monks are becoming less. In the other hand, Qinghai Province is a territory of Panchen Lama recognized by the Beijing government. Therefore, construction of monasteries is being accelerated.



On the way from Yushu to Nangqen



Nangqen Shamda town and upper Mekong River



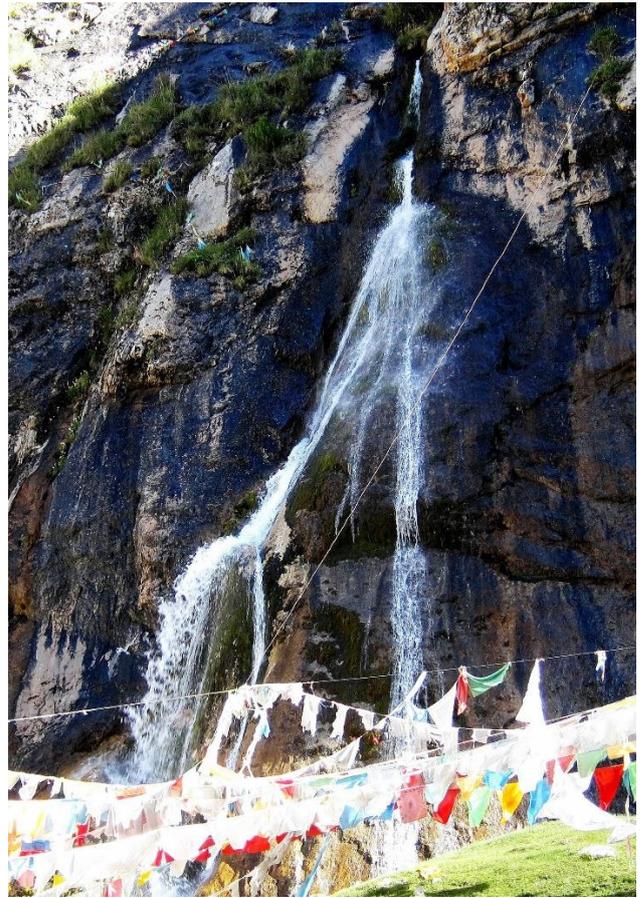
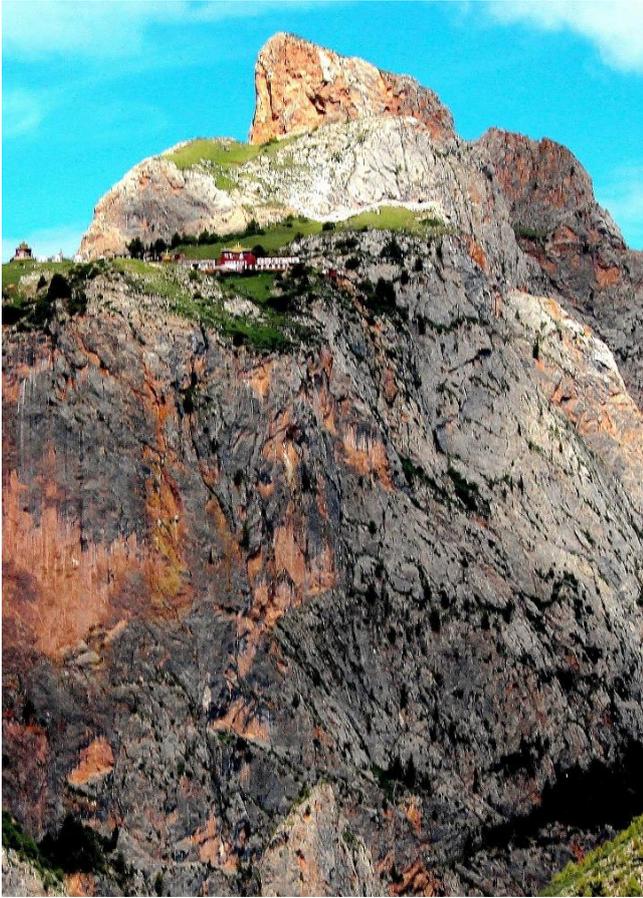
Symbol of Shamda, capital city of Nangqen County, Buddha statue and 108 stupas

To historical Tana Monastery

On July 8 we headed to Tana Monastery. Morning temperature was 9°C. We passed the gorge zone as below and crossed a high pass of 4,712m which led to a junction to Zadoi and Tana Monastery.



Tana Monastery is in far distance, 170km and five hours drive from Shamda. Road is well paved to a point near the monastery. Many monasteries hung on the cliffs. There is a holy waterfall.





Approaching to Tana Monastery – long way



On the way to Tana Monastery, rock peaks appearing



Tana Monastery surrounded with seven rock peaks

Gesar and the Kingdom of Ling

In Tibet, that Gesar was an historical figure is rarely questioned. Some scholars there argued he was born in 1027, on the basis of a note in a 19th-century chronicle, the *Mdo smad chos 'byung* by Brag dgon pa dkon mchog bstan pa rab. Certain core episodes seem to reflect events recorded at the dawn of Tibetan history: the marriage to a Chinese princess is reminiscent of legends concerning king Songtsän Gampo's alliance marriage with Princess Wencheng in 641, for example.^[27] Legends variously place him in Golok, between Dotō and Domé, or in Markham, Kongpo, Tanak, Öyuk or the village of Panam on the Nyang River. Given that the mythological and allegorical elements of the story defy place and time, the historicity of figures in the cycle is indeterminate. Though the epic was sung all over Tibetan-speaking regions, with Kham and Amdo long regarded as the centres for its diffusion,^[31] traditions do connect Gesar with the former Kingdom of Ling (Wylie: *gling*). In Tibetan, *gling* means "island" but can have, as with the Sanskrit word *dvīpa*, the secondary meaning of "continent". Ling was a petty kingdom located in Kham between the Yangtze and Yalong River. An historical kingdom of Lingsang (Wylie: *gling tshang*) existed until the 20th century.



King Gesar in Tana Monastery (left) and Danba, Sichuan (right)



(above) Largest nunnery in Qinghai 改迦尼姑 (below) Veiled 5,725m south of Yushu town

Journey through south Yushu of Qinghai Province, eastern Tibet Nangqen to Mekong Headwaters, July 2019

Tamotsu (Tom) Nakamura

Part 2 From Mekong Headwaters to upper Yangtze River

On July 9 we left Shamda, Nangqen County capital early morning for Zadoi, a gateway to Mekong headwaters. The new road was well paved and promised us a comfortable drive. The road passed higher than 4,000m vivid green grasslands throughout the route. It was interrupted with hairy caterpillars at 4,470m point. After two passes of 4,851m and 4,672m we went down to a Mekong tributary, Jiqu, at 4,180m, windless perfect weather. 5,500m rock peaks were viewed in distance. In the surrounding a herd of yak was grazing.



We further crossed two passes of 4,435m and 4,713m and then we stood at a shore of the Mekong mainstream, Zaqu. We arrived at Zadoi town at 5:30pm. It was surprising that the Zadi township had completely changed to modern large city with uniform new houses and buildings of Chinese style in only six year. Season (June) of caterpillar fungus was over, people became rich and streets were full of a great turnout.





Fertile Qinghai grasslands, a shore of Jiqu, a tributary of the upper Mekong.



Wild fox



Hare

Awang explained meanings of prayer flags color. “White” represents peace, “yellow” desires to be rich, “Red” angry, revenge.



Developing Zadoi town at 4,100m



Hotel in Zadoi

Zadoi town of 6 years ago was very shabby and dirty. There was only one hotel with uncomfortable, but now changed to modern city. many new and, to our surprise, a drug store wanted payment in Japanese Yen. Our driver also preferred to Japanese Yen. Japanese Yen was circulating in such remote borderlands.

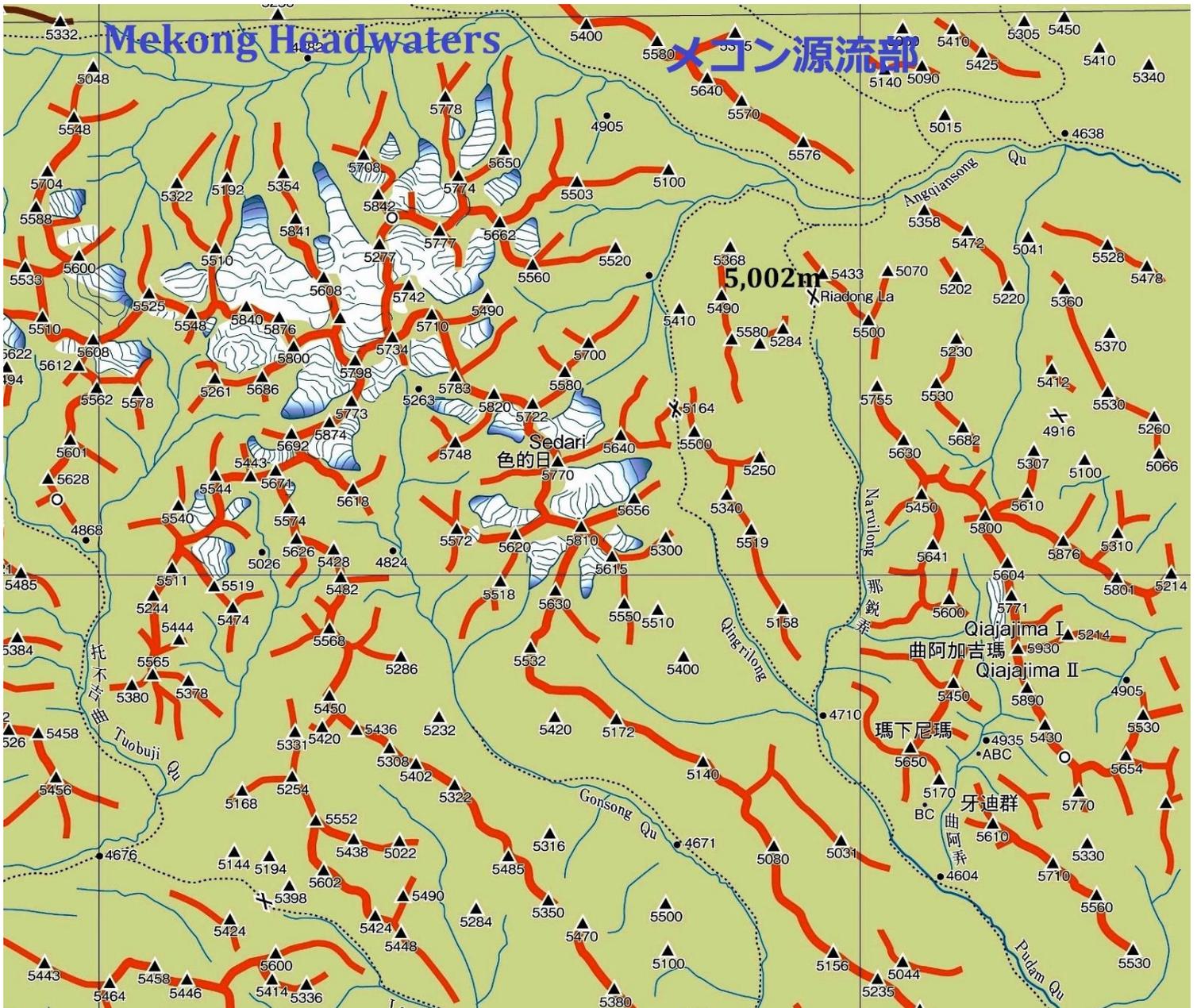
July 10 we departed from Zadoi heading to the Mekong headwaters. The weather was not good. A route to Zaqin 4,240m was changed. 6 years ago the road directly ascended to 4,700m pass from near Zadoi town, and we enjoyed a stunning panorama of the peaks south of Zadoi town, but now the new road went on along the north bank of the Mekong River and then entered a tributary that led to Zaqin. After one hour leaving Zaqin there was a trailer accident to close the road. We had to return to Zadoi.



July 11 07:00 am 7°C. It was fine. Good weather encouraged us for heading to the headwaters. We left Zadoi

at 08:00am and passed Zaqin at 09:00 towards north. We entered a valley west of Qiajajima massif. The highest peak Qiajajima I 5,930m was first ascended by a Japanese party. At noon we crossed a pass of 5,002m 日阿東拉垭 Mekong-Yangtze Divide to tributaries of upper Yangtze River, Tongtienie. On the way we entered a valley in the eastern side for reconnaissance. Although to our regret Qiajajima was not in our sight hindered by a ridge in front, we could photograph many 5,500m~5,700m rock peaks. Yellow poppy, *Meconopsis integrifolia* were in full blossom.

Same as the Mekong, Yangtze changes its name in each section. From river mouth to Yibin of Sichuan Province it is called as Changjian. From Yibin to Yushu of Qinghai is River of Golden Sand, from Yushu to river source is Tongtienie. We stayed at Zhidoi.



As shown on the map of previous page, no glacier is not developing in Qiajajima massif. In the other hand, massifs 5,800m of the western side have many glaciers. There is a distinct difference between the west and east. In June, 2013, Nakamura and Shintani stayed at 4,800m to enter the glacier areas, but because of caterpillar fungus villagers and horsed went out to collect the fungus. We could not organize horse caravan to access to the glaciers. It was a bitter experience.

In 2008 New Zealand party entered the glaciers from the north side and climbed many peaks that remained untouched. Here are their photographs.





On July 12 we departed from Zhidoi. We first visited a historical Gasa Monastery 嘎薩寺. We returned to Yushu on the same day. The road from Zhidoi to Yushu passes high altitude almost 4,500m~4,800 all the way. Typical green grasslands continue. Qinghai highlands has the largest pastures for raising yaks and sheep in the whole Qinghai-Tibet plateau. Raising of yaks is the fundamental basis of economy. Quality yak milk products such as butter are supplied to Lhasa and the other cities.



Rock peaks in the Mekong Headwaters

5,500~5,700m





















High pass at 5,002m sharing watershed of Mekong and Yangtze



Rock peaks and a tributary of upper Yangtze, road to Zhidoi