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Future Climbing Paradise of West Sichuan Highlands
“Gangga” and “Kawarori” massifs
(Supplemented with Serthar Buddhist Institute)

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Political situation in Tibet is uncertain and sensitive. Since no foreigners are allowed to enter remote areas of my field, eastern Tibet, instead I organized an elderly survey team from the Hengduan Mountains Club (Tom Nakamura, Tsuyoshi Nagai, Tadao Shintani) to visit West Sichuan Highlands and Yunnan from late September to late October, 2012.

The main objective was to photograph, map out and identify peaks of the Gangga massif and least-known Kawarori. The Gangga massif is just south of Ganzi town and the Yalong Jiang, a northernmost extention of the Shaluli Shan range. Kawarori is a sacred mountain of the Gongkara Shan range which is located east of the Gangga massif and Yalong Jiang, northwest of the Daxue Shan range in the West Sichuan Highlands. The Yalong Jiang is one of the large tributaries of the Yangtze River (Chang Jiang). Reconnaissance of the Gangga massif was made in 2005 by a Japanese party from the Nagano Prefecture. They were unable to bring back useful and informative record. Later one 5,400m peak was climbed by an Austrian team.

The Alps of Tibet, mountains in eastern Tibet, is the last frontier in the greater ranges of the world. About 260 peaks over 6,000 meters high remain untrodden in Nyainqentanglha East, Kangri Garpo and Gorge Country. On the contrary, unclimbed mountains exceeding 6,000 meters are only more or less 10 summits in the West Sichuan Highlands, a region of Tibetan inhabitants too.

Nevertheless, if you look at and focus on peaks lower than 6,000 meters, you will come across many fascinating and challenging peaks that attract and enchant climbers seeking for unfrequented targets. Climbers have been rushing to rock peaks in the Qonglai Mountains of now popular Mt. Siguniang and currently several climbers have started an attempt on alluring rock peaks in the Genyen massif north of the Litang Plateau. However, the Gangga massif and Gongkala Shan are still behind climbers’ attention. The Gangga massif is not a large mountains group and heights is 5,300 – 5,600 meters but provides fantastic rock peaks. Kawaroni are holy mountains guarded by Tibetan monks and villagers, but a team of Scottish climber Bruce Normand climbed with no permit.
Our team arrived at Chengdu on the 26th September. Sichuan Earth Expedition Inc. arranged for our trip as usually and Zhang Jiyue joined the team. We left Chengdu for the mountains on the 28th September. We followed a newly built highway Chengu-Xichang making a detour of Erlanshan Tunnel passage. Acceleration of highways construction in West China is amazing. We left the highway at Ximien and drove northward along Dadu River, and then crossed a pass Xuemenkan 3948m down to Kangding new town. The pass divides Minya Konka massif to southwest and Lamoshe massif to northeast.

I must mention two factors of our survey trip. One is an extraordinarily bad weather in late September to mid October and the other is a political situation. During our travel in two weeks, only one and a half days were considerably fine weather (but not perfect blue sky) though I could take advantages of a narrow chance to photograph the mountains necessary for peaks identification. We stayed at Ganzi town only three nights during the good weather. On the 30th September we ascended to a pass Lazika 4,000 meters of the Sichuan-Tibet Highway for taking a panorama view of the Gangga and Kawarori. From this pass Erich Teichman viewed Kawarori in 1918. On the 1st October we enter a valley just south of Ganzi town and ascended to a high pass Zhuodana 4,820 meters leading to Baiyu County for reconnaissance of the central part of the massif. Remaining one week were spent for visiting interesting places including a village with famous stone towers in Danba County and Mt. Siguniang.

The other problem was a restriction imposed on foreigners due to political uncertainty in the region. The areas of Ganzi and adjacent counties were closed to foreigners in principles since spring of 2012 when Tibetan monks’ fire suicide happened. As after the spring, fire suicide took place intermittently, the authorities became nervous about foreign visitors. Under such circumstances we could manage to travel through the officially restricted areas with no difficulty and without any problem thanking to Jiyue’s careful attention. We met only a couple of westerners and no Japanese throughout the trip. We stayed at the Chunglu village now famous for historical stone towers in Danba. We returned to Chengdu on the 10th October and flew to Kunming on the 11th for traveling south Yunnan and north Laos to retrace footsteps of the 19th century French Mekong River expedition. This is another story.
Mountains of Kawarori were first reported by an early British consular officer and explorer, Eric Teichman who traveled through the highlands in 1918.

[Passing Joro, the trail tops a rise and emerges on to rolling grasslands now patched with snow. Here we saw many gazelle. A long pull up hill with occasional short descent brought us to the top of the She Chu – Yalung Divide, only about 13,000 feet high. As one tops the last rise, the great range beyond the Yalung bursts into view, a glittering mass of ice, snow and rock, culminating in the snow-clad mass of Kawalori (“peak of everlasting snow”), a sacred mountain of Nyarong, and one of the highest peaks in Eastern Tibet. This great range is here pierced by the Yalung, and glimpses of it are occasionally caught from the She Chu valley below Driwo.]

(Travels of a Consular Officer in Eastern Tibet Erich Teichman, Cambridge 1922) Teichman’s observation is accurate.

Kawarori of the Gongkara Shan range is located 30 km southeast of Garzi. Two principal peaks Kawarori-I 5,992m and Kawarani-II 5,928m remain unclimbed. Local Tibetan pronounces it “Kawaruori” but in this article “Kawarori” applies. Reconnaissance was first conducted by a Japanese party, Yamanashi Mountaineering Federation in autumn of 1999 and then a British party first attempted on climbing in autumn of 2005. They set up the second camp at 4,800m. However hostile monks of a lamasery forcibly opposed the British to continue climbing for religious reason because of Holy Mountains. They could not help to abandon the attempt. Another British party came to Kawarori in 2007 but a climbing permit could not be obtained.

The Tohoku University Alpine Club planned to climb Kawarori in summer of 2011 in a hope that a climbing permit would be issued. After getting an official permit of the Sichuan Mountaineering Association, they left Japan on 24th July. To their great upset, however, their plan was turned down by a senior official, Deputy Director of Sports Administrative Department, Garze Tibetans Autonomous Region at Kangding. He excused that Kawarori was holy mountains to local Tibetans and would oppose anyone to climb the mountains. Supposedly there might have been the other reason of recent sensitive and uncertain situation as monks’ fire suicides, though the official was silent. In fact, the public security bureau (PSB) was cautious and nervous about foreigners to contact local villagers in Khamba territory.

Maps and pictures including aerial views follow from the next page:
Punyu (Pomi, Celestial Peak) 5,413 meters south face
Gangga Massif – Panorama of central part, east face 1

Gangga Massif – Panorama of central part, east face 2
Gangga – Peaks of southeastern rim, east face: 5,690m (left), 5,641m (central)
Gangga – Peaks of southeastern rim, east face: 5,690m (left), 5,241m (right)

Gangga – Peak of southeastern rim, east face: 5,690m
Gangga – Peak of southeastern rim, east face: 5,241m

Gangga – Central part: Peaks 5,492m (left) 5,286m (right) east face
Gangga – Central part: (from left) Peaks 5,420m, 5,400m, 5,286m northeast face

Gangga – Central part: Gangga II 5,582m east face
Gangga – Central part: Gangga III 5,525m (behind) Gangga I group (from left) Main peak 5,6880m, Central peak 5,670m, North peak 5,650m peak, A flock of hawks flying.

Gangga – Gangga I (from left) Main 5,588m, Central 5,670m, North 5,650m east face
Gangga I group, Central 5,670m (left), North 5,650m east face viewed from Ganzi town

Gangga – Central part: Peak 5,318m west of Gangga I east face seen from Ganzi town
Gangga – Central part: Peak 5,241m north face west of Ganzi town

Gangga – Central part: Pks 5,567m (left) 5,690m (right) seen from Pass 4,820m SW face
Kawarori I 5,992m (left) Kawarori II 5,928m (center) SW face seen from Ganzi town

Kawarori I 5,922m (left) Kawarori II 5,928m (right) NW face seen from Ganzi town
Kawarori I 5,992m north face

Kawarori II 5,928m north face seen from east of Ganzi town
Chunglu village of stone towers in Danba 1
Chunglu village of stone towers in Danba 2
Chunlgu village of stone towers in Danba 3

Danba girl in Chunlgu village
Festival in Danba, dancing team

Festival in Danba
Serthar Buddhist Institute

Chola Shan

Gangza
Kawarori
Daxue Shan

Map of West Sichuan Highland
Serthar Tibetan Buddhist Institute-Academy in 2013