



Mountains of the Mekong Headwaters

China, Qinghai

AFTER 14 MONTHS OF PLANNING, I landed at Yushu Airport (3,800m) in Qinghai to meet my companions Ben and Jos Hoetjes (New Zealand), who had ridden bikes almost 1,000km from the provincial capital of Xining. It had taken them 10 days and provided valuable acclimatization. Our mission was a lightweight attempt on what we believed, after much research, were the highest mountains in this part of the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau.

This whole project was initiated after reading about the first ascent of Qiajajima in AAJ 2005, where the final lines of the report describe “three outstanding mountain massifs in the source of the Mekong River,” one of which was “...Sedari (5,770m), and the 5,700–5,800m peaks ranging to the west, where the glaciers are most developed. This massif remains unvisited. No photos of the mountains have been taken.”

These peaks lie in the most isolated region of the Yushu Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture. The ranges in this area run roughly southeast to northwest for over 300km, from below Yushu (in the southeast) to above the sources of the Mekong. To the north, west, and south, they drop into the rolling hills of the Tibetan Plateau (often 4,800m high). To the southeast there is no definite end—the mountains drop to below 5,300m and merge with other ranges that stretch toward Sichuan before rising again to over 6,000m.

With just a few blurry Google Earth images and 1950s Russian maps, we planned to explore—and if possible climb—some of these peaks, using bicycles as transport. Traveling light is part of our philosophy, and what I term “velo mountaineering” also increases flexibility in planning and transport, well outside the bureaucratic difficulties normally associated with high Asian expeditions.

In the first two days we rode over 200km, crossing over a 4,800m pass, to reach the town of Zhidoi. The route onward to the west had worried me greatly due to a necessary crossing of the An Yang Gong Chu (Angqiansong River). However, we found a new road had been constructed that bridged the river and considerably eased our travel. One long day took us to the bridge and a camp by the river at 4,650m, from where we could see our peaks for the first time. A second day got us to a second camp at 4,800m, where we left the bikes.

From here, on July 10, we made a traverse of Deception Peak (5,778m, 33°38'26"N, 94°59'22"E). (Altitudes cited here refer to the Tamotsu Nakamura map of the area and differ slightly from an ArcGIS map we used, and which we believe to be more accurate.) This peak was directly above our camp and so named because it proved deceptively difficult.

The next day we moved up the main glacier system to the southwest, which we dubbed Sunshine Glacier, and camped at 5,350m. On the 12th we crossed west to the Fox Glacier and climbed Peak 5,876m via the northeast face and southeast ridge, naming it Ben Jai Ma (33°34'21"N, 94°55'55"E). The following day, from the Sunshine Glacier, we climbed a peak not shown on the Nakamura map but lying between peaks 5,777m and 5,842m. We named this Constellation Peak (ArcGIS map height 5,797m).

Although we did not have the means to verify its exact altitude, we are now fairly sure from all points

of reference, including the summit, that Ben Jai Ma is the highest peak in all the large glacial areas of this region. This includes the Qiajajima Group, approximately 30km southeast of where we climbed; previous reports listed Qiajajima high point at 5,930m, but the massif is significantly lower on satellite and radar-mapped surveys, the highest summit being 5,761m.

Leaving the mountains on the 14th, we spent five days returning to Yushu via Zhidui, where my friends left me to investigate peaks south of Yushu, which form a southern extension to the mountain system we visited. The names we gave to mountains, valleys, and glaciers are purely for convenience and our sense of fun. We fully expect these to be replaced by local names over the course of further exploration.

– Nathan Dahlberg, New Zealand

Images



Ben Jai Ma seen from the northeast. The first ascent finished up the left skyline ridge. The rockier peak to the right is 5,766m.



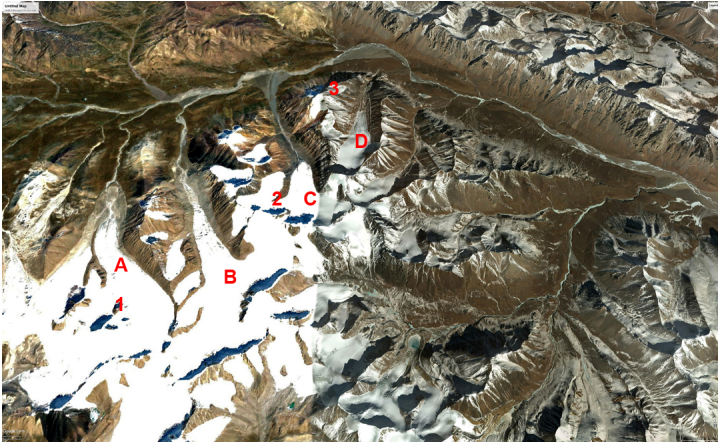
Deception Peak, which rises almost 1,000m above its base, is the highest peak outside the Sunshine–Fox glacier complex. The summit was reached from the valley behind and descent made via the right skyline (north) ridge.



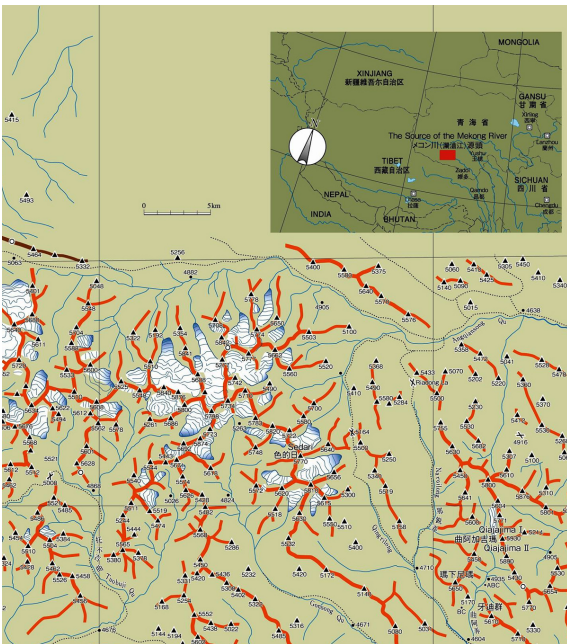
On the descent of the corniced north ridge of Deception Peak.



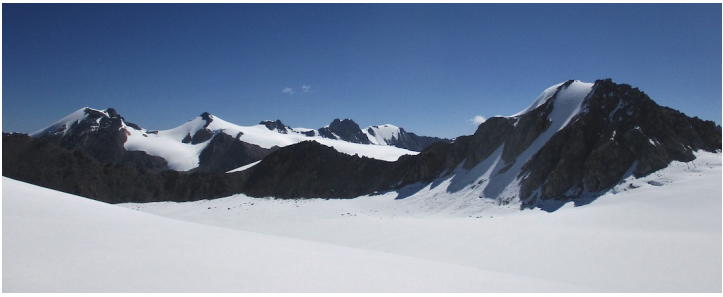
Looking southeast from Ben Jai Ma over a sea of unnamed, unclimbed peaks.



Mountains of the Mekong headwaters visited in July 2018. (A) Fox Glacier. (B) Sunshine Glacier. (C) Glacier 2. (D) Desolation Glacier. (1) Ben Jai Ma. (2) Constellation Peak. (3) Deception Peak. The meeting point of two rivers on the far right edge of the image is just above the bridge over the An yang qong chu River.



Tom Nakamura's sketch map of the mountains of the Mekong headwaters.



Looking east across the upper Fox Glacier.



The bike cache at 4,800 meters.



Approaching unexplored mountains northwest of Yushu.



To reach unexplored mountains northwest of Yushu, three climbers rode four days to reach a camp at 4,800 meters, west of the town of Zhidui. Here they cached their bikes and headed into the hills.

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