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Visiting Christian Churches in Salween Basin
Yunnan Summer 2010

We planned two stage journeys in summer of 2010. The first stage was in Yunnan to gather updated information in a most isolated region of the upper Irrawaddy River, Chinese name Dulong Jiang, a country of the Dulong minority tribe, and then to visit Christian churches in the Salween River Basin. The second stage was in Sichuan to explore the unknown Shaluli Shan – Litang Plateau. The latter is reported elsewhere.

1. Dulong Jiang (upper Irrawaddy) and veiled Kawakabu

To Dulong Jiang (main stream of upper Irrawaddy River)

Dulong minority tribe’s population is 5,700 – 5,800. The same tribe called “Taron” inhabits in the upper Irrawaddy basin in North Myanmar. They had a custom to make tattoos on women’s face.

I left Tokyo on July 6 and joined my colleagues, Morita and Suzuki, at Kunming, Yunnan. On July 12 we headed for the Dulong Jiang from Gongshan and were soon stopped by officials at a check-post on the way to the Dulong Jiang. A vehicle road of 96km to cross the Gaoligongshan range forming the Salween-Irrawaddy Divid to Dulong Jiang from Gongshan town already opened a couple of years ago. Nevertheless the Gongshan County government ordered a traffic control between Gongshan and Dulong Jiang for two and half years from June 1, 2010, till December 31, 2012, for refurbishing and reconstructing the road damaged by floods and landslides caused by heavy rain fall.

1) More vehicles than three cars cannot pass in one time.
2) A vehicle over three tons is not allowed to pass.
3) Any visitor cannot pass without a special permit. (No foreigner was allowed to pass.)
In fact there happened serious accidents. Two tracks fell down to the Dulong Jiang, six persons being lost in two months. We had to resign to visit the Dulong Jiang.

Where is Gompa La? – “Veiled mountain” Kawakabu 5,128 meters

There was one thing to confirm before entering the Dolong Jiang basin. A plant hunter, Frank Kingdon-Ward was the third as a foreigner to have reached Putao (Fort Hertz) of North Burma from Yunnan. He crossed over the Gaoligongshan to the Dolong Jiang from east in October, 1922. The first was Prince Henri d’Orlean in 1985 (From Tonkin to India – by the Sources of the Irrawadi, January ’95-January ’96 Prince Henri d’Orlean, London 1898) and the second was a British explore, E. C. Young in 1906. (A Journey from Yun-nun to Assam, The Geographical Journal, August 1907 Vol. 30 No. 2) Presumably there were four routes to go across a watershed that shares the Nu Jiang (Salween) and Dolong Jiang (Irrawaddy). F. Kingdon-Ward described in his narratives on journey 1922 that he passed “Gompa La”, one of the four routes (From China to Khamti Long Edward Arnold & Co. London 1924). It has been difficult to locate it since he had not used a name of Gompa La in his previous journeys in 1911 (The Land of the Blue Poppy) and 1914 (Mystery Rivers of Tibet). Heinrich Handel-Mazzetti, an Austrian botanist, came here and soon after Kingdon-Ward in 1914 and recorded the highest peak of Gaoligongshan as Gompa La. A careful and repeated reading of the Kingdon-Ward’s 1922 journey led me to convince that Gompa La must be veiled Kawakabu 5,128 meters. He did not stand atop of Gompa La (Kawakabu), but avoiding a route on a glacier he walked on steep rocky path for crossing the watershed from east to west. In recent year a Scottish plant hunter, Michael Wickenden crossed Gompa La. (Exploring The Upper Dulong River – The KWL Expedition to North-West Yunnan, September – October 2008)

In my journey to have retraced missionaries’ trails from Mekong to Nujiang (Salween) in autumn of
2004, I could luckily take panoramic pictures of the east face of Kawakabu and neighboring peaks ranging north to south on the Gaoligongshan. The other two photos that I took are shown as below.

I have written “Veiled mountain”. Nevertheless it doesn’t mean that it is located in a fur-flung place. Kawakabu is a lofty mountain with a glacier but soaring very close to a town of Bingzhongluo on the right bank of Nujiang (Salween). Bingzhongluo is the northernmost town in Gongshan Dolong Nu Minorities Autonomous County. In this remote corner of Northwest Yunnan construction of infrastructures is progressing rapidly and spectacular landscapes of Nujiang canyon with deep gorges are important resources of tourism to allure and enchant visitors.

In fact Kawakabu is almost always covered with cloud throughout the year except for late autumn. In spite of only 5,128 meters in height, glacier exists and high passes on the watershed are closed with snow till late May, as this area of the Gaoligongshan range has heaviest precipitation of snow fall in Yunnan. Topography and climatic conditions make Kawakabu “Veiled mountain”.

I mention a few comments on an altitude of Kawakabu. Kingdon-Ward wrote a name of Ke-ni-chun-pu (over 20,000ft) on his map of the journey 1911 (The Land of the Blue Poppy) but he assumed a height of Gompa La to be 17,000ft (5,182m) almost same as 5,128m of present altitude. It was measured from a pass at 13,000ft near Gompa La in the journey 1922. Joseph rock, an American plant hunter and geographer viewed Kawakabu in October, 1923 and recorded it as Kenychunpo, over 20,000ft, on his map.
F. Kinloch-Ward "China to Khamti Long" 1922-1923

Route 1922-23 shownthese Approximate contours in metres.

Prince Henri d’Orleans “Tonkin to India” 1895-1896
2. New Wave-the Christianity in Nujiang (Salween) Basin

We visited many Christian churches in a week from July 12 to 18 and got to know the fact that the Catholic missions were rather on the decline whilst the Protestant missions were expanding in the Nujiang basin. This was a new discovery.

On July 12, we went to a church of Lizu tribe, which was a center of religious activity of the Protestants in Gongshan and adjacent villages. Young Lisu were enjoying a dance.

On July 13, we moved from Gongshan to Bingzhongluo, and visited historical Zhongding Catholic church where I met again a Tibetan female believer who managed a entrance key and paid a visit to a cemetery of Father A. Genestier from the Missions etrangeres de Paris (MEP) who gave an advice to Kingdon-Ward in 1922 on best timing to enter Dulong Jiang. The church was recently reconstructed and well maintained.
A Lamasary, Puhua Si, famous as a base for cracking down on activities of Christianity, was of our interest. We paid a short visit to the monastery under refurbishing.

A guide book published in the Gongshan County Tourist Bureau show a lookout point of Kawakabu on its map. With a great anticipation we headed to the point but no villagers knew how to get there. Only one Tibetan provided us with information. He told us that a return trip to terminus of the glacier of Kawakabu would take one week only on foot as a trail was too bad and steep for a horse.
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On July 14, we went up north along the Nujiang to near the border with Tibetan Autonomous Region. It was raining continuously from previous night. “Stone Gate” (Kindgon-Ward’s Marble Gorge) was spectacular. The water level became very high and the river was raging.

After the gorge we visited Qiunadang in a valley on the left bank. A Catholic church looked dilapidated with no maintenance. A trail to north from Qiunadang leads to Bongga, ruins of a Catholic church in four hours and then to Aben of Tsawarong in eight hours on foot. We further went up to a Catholic church at Chugan, which was the last village in the valley. All of 160 inhabitants of 24 families were Nu minority tribe and 80 % were Catholic believers. A 74 years old sexton of the church was a Tibetan who came from Deqen. His father used to serve for Father A. Genestier.

On July 15, after heavy rain in the morning it became very hot in Bingzhongluo. We visited Demalo for meeting Tibetan Catholic believers, who were our muleteers in 2004 expedition. They accompanied us to retrace Catholic missionaries’ trails constructed in late 19th century from Tsekou of Mekong to Demalo in Nujiang (Salween) basin. Aluo, a chief of the muleteers welcomed me at his house. The intelligent and capable Tibetan was now an owner of a bar and guest house and working as a reliable guide in Gongshan and Bingzhongluo as well. To my surprise, meanwhile, Catholic church of Demalo was also dilapidated.

Demalo 1,870m has 12 villages with 3,000 inhabitants, 80 % of which are Catholic believers. They have three names of Tibetan, English and Chinese. After Demalo we went to a recently refurbished Catholic church of Yonglaga 1,574m with 100 believers. Catholic church in Gongshan was also dilapidated. Later in Baoshan we got to know the reasons that Protestant churches were increasing whilst Catholic churches were declining.
Roughly classifying areas of distribution, Protestant churches mainly locate south of Gongshan town and Catholic churches concentrate in the north of Gongshan town. Perhaps on account of topography of the Nujiang basin south of Gongshan, Protestant churches are more on the right bank of Nujiang.

On July 16, we moved from Gongshan to Liuku 680m along the Nujiang. It was hot and humid. Thermometer recoded 32°C. Liuke in a sub-tropical zone was developing tremendously fast. Streets were congested with new model cars. Hotels were fully occupied. Another township was being constructed. We took many photos of Protestant churches on the way. A cross of Protestant church above roof is red colored whilst a cross of Catholic church is white colored. The Nujiang grand canyon en route is attracting tourists.

On July 17, we visited Baihualing Protestant church on the right bank of Nujiang 30 minutes away from Like to south on the way to Baoshan so that we might interview with a manager of the church. Lisu minority tribe has own language using alphabet.

The following is a summary of the interview with a manager who was in No. 2 position

—Population of Baihualing village is 600 – 700 (Han is only 15, 99% is Lisu minority). Believers are about 300 and on Sunday some 1,000 believers including neighboring villages gather to the church.
420 seats are always full. Christian churches in Lushui County are 300 in total and all of them are Protestant. Baihualing village belongs to Shangjiang district, a sub-division of Lushui County. Shangjiang has 52 churches.
Present new church was constructed in 2003. Cost was RMB47,000 (about US$7,000) donated by believers. Roof was refurbished in 2010. Father is one of villagers and the founder is a Lisu minority of 84 year old. Foreign fathers don’t come, but tourists come sometimes. Japanese also come. The church is supervised by the religion administration bureau of both the prefecture and county governments. A successor of father is decided by mutual election of villagers.

The prefecture government provided the Lushui Baihualing Chorus (famous in yunnan) with RMB400,000 for supporting their cultural activities, whiles the church itself is operated on villagers’ donation. One of the reasons for increase of Protestant churches is the government’s favor to the minority people for succeeding Lisu’s traditional and indigenous culture. Such policy would help to change villagers’ mind from primitive religion to Christianity, that is to say, to educate them to have practical-mind.

Believers of Lushui County in 1947/48 were merely 4,000 but at present they have increased to 40,000. In 1947 there were only two churches in Lushui County. The Protestant first came to the Nujiang (Salween) basin via Burma in 1928, a half century later than the Catholic, and it was around 1936 that the Protestant started missionary work intensively. Religious activities were prohibited by the new China. However, after the Deng Xiaoping’s reform and open-door policy was implemented, in 1981 religious activities were allowed to resume. Believers of Baihualing church were only 20, but have now been increased to 300 thanks to the government’s support. Every church in Shangjiang district is administrated strictly in compliance with the government regulations.

Economy of Lushui County is dependent upon agricultural income and remittance from those who work away from home. There is no subsidy from the government. Main products of agriculture are tobacco leaves, rice, maize, fruits such as mangos, peaches, bananas, walnuts, etc. Currently coffee cultivation has started. Rice used to be the largest income, but tobacco leaves have taken the place.

We drove across the Mekong-Nujiang Divide at 1,960 meters and entered the highway connecting Kunming and Luili, a border town to Myanmar. In the early afternoon we arrived at Baoshan City, a center of traffic in west Yunnan. Baoshan is a wide and fertile basin and cultivation of coffee is now rapidly increasing in the Nujiang sub-tropical areas. In near future Baoshan brand coffee will become popular in the world market.

We soon visited a head-quarter of Baoshan Protestant organization which has a church and school. A secretary of the head-quarter kindly responded to our questions.
—Baoshan City (the same unit as prefecture) has a population of 2.6 millions and 75 Protestant churches. No Catholic churches exist. Believers who come to the church are about 50,000, 70% of which are Han people. Baoshan suffered from less damage at the time of the Culture Revolution. Baoshan has the largest number of Protestant believers in Yunnan Province.

—Expenses of the church and school are covered with donations, school fees, boarding fees, temporary revenue of events, the government subsidy and support from foreign countries including Japan. Students are 120 and foreign fathers are 10 (British, etc.). They come to the church only on Sunday.

—Difference in the spread of Catholic and Protestant has caused by the measures which they were taken after the reform and open-door policy had been launched in 1981. Catholic was not positive. On the other hand, Protestant was active and made an effort for missionary work to spread Protestant churches.

3. Hengduan Mountains – Another Battlefield of World War II

You may see a display of photo panels for the World War II at the waiting room of Baoshan Airport. This proves a perception on history of Chinese people for resistance against Japanese invasion during the war. C-6 aircraft of the allied air force and the famous Generals are shown. Baoshan was a bridgehead, an important front line of the allied force and Chinese army.

The allied force supported China from India, by both roads and air routes. The Japanese army fiercely fought to cut off the Led Road, a terrestrial logistic route so-called “Chiang Kai-shek support route (to help the temporary Chinese government in Qongqing)” in the battlefield of eastern Burma.

After the terrestrial road was cut off, the allied force carried supplies to China by air planes for support. This logistic operation is known as so-called “Over Hump” which geographically meant the Himalaya and Hengduan Mountains. Bad weather had many air planes crashed into the mountains in the deep gorge country of the Nuijiang (Salween) basin. These accidents were told by an American missionary and witnessed by old local Tibetan as well.