

TAMOTSU NAKAMURA

Highlights on the Eastern Himalaya

Gankar Punsum, Namcha Barwa and Gyala Peri massifs

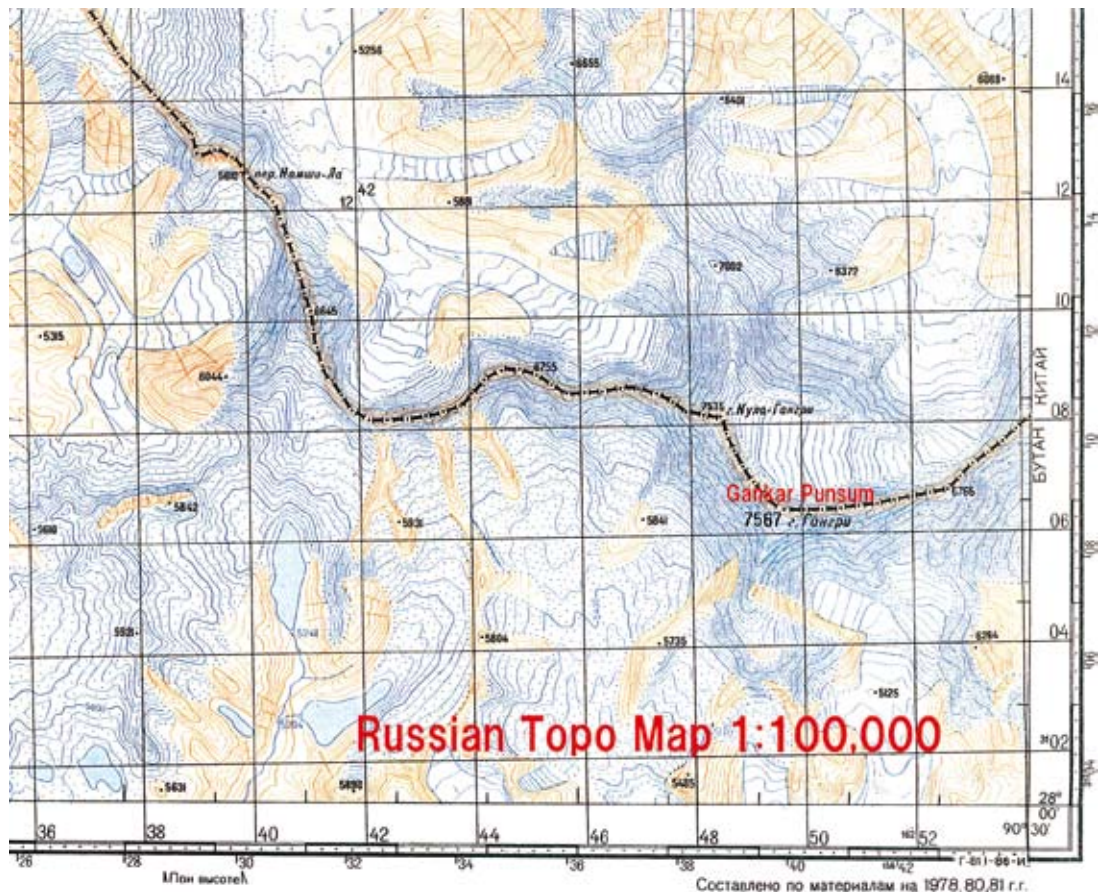
Part I. Gankar Punsum

Who may challenge the highest unclimbed peak in the world?

Overview

Gankar Puensum is not only the highest mountain in Bhutan but remains the highest unclimbed summit in the world with an elevation of 7,570 meters and a prominence of over 3,000 meters on the border with Tibet, China.

Note: A report of the 1986 British expedition gives the mountain's height as 24,770 feet and states that Gangkhar Puensum [newest Bhutanese spelling] is completely inside Bhutan. Its altitude was first measured in 1922 and, until recent years, maps of the region were not at all accurate and the mountain had been shown in different locations and with markedly different heights. On this article, however, a height 7570 meters applies being based on the Chinese sources.



According to a comprehensive "Concise Mountain Name Dictionary" (Ichiro Yoshizawa, Sanseido Publishers, Tokyo 1984) South Summit of Gankar Punzum 6760 was climbed on September 15, 1973 by K. I. Kumar from an Indo-Bhutan joint expedition led by D. N. Tankha. But this peak seems only a hump in extension of the central ridge. After Bhutan was opened for mountaineering in 1983 there were a couple of expeditions which were unsuccessful in summit attempts or deadlocked before departure. They are:-

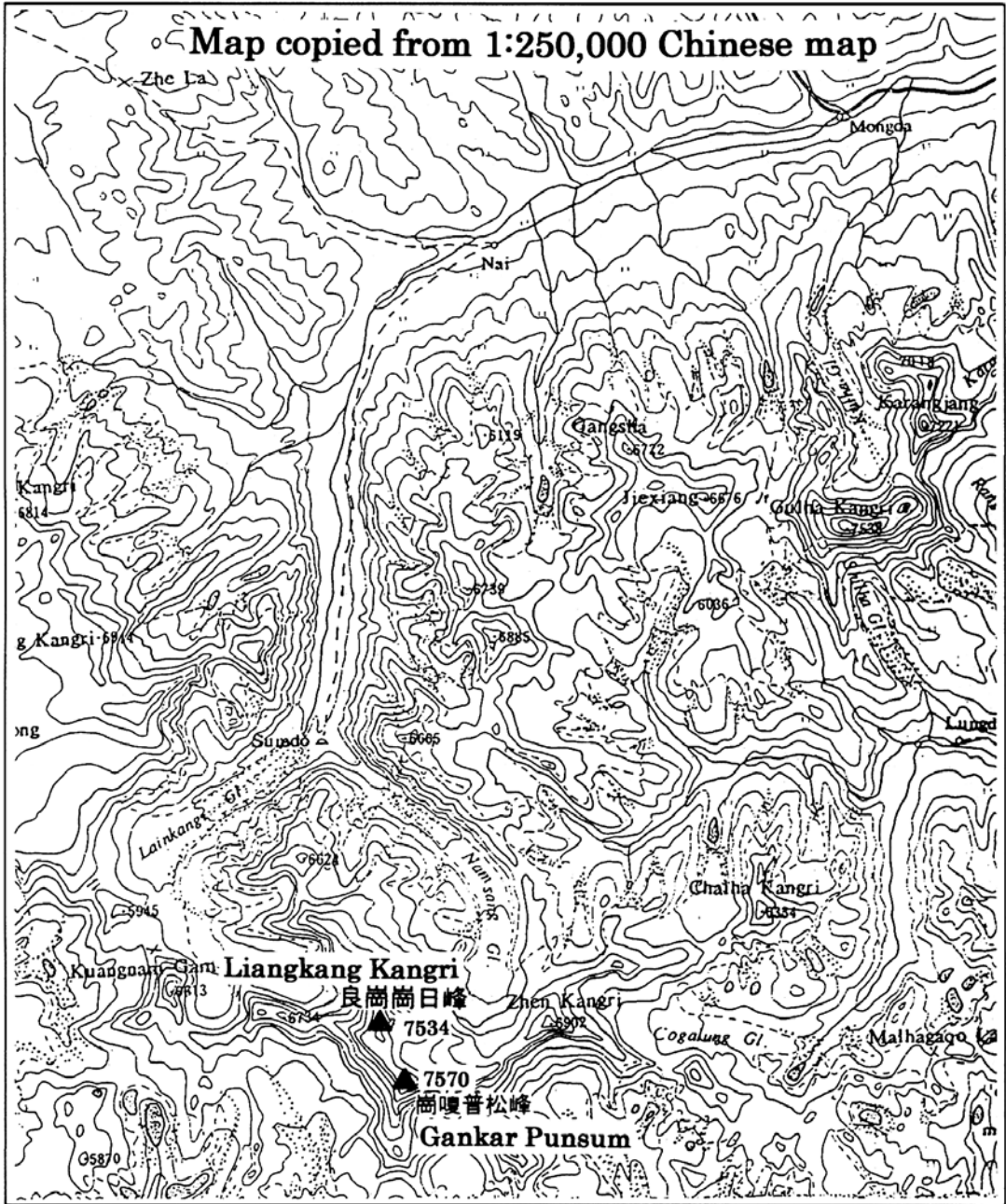
- (1) The Himalayan Association of Japan in 1985
- (2) The British party in 1986
- (3) The Japanese Alpine Club's failed plan in 1998 and ascent of a subsidiary peak Liangkang Kangri in 1999.

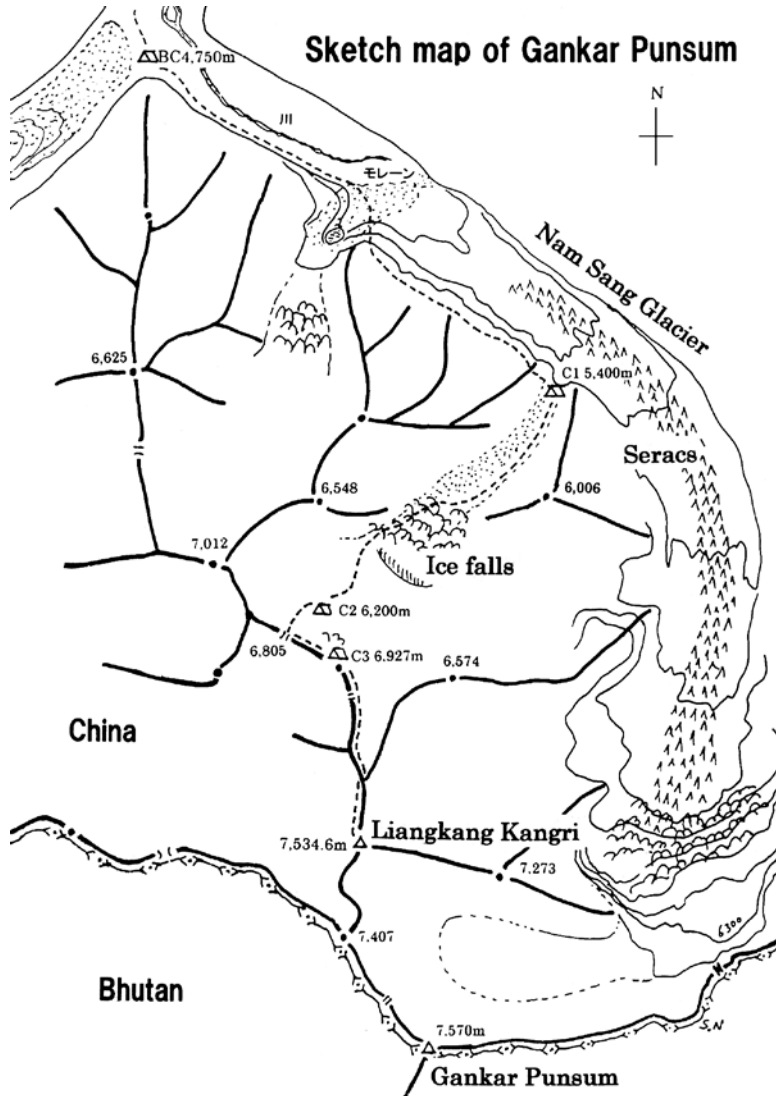
Since 1994 climbing of mountains in Bhutan higher than 6,000 meters has been prohibited out of respect for local spiritual beliefs and since 2003 mountaineering has been forbidden completely. Therefore Gankar Punsum is keeping its unique status as the highest unclimbed peak in the greater range of the world.

Liangkang Kangri (Gankar Punsum North)

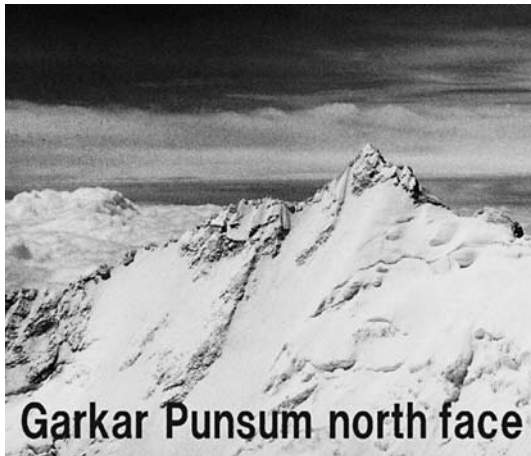
In 1998 the Japanese Alpine Club (JAC) expedition obtained a permit from the China Mountaineering Association to climb the mountain and organized a powerful team of the expedition, but this plan was not realized. As I cannot disclose an inside story behind the sudden cancellation, I write only that the reason why the permit was withdrawn was because of a political issue with Bhutan government. Instead, in 1999, the Japanese Alpine Club sent a team to Tibet and they successfully scaled a 7,535 meters subsidiary peak, Liangkang Kangri (also known as Gangkhar Puensum North).

But I regret that Liangkang Kangri is not an outstanding summit and does not look an independent peak. Unlike most maps, the expedition's report shows this summit as being in Tibet and the Tibet-Bhutan border is shown crossing the summit of Gankar Punsum described as "the highest peak in Bhutan," at 7,570 meters, whereas Russian topo map of indicates Gangar Punsum North on the border. There is a contradiction.

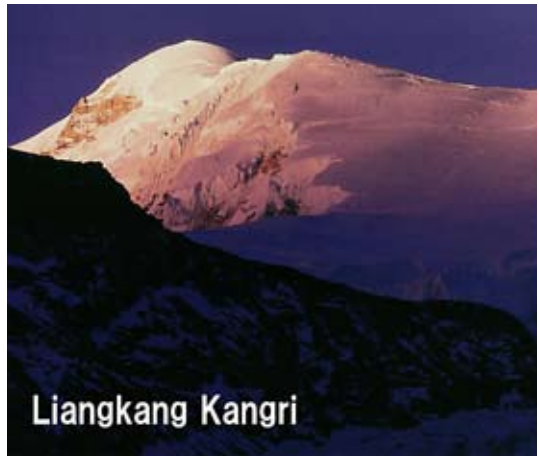




Japanese Alpine Club Expedition 1999



JAC 1999 Expedition



JAC 1999 Expedition

On the 5th May, 1999, five members led by Kiyohiko Suzuki left the final camp (C3) at 6,920m before dawn and ascended the north ridge. When they were climbing the last snow wall, Gankar Punsun north face suddenly came into their sight to the south. On the 9th, four members atop Liangkang Kangri. The expedition departed from Lhasa and drove to the last village Yojitsongtso where a caravan with 75 horses was organized on April 18. BC was set up at 4,750m, and C1 April 25, C2 April 30, C3 May 8 were placed in succession as shown on the Sketch Map of Gankar Punsum as attached.

Ambitious Assault 1985 by the Himalayan Association of Japan

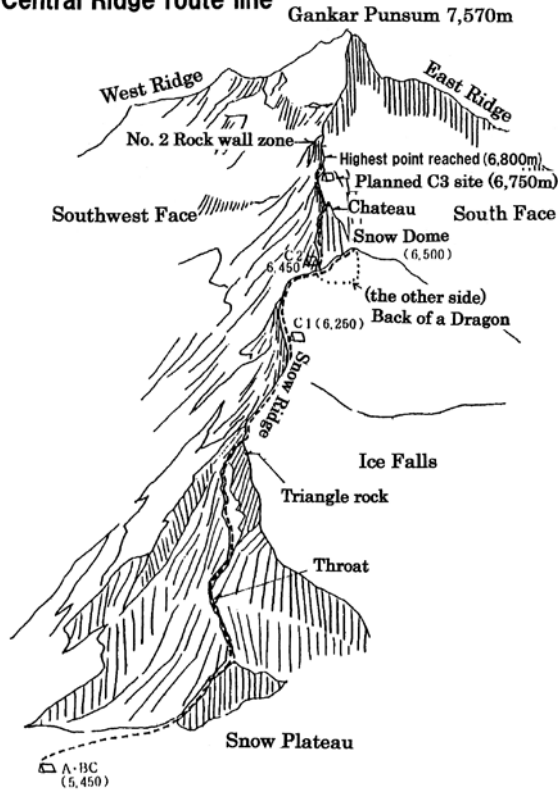
This is Japanese proud witness of pioneering challenge on the awful but fascinating Central Ridge of Gankar Punsum, a contact line straightly going up to the summit sharing Southwest and South Faces, though they had to stop climbing on the way since one member unfortunately suffered from lung dropsy and rescued by a helicopter.

One of the most distinguished Himalayan climbers in Japan, Yoshio Ogata played an important roll as a deputy leader of the expedition with ten members. They started a caravan on August 22 and approached to the Central Ridge from southwest side. They set up BC at 5,050m on the 30th. ABC was set up at 5,450m on September 2. C1 was set up at 6,250m on September 12 and C2 was placed on the 24th successively.

On the 28th, Ogata party made route paving and pushed three pitches of fragile rocks using artificial aids to the head of chateau. On the 19th, they fixed ropes for six pitches on steep snow ridge to snow peak at 6,750m. From there treacherous knife-edged snow ridge like the back of a dragon led to No. 2 rock walls zone. On the 29th, very difficult pushes continued. They negotiated snow ridge like huge mushrooms with sheer drops to the both sides. They further climbed up unsound rock tower and reached the foot of a pinnacle where they deposited gear and supplies for the next day and returned to C2. However, climbing suddenly ceased because of one member' s lung dropsy. The patient was safely carried down to BC on October 2.

Visual materials must be better than literal expression. So I publish as many pictures as pages are possibly allocated.

Central Ridge route line



SW & S face of Gankar Punsum (left) and Khula Kangri (right) – Francoise Pommerate



Gankar Punsum south face seen from a point before reaching BC – Y. Ogata



Gankar Punsum soaring in the opposite side of glacier upstream Mandi Chu – Y. Ogata



Snow Dome and C2 looked down from rock wall zone to C2 & Snow Dome – Y. Ogata



Knife-edged formidable snow ridge from Snow Dome to C2 – Y. Ogata



Ridge "Back of dragon" beyond Snow Dome



Rock walls zone like chateau above C2



Snow Dome (6500m) seen from C2



Rock wall beneath 6,800m reached

Part II. Easternmost Rim of the Himalaya

Tributes of Frederick M. Bailey

Arthur Swinson wrote of F. M. Bailey in his book *Beyond Frontiers – The Biography of Colonel F. M. Baily, Explorers & Secret Agents* Hutchison & Co Ltd. London 1971.

“Having completed his review of the journey, Bailey then summed up what in his view were the chief results. These were:

1. The mapping of some 380 miles of the Tsangpo, which had previously only been done by untrained or unreliable explorers
2. The lower course of the Nagong Chu
3. Discovery of Gyala Peri, a snow-peak 23,460 feet in height, and of glaciers on it, and Namcha Barwa, the peak on the opposite side of the river
4. The taking observation for altitude on the river, where it breaks through the Himalayas some information regarding the enormous drop on the river has been gained, and the falls reported to be 150 feet in height have been proved to be merely an exaggerated rapid of thirty feet”

“Should China become more civilized on day, and relax her hold on Tibet, then perhaps exploration on India’ northeast frontier may commence again. Men will go to see the last few miles of the Tsangpo river not yet glimpsed by European eyes; and mountains will set foot on Namcha Barwa or Gyala Peri. Then Bailey’s great journeys will be recalled again and his fame as an explorer will be set aside that of Younghusband and Sven Hedin, Livingstone and Speke.”

Swinson first published this book in 1971. However Gyala Peri was climbed in 1986 only 15 years later and Namcha Barwa was scaled in 1991 – 1992 only 20 years later. Nevertheless the borderlands surrounding these two outstanding peaks have yet to be explored.

Sanglung 7,095m east of Namcha Barwa main summit is unveiled and no one has yet attempt to climb. In 2001 Nippon University Alpine Club planned to send an expedition, but a climbing permit was suddenly cancelled because of the 9.11 disaster in New York. Two major challenging peaks close to 7,000m in height, Tiba Kangri 6,846m and Sengtang Bu 6,812m Gyala Peri massif also remain untrodden. Gakushuin University Alpine Club made a reconnaissance of Tiba Kangri in autumn of 1999, they did not bring back notable information.

The Tsangpo transforms itself into the Brahmaputra and flows into the Bay of Bengal after surging between two striking peaks, the 7,782 meters giant, Namcha Barwa and the Gyala Peri 7,294 meters massif. But in the late 1800s, the Tsangpo Gorges were romoured to conceal a waterfall that rivalled Victoria Falls. Cloached in mystery and protected by fierce tribesmen and impenetrable terrain, the Tsangpo was the center of considerable geographical debate. Determined probes to unravel its secrets were made by the Pundit surveyor Kintup (1880) and British explorers Frederic M. Bailey and Henry Morshead (1911 – 1913).

1. Namcha Barwa 7782m

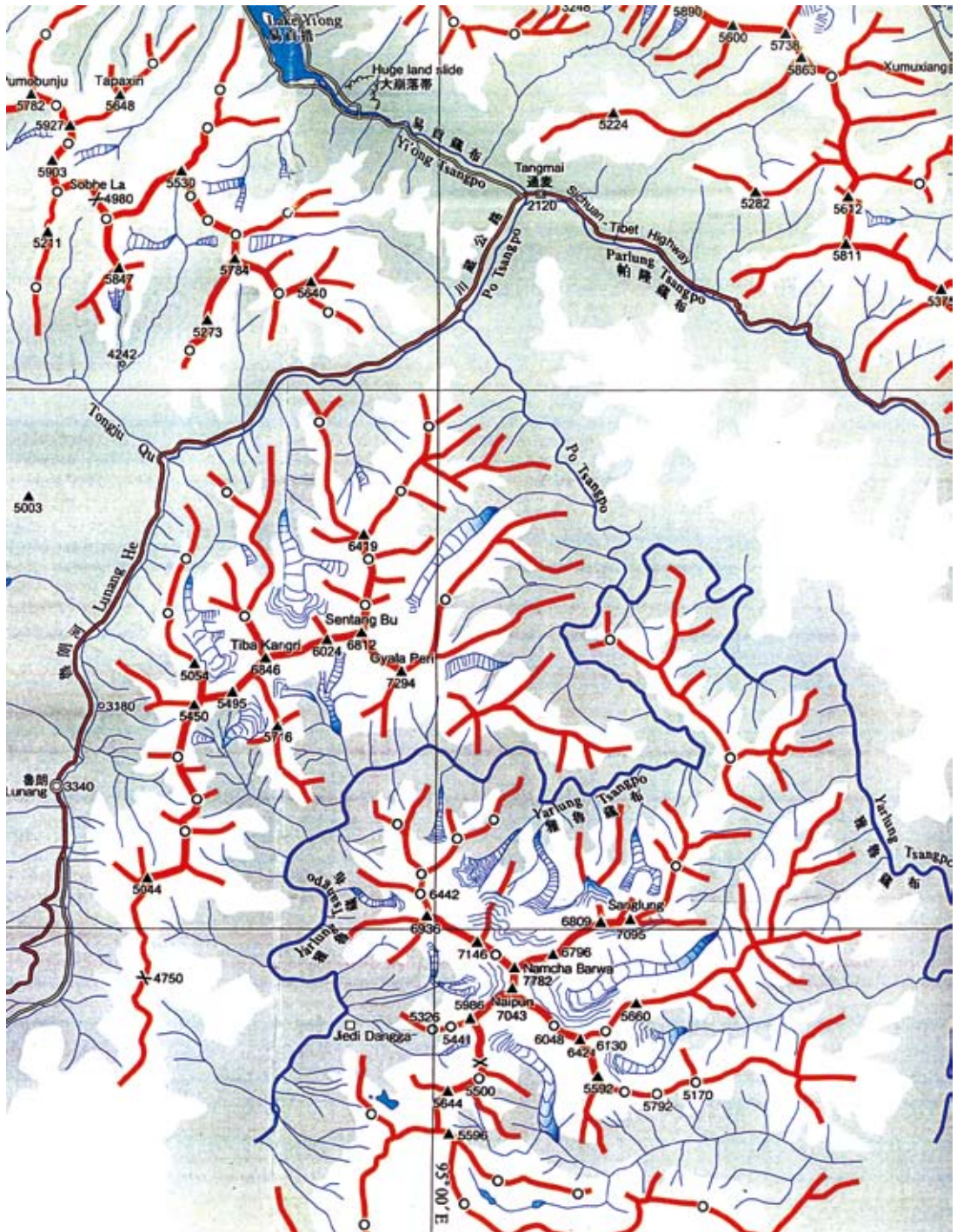
Being located on the easternmost rim of the great Himalaya in East Tibet, Namcha Barwa had long been inaccessible until the China implemented an open-door policy by Deng Xiao Ping in late 1970s. It is about 390 km away to east from Lhasa and encircled with the Tsangpo Great Bent. In 1912 a British of the Survey of India, H. T. Morshead first had a glimpse of the summit from a hill in Assam and in 1913 Morshead and F. M Bailey found the Graat Bent of the Yarlung Tsangpo. Namcha Barwa means 'a red flush of lightening streaking across the sky'.



Namcha Barwa N face seen from Gyala Peri - Y. Ogata



Namcha Barwa W face viewed from Seti La - T. Nakamura



Peak map of Namcha Barua and Gyala Peri massifs drawn by T. Nakamura



Overwhelming 3,000m West face of Namcha Barwa – T. Nakamura

In 1973, the Chinese Academy of Sciences began to send teams from the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau institute for conducting scientific survey and research of the basin of the Yarlung Tsangpo. But an attempt to climb the mountain had to wait until the Japanese Alpine Club and the China Mountaineering Association organized a powerful joint expedition in late 1980s.



Aerial view of west and south face of Namcha Barwa – Yomiuri Shimbun

In succession to the first attempt in 1991, the Japan-China joint team headed by Jiro Yamada (Japan) and Losang Dawa (China) challenged again in 1992.

BC 3520m was established in the southwestern side on September 14. C1 4300m was set up above primeval forest. C2 4850m was built on a flat place of the glacier which flowed from Naipun peak 7043m on the south ridge. Rock wall to the C2 mixed with snow and ice. They traversed a couloir in deep snow and set up C3 5600m on the south ridge. They followed the long south ridge in deep snow to C4 6200m, and C5 6900m was place just beneath the Naipun peak. On October 27, they descended 200m along the south ridge and set up the final assaulting camp, C6 6700m. On October 28, the route was to traverse the south face and 14 ropes were fixed on the most critical pitches to rock band. On October 29, they fixed further 24 ropes onward and bivouacked at 7600m. On the following day they pushed three pitches before reaching NNE ridge. Struggle against deep snow to waist on the NNE ridge led to the summit. The first party stood atop at 12:09 on October 30. The second party stood atop at 14:30 on the same day. The ascent must be one of the hardest and most remarkable climbs in the Himalaya.

Climbing Chronicle of Namcha Barwa

The following is a summary of Climbing Record of Namcha Barwa described on an official report of the Japan - China Joint Expedition in 1992.

1) Attempt by Chinese parties 1960 – 1984

The first attempt was made by a Tibetan party in 1960. They reached a point at 5,000m on the south ridge. Then there was a long blank time and full scale expeditions commences in 1982 after 22 years. In the same year the Chinese Academy of Sciences conducted survey and research of the Yarlung Tsangpo and adjacent unvisited areas. The mountaineering expeditions made a reconnaissance of a viable climbing route in 1982 and succeeded in the first ascent of Naipun peak 7,043m 1983. In the following year they again challenged with powerful members of strong Tibetan climbers, but could not go farther than Naipun peak. The season of their attempts in 1982 - 1984 was in the pre-monsoon which fosters much snow precipitation.

2) Failure in 1991

The Japan-China Joint Expedition started in 1990. In this year a joint reconnoitering party ascended up to a point 6,900m of Naipun peak in only 8 days and could have a confidence to reach the summit of Namcha Barwa from there. In 1991 a full scale joint team was dispatched for climbing. They set up BC on September 30, but unexpected deep snow caused a fatal accident. On October 16, Hiroshi Ohnishi was killed by avalanche en route to C4. This happening made climbing speed very slow and consequently they failed to reach the summit due to lack of time and supplies and fierce winds prevailing in high altitudes.

3) Tactics in 1992 – Successful ascent

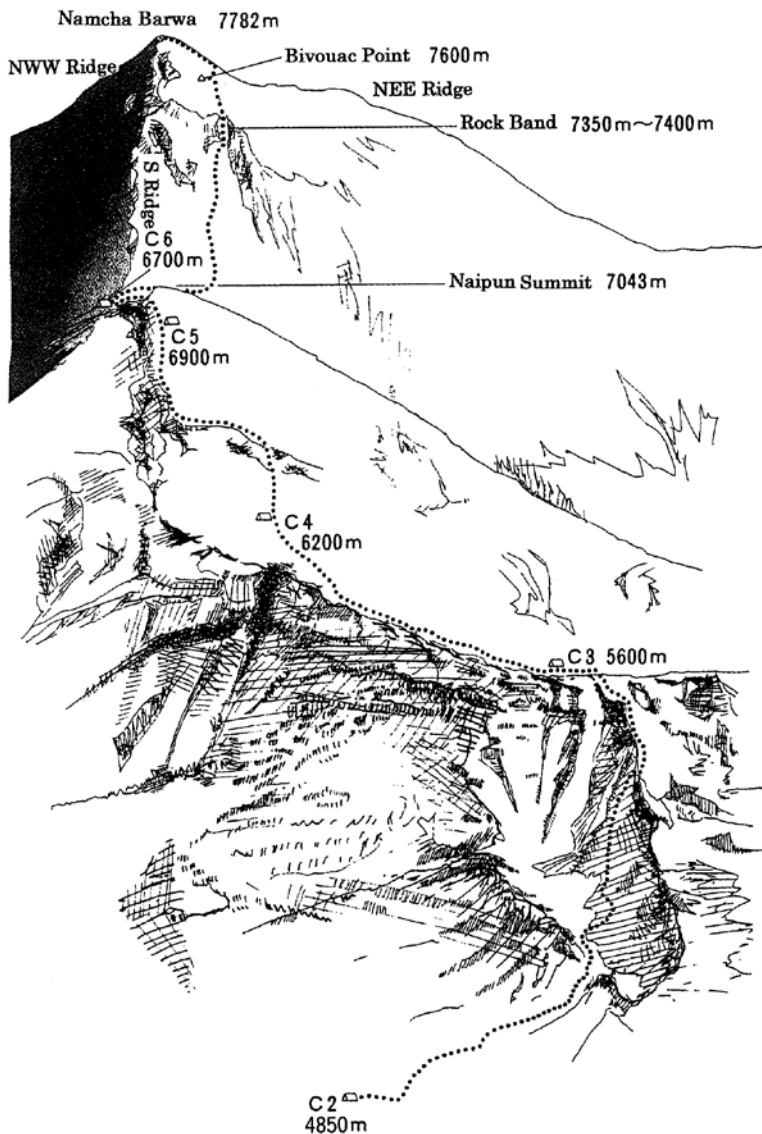
The failure in 1991 taught a good lesson. They 1 gained a conclusion that 4 - 5 days in mid October in post-monsoon season would be the best timing for assaulting the summit in consideration of weather conditions. This is the most important factor for the success.

Their climbing tactics were:-

1. C2 must be set up by mid September.

2. Climbing period was staged in 3 steps:
 - (1) Placing BC, C1, C2 and route paving to C3 for ferrying loads.
 - (2) Placing C3, C4 and route paving to C5.
 - (3) Placing C5 and route work to C6 and farther to the rock band, and assaulting the summit.
3. Controlling logistics in most efficient and optimum supplies distribution.
4. Best combination of members in two teams.
5. Enhancing an ability of weather forecast: one specialist was included in the members. Though the meteorological satellite "Noa", an access to information from the Japan Meteorological Association was possible.

Note: One of 6 Tibetan summitters is Bianba Zaxi (27 years old in 1992). He is a potential eight-thousander now well-known in world mountaineering community.



Unknown Sanglung in the Tsangpo Gorge

Very few experts of the Himalaya region have a knowledge of this mountain, but Frank Kingdon-Word had already visited the hardly accessible region of the world largest canyon in 1924. He published his account on the journey *The Riddle of the Tsangpo Gorges* (Edward Arnold, London 1926). He wrote in the book as follows.

“Across the river is a range of snow-peaks, and above Payi is the great bulk of Sanglung, 23,018 feet. With a terrific snow cliff facing eastwards; east of that again are smaller several snow-peaks, and then the range which just west of Sanglung had attained the dazzling height of 25,445 feet in Namcha Barwa, sinks down and melts into the low rounded jungle-covered hills of the Abor country.”

Sanglung is located 8 km east of Namcha Barwa inside of the Great Bend. The main is unveiled but no one has yet attempted to climb. In 2001 Nippon University Alpine Club planned to send an expedition, but a climbing permit was suddenly cancelled because of unknown reason. Such case is not unusual in eastern Tibet.



Sanglung N face seen from Gyala Peri - Y. Ogata



Aerial view of Sanglung (left) Namcha Barwa (right)
– T. Nakamura

2. Gyala Peri 7294m massif

There is an outstanding mountains massif with three prominent peaks north of Namcha Barwa and the Tsangpo Great Bend. They are Gyala Peri 7294m, Tiba Kingri 6846m and Sentang Bu 6812m. Gyala Peri is 24 km NNW of Namcha Barwa.

In 1912, H. T. Morshead and F. M. Bailey first had a look. In 1913, F. M. Bailey viewed this peak from the ridge near Sanglung Glacier. He described his impression on his book *No Passport to Tibet* (Rupert Hart-Davis, London 1957) as follows.

“The snow-clad which Morshead and I had discovered from Mipi half hidden by its rival Namcha Barwa was now revealed in its true magnificence. Its name was Gyala Peri and it towered to 23,460 feet. In itself it was one of the greatest mountains of the world; but what made it so astonishing was

that only thirteen miles away the peak of Namcha Barwa, 25,445 feet, and between them flowed the Tsangpo over 14,000 feet below Gyala Peri and 16,000 feet below Namcha Barwa. It was an example of the power of water startling as that of the Colorado river in the Grand Canyon. It was a fantastic landscape with different glaciers, some covered in rock and earth and others just masses of dirty ice. (July 17 th, 1913, at Gyala, 9,300 feet)”



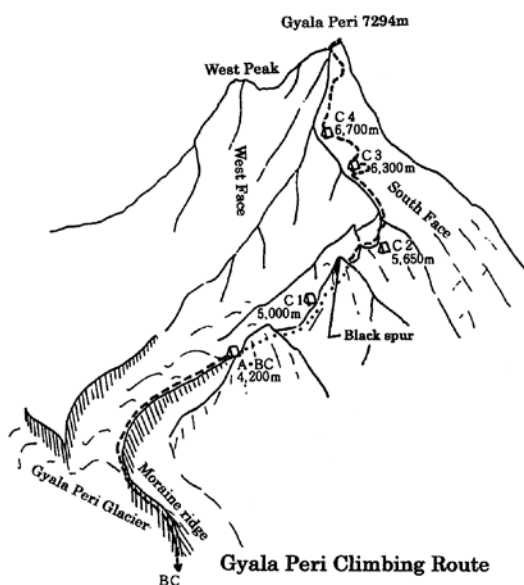
(from left) W & S face of Tiba Kangri, Sentangbu and Gyala Peri – T. Nakamura



Gyala Peri southwest face – K. Yamamori

In 1936, '38, '46 – '47, Frank Ludlow and George Sherriff entered the region for quest for flowers and plants hunting. Gyala is the name of a village on the right bank of Yarlung Tsangpo. Peri means a high mountain. The first ascent was made a Japanese party of the Himalayan Association of Japan headed by Yoshio Ogata via the south ridge on October 31, 1986. But the other two peaks, Tiba Kangri and Sentang Bu have been yet attempted and remain untrodden accordingly. The Gakushuin University Alpine Club made a reconnaissance of Tiba Kangri in autumn of 1999, but they did not bring back notable information. These magnificent peaks must draw more attraction in near future

On September 15, the Japanese party set up BC 3200m on the right bank of the Gyala Peri Glacier. From there they started climbing of 4000m in elevation. Advance base camp 4200m was established at the foot of the west face in the opposite side of the Glacier. Climbs first began with a long rock ridge of the right rim of the face. After three pitches of knife-edged ridge from the plateau, C1 5000m was set up. Four pitches on rock ridge, detour of pinnacles, eight pitches of snow ridge and further push on a slab at 60 – 70 degree angle covered with unstable snow led to a place for C2 5650m. Above the C2, they climbed the south ridge, negotiating crevassed ice cliffs and set up C3 6300m. Ice cliffs continued. Climbing route was taken upwards among the ice cliffs to C4 6700m. After taking rest, four members returned to C3 on October 28. On October 31, three members reached the foot of the summit rock wall after being bothered by deep snow. There were complicated crevasses beneath the summit. They climbed ice wall with double axes from the bottom of couloir like a well. They stood a top at 16:55. It took 13 hours from C3.



Knife-edged ridge of Gyala Peri - Y. Ogata



Gyala Peri south face - Y. Ogata



Sentangbu south face seen from Seti La – T. Nakamura



Tiba Kangri south and west face seen from near Seti La – T. Nakamura



Tiba kangri west face seen from Lunang – T. Nakamura