

TAMOTSU (TOM) NAKAMURA

## **Mountains of Goddess – “Damyon” in Southeast Tibet**

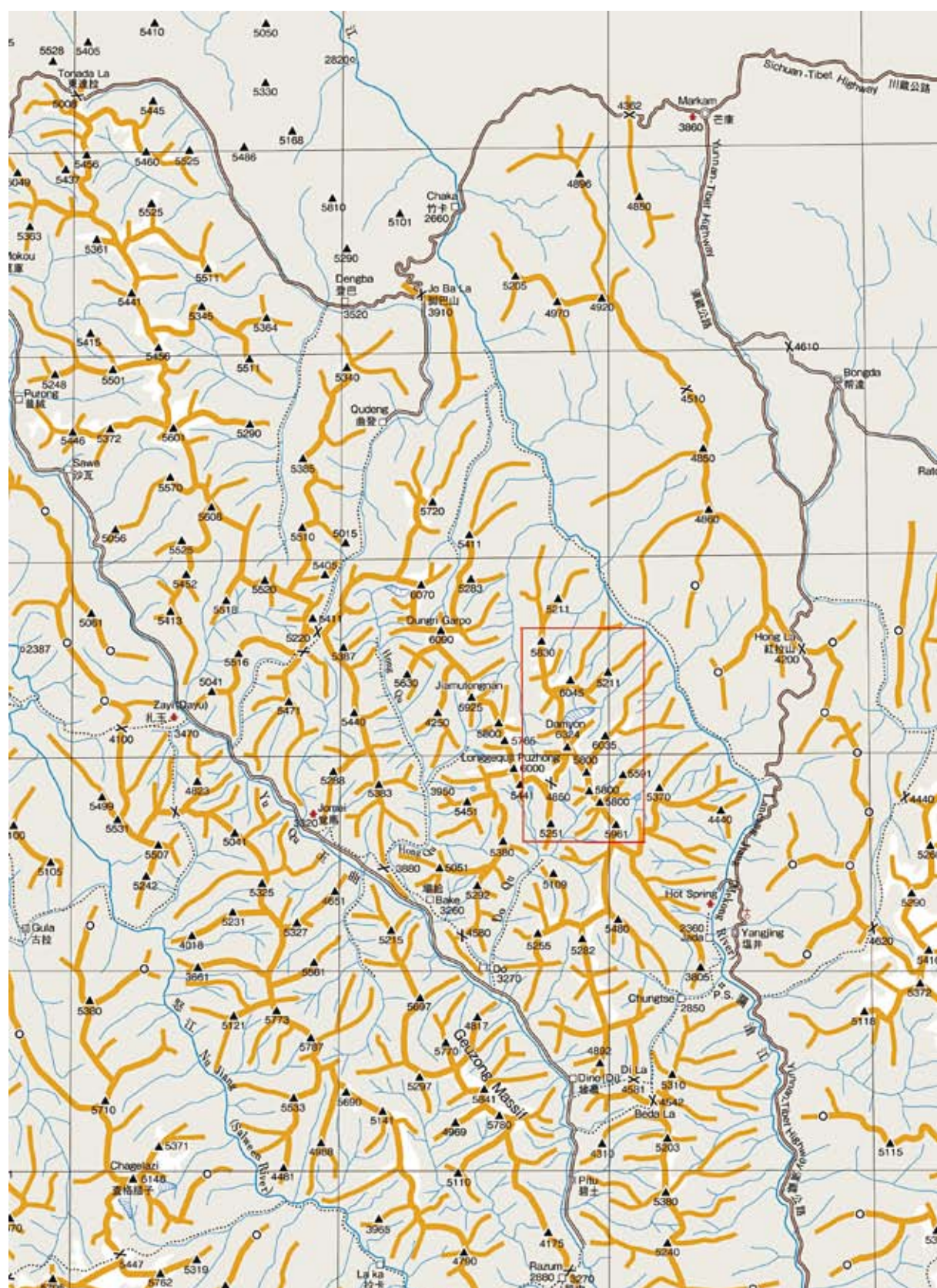
### **Untrodden Mighty Range on Salween–Mekong Divide in Gorge Country**



Southeast face of Damyon 6,324 m viewed from near Yanjing (Yakalo) town

The mountain range on the Salween-Mekong Divide stretches about 700 km from the Tibetan Plateau to the south and is divided into two parts, the Taniantaweng Shan in the north and the Nu Shan in the south. The Sichuan Tibet Highway (Southern route) from Sichuan to Tibet runs along the southern rim of the Tibetan Plateau and crosses the southern part of the Taniantaweng range over the pass Tongda La (5,008 m). To the north of this high pass there aren't any prominent peaks exceeding 6,000 m. In the south, however, soar Dungri Garpo (6,090 m) and the Damyon (6,324 m) massifs.

The latter is a large and impressive mountain massif with two other 6,000 m peaks and many 5,800 – 5,900 m rock peaks. The local Tibetan inhabitants consider the Damyon to be a mountain of Goddess, sacred mountain. A complete panorama of its eastern flank can be admired from the pass Hong La (4,200 m), where the Yunnan Tibet Highway crosses the Mekong-Yangtze Divide. The massif is composed of many lofty crags/turrets/pinnacles but its glaciers have receded and are now small. All peaks remain unclimbed. To the south of the Taniantaweng Shan, the Nu Shan range continues down to south, where the most important part is stunning peaks of the Meil Xueshan (Snow Mountains) massif. They are well known as Ka-Kar-Po, Kang Karpo or Moirigkawagarbo (6,740 m), a holy peak and the other 20 peaks. We call the region as the Deep Gorge Country.





A plant hunter, Frank Kingdon-Ward is the first explorer to have reconnoitred Damyon massif. He wrote in the preface of his narrative *From China to Khamti Long* (Captain F. Kingdon-Ward, Edward Arnold & Co., London 1924), of the author's six months journey nearly one century ago stating from Lijiang through Northwest Yunnan / Southeast Tibet to Khamti Long of North Burma.

"My object in this book is to give some idea of the rapid changes which take place – physical, climatic, and botanical – as you travel westwards from Yangtze across that narrow strip of earth crust where the great rivers of South-east Asia escape from Tibet; and of the jungles which hide the headwaters of the mighty Irrawaddy, Burma's river."

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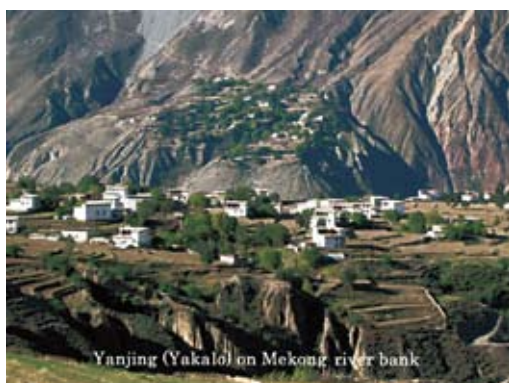
"Just opposite Yakalo (Nakamura's note: Yanjing) across the Mekong, rises the snow-peak of Damyon, the summit of which is visible from the French Mission. It has a local reputation as a sacred mountain, merit being acquired by marching round it. I decided to make it my first objective in the search for plants and glaciers (not merit), and the last day of August we left Yakalo in splendid weather. I took only six mules, as we intended to be back in eight or ten days, and thus lightly equipped, we were able to travel rapidly. In order to reach Damyon, the snowy range between the Mekong and independent Tibet, it was first of all necessary to cross the Mekong, by the rope bridge just below the salts-wells. [The name of Damyon is probably of Moso origin; anyhow, it is neither Chinese nor Tibetan]"



Salt wells & Mekong River, Yanjing



Yanjing (Yakalo) Catholic Church



Yanjing (Yakalo) on Mekong River bank



Lagong Monastery near Yanjing (Yakalo)

"It is an abrupt climb from the Mekong gorge to the crest of the ridge, over 3,000 feet above the river. We spent the night at a small house close by ruins of the monastery (Nakamura's note: Lagong Monastery), and on the following day, September 1, started up the ravine which leads to Damyon."

"Presently we entered the forest and matters became difficult, for the trail was encumbered with fallen tree-trunks. But worse was to come, for as we ascended we came to screes and moraines, where there was practically no trail at all. In the days of Tibetan ascendancy, merit was acquired by any lama who made the circuit of the sacred Damyon.

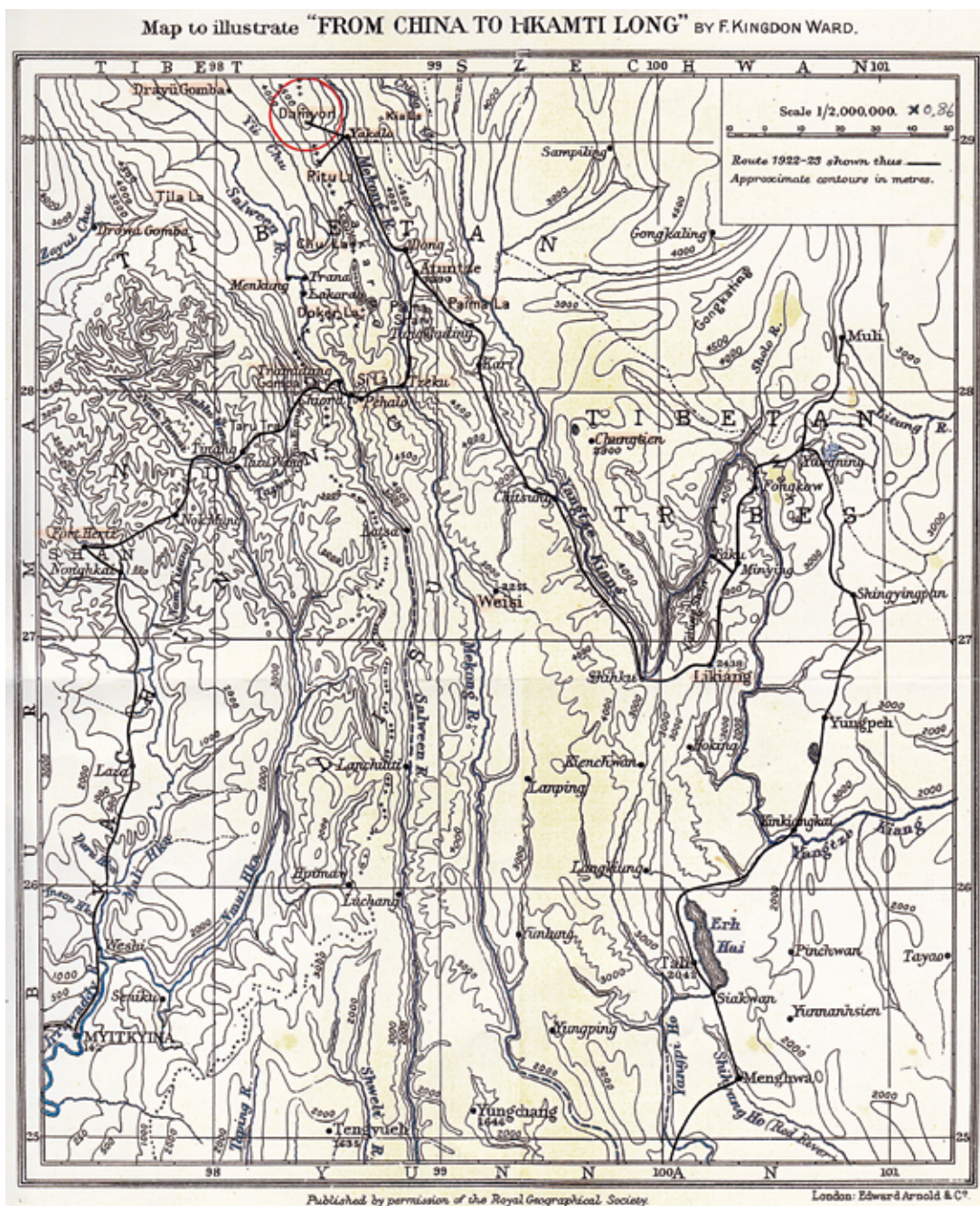
"Huge screes, almost bare of vegetation, towered on either hand and were crowned by barer crags. Glaciers had once filled the valley, but now we were many miles from the foot of the nearest glacier. What had caused the ice to disappear? Was the climate warmer than formerly, or was the snow-fall much less? ----- In a high valley facing north, at about 17,000 feet above sea-level, I found a dying glacier – or rather dead glacier. For it was but a corpse, a wraith crouching at the very top of the valley, hidden from sight. There was no snowfield to nourish it and keep it alive; in a few decades at most no vestige of it would remain; whereas in the case of main Damyon glaciers, though they had retreated many miles and were still shrinking, they could never completely disappear unless Damyon itself fell down, since a peak nearly 20,000 feet must be always snow bound. This is an interesting fact. Dead glaciers! Could anything more droll"

"We camped at 16,000 feet by a small lake, the highest point at which firewood could be obtained from shrub *Rhododendron*. ----- At the head of the valley, only a few miles distant, where a large lake lay at the foot of the cliffs, was Damyon itself, crowned with eternal snow. Not a thousand feet above the lake, but hidden behind a rampart of moraines which it had pushed forward even in retreat, was the glacier. With much toil we climbed the steep and slippery pile to its foot, and secured the first photograph of it, to prove once more that the glaciers in this part of the world are in full retreat, and the North-western in Yunnan at least is indeed drying up."

"We spent several days here, climbing to 17,000 feet, exploring and collecting plants; for on these ranges flowering plants are found at nearly 18,000 feet. In the spreading water at the head of the valleys stood hundreds of plants of a *Primula* allied to *sinoplaginea*, the dark purple capsules showing their teeth in an autumnal grin; but the tightly packed seeds were still green."

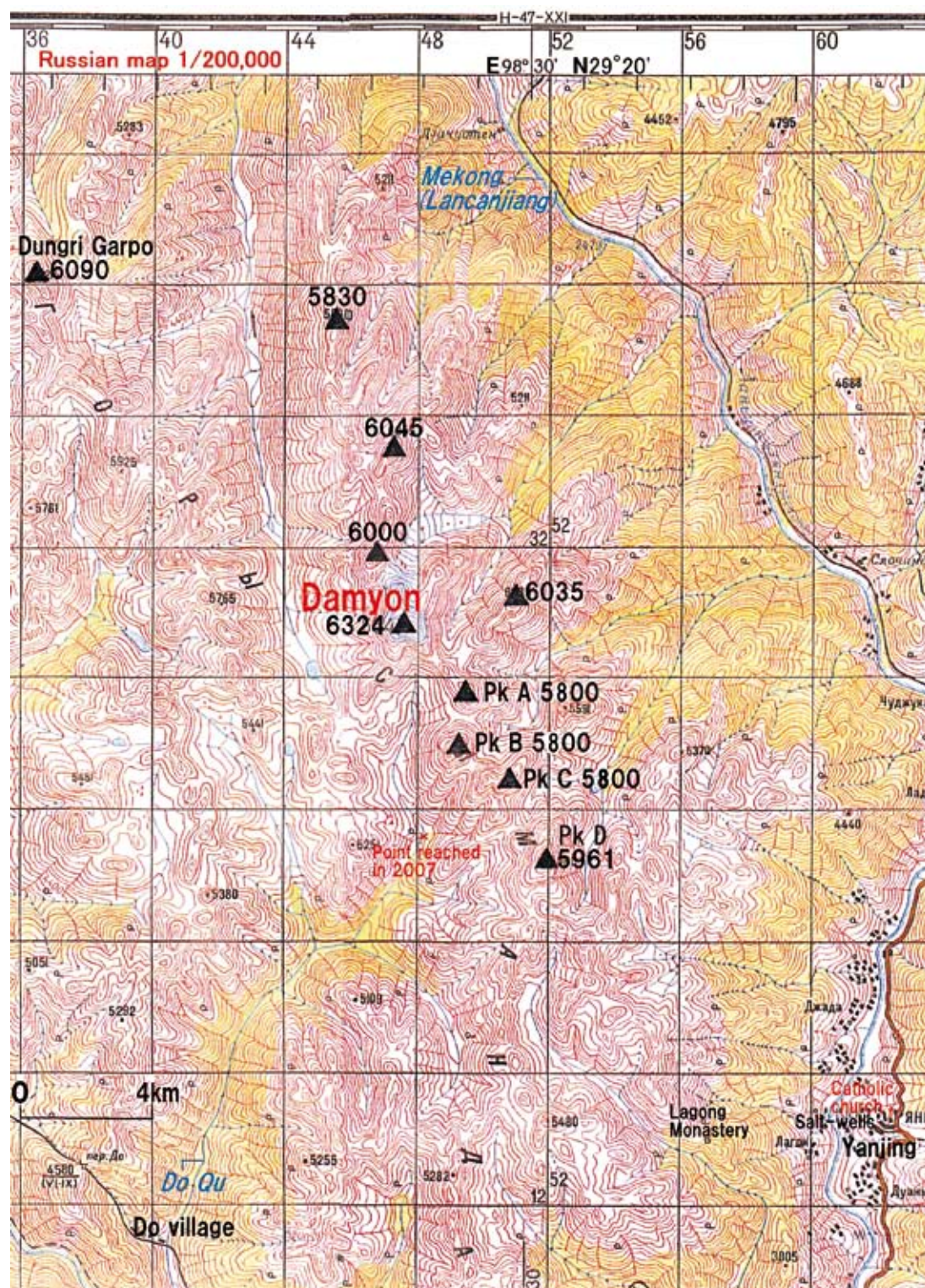
"Damyon glacier ends 1,176 feet above the Tzaya glacier; the former, however, south face, whereas the latter faces north. The snow-line on Damyon is about 18,000 feet, it and the peak itself in the neighbourhood of 19,000 feet."





After nearly one century later, Nakamura's party explored and made a reconnaissance of the western side of Damyon massif from the Yu Qu basin, a large tributary of the Salween River (Nu Jinag) in autumn of 2007. A record of this expedition was published on the Japanese Alpine News vol. 9 2008. This article mainly deals with introduction of challenging peaks in the Damyon massif with related maps. All the peaks are not attempted to climb by anyone else.







## EAST FACE



Panorama (left) of Damyon massif east face viewed from Hong La 4,200 m



PK B 5,800 m, PK A 5,800 m



PK B 5,800 m, PK A 5,800 m, Damyon 6,324 m



PK D 5,961 m

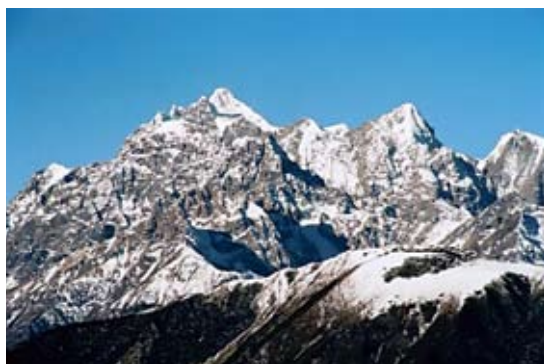


PK C 5,800 m, PK B 5,800 m

## EAST FACE



Panorama (right) of Damyon massif east face viewed from Hong La 4,200 m



Damyon main peak 6,324 m east face



6,045 m peak east face



6,045 m (left), 5,830 m (right) east face viewed from Hong La 4,200 m



## SOUTHWEST FACE



Damyon main peak 6,324 m southwest face viewed from Do village



Caravan marching up Do Qu to Damyon



Damyon 6,324 m southwest face

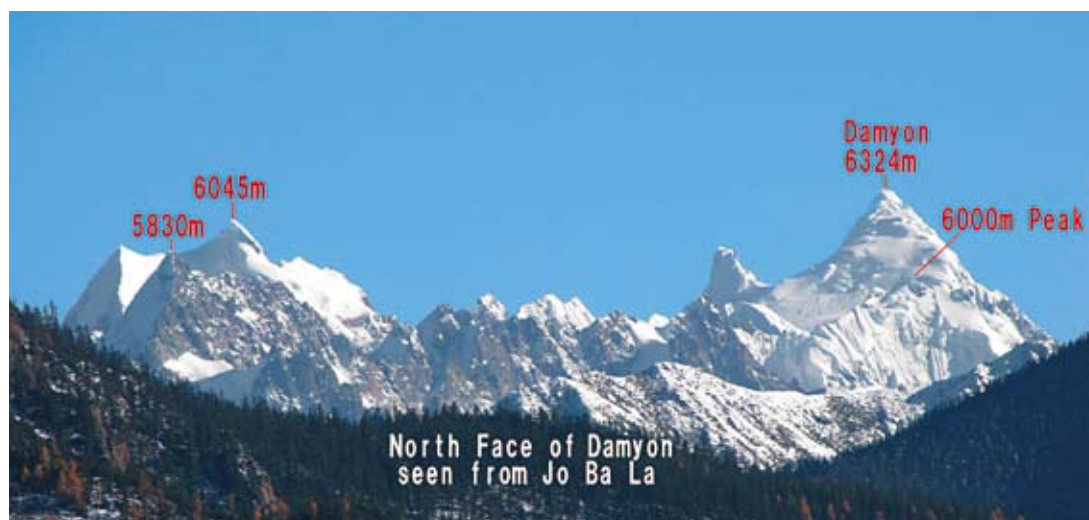


Peak B 5,800 m southwest face from Do Qu



Peak C 5,800 m southwest face from Do Qu

## NORTH FACE



Damyon 6,324 m north face from Jo Ba La



5,830 m (left). 6,045 m (right) north face



Peaks north of Damyon main peak (left), Dungri Garpo 6,090 m (right) northeast face



## **BEYOND DAMYON**



Geuzong 5,841 m north face



Jiamutongnan 5,925 m south face