
Journeys



Julian Cooper *Hinterstoisser Traverse*
2003, oil on canvas, 71 x 51 cms

TAMOTSU NAKAMURA

Quest for the Source of the Irrawaddy

In the Steps of Bailey and Kingdon-Ward

If you travel north-westwards from Yakalo (Yangjing), you meet with snow peaks at every turn, growing ever more lofty. There is a perfect botanist's paradise in that mountainous and little-known country beyond the source of the Irrawaddy.

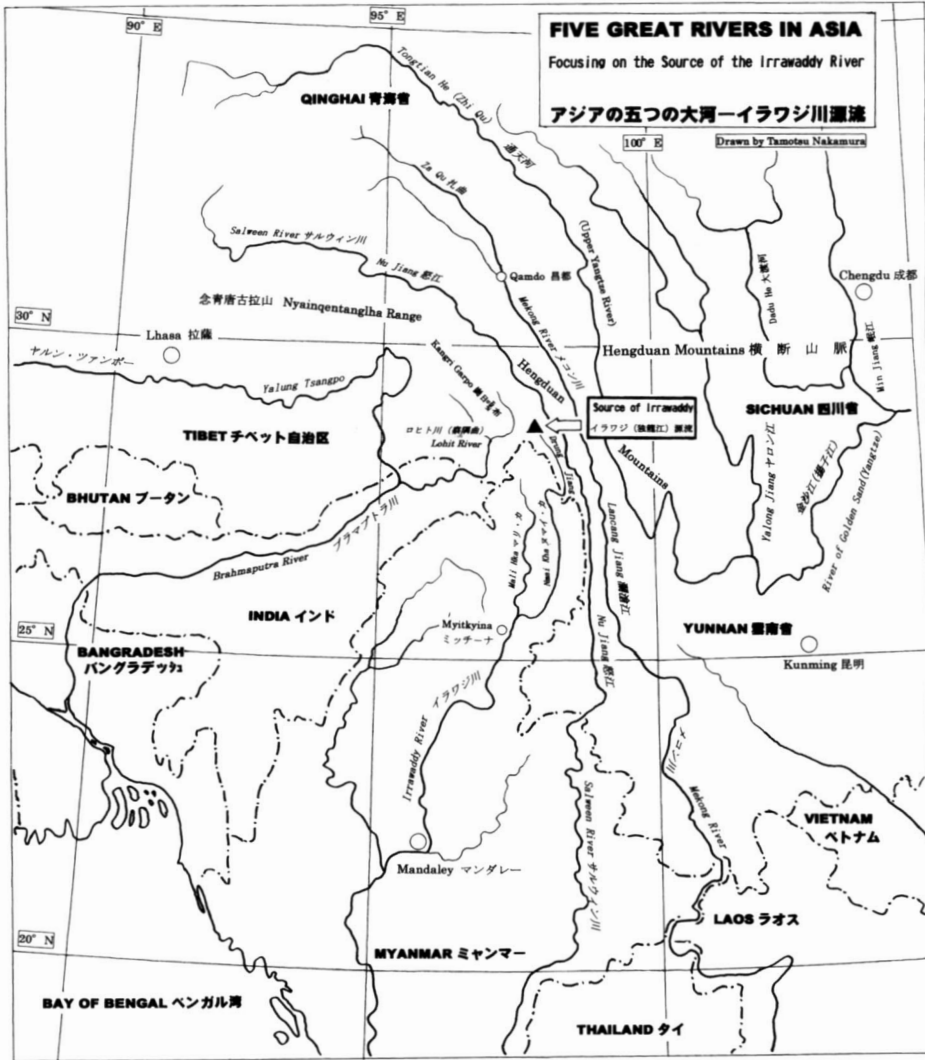
Frank Kingdon-Ward, *China to Khamti Long*

The year 1999 held bitter experiences for us, elderly explorers searching for the source of the Irrawaddy. We had long hoped to trace the footsteps of F M Bailey in 1911 and Frank Kingdon-Ward in 1911-13 across the gorge country from China to Assam in India. Our plan was to approach the headwaters of the Irrawaddy from forbidden Zayul County in south-east Tibet, adjacent to the border with the Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh and northern Myanmar, and then traverse the three river gorges of the upper Salween, Mekong and Yangtze. Our main objective was a quest for mountains at the headwaters of the Irrawaddy and a search for unknown glaciated snow peaks over 6000m in the heart of the Baxoila Ling range. We departed from Deqen in Yunnan province at the end of May. Before arriving at Zayul, however, we discovered that our travel agent had not obtained a special permit allowing us to travel through an area strictly prohibited to foreigners. Our illegal entry caused serious trouble. We were arrested near Lhasa by the Public Security Bureau and a heavy penalty was imposed by the Chinese authorities.

But these setbacks never dimmed our dream of seeking the source of the Irrawaddy. Neither did the notorious SARS epidemic prevalent in China halt our plans. In the summer of 2003 the Army and Public Security Bureau granted permission for our projected route.

The Headwaters of the Irrawaddy

The Irrawaddy is one of the great rivers of Asia. It runs south from the extreme north of Myanmar and the Hengduan mountains in south-east Tibet and empties into the Andaman Sea. The main river has two separate tributaries, the Mali Hka to the west and the Nmai Kha to the east, rising in South-east Tibet. They flow southward in parallel to unite 45km north of Myitkyina ('near great water'), Myanmar. Irrawaddy means 'river of the elephant' in Hindi. The river is 2150km long and its annual discharge is the tenth largest in the world.



46. Five Great Rivers in Asia. (Tamotsu Nakamura)

The name of the Nmai Kha changes to Drung Jiang (*jiang* means 'river') in China. Its length is 178.6km, 86.9km of this in the Tibetan Autonomous Region (TAR) and 91.7km in Yunnan Province. East of the Drung Jiang rises the Baxoila Ling range with peaks of 4000m-5000m forming a watershed with the Nu Jiang (Salween river). To the west, the Dandalika range rises to 3600m-4000m, forming a watershed with the Mali Kha, along which runs the China-Myanmar border. The valleys are deep, the mountains are high and the region is a largely isolated part of the gorge country.

The Nmai Kha/Drung Jiang is longer than the Mali Kha and therefore ranks as the major source of the Irrawaddy. The Drung Jiang separates into two major tributary streams at 98.05.24E, 28.17.37N in Zayul County, only 8km from the Myanmar border. The Ridong He (*he* means 'river') flows in from the north-east and the Jida Qu (*qu* means water) from the north-west. The name of the Jida Qu changes to Gada Qu above Jida village. But which stream is the true source, Ridong He or Gada Qu? Published information and observations during my journey in October 2003 would, hopefully, help us resolve this possibly controversial issue.

The two principal Chinese publications disagree on the source. *International Rivers of China* gives the Drung Jiang as the main stream of the Irrawaddy and says it rises on the eastern slope of Mt Raiala (5298m) in the Baxoila Ling range of Zayul County where the river is known as Ridong He. This stream flows through Ridong village. However, the *Chinese Water System Dictionary* says that the main upper stream of Drung Jiang is the Jida Qu rising from mountains further west in the Baxoila Ling, in Chubagong district of Zayul County.

As far as I know, three early geographer-explorers visited this region, Jacques Bacot (1909), F M Bailey (1911), and Frank Kingdon-Ward (1911-13). As no specific records or accurate maps and photographs are available to verify the true source, their observations are invaluable even today. Bailey wrote, in his somewhat belated account, *China-Tibet-Assam, A Journey 1911*, London (Jonathan Cape) 1945:

It was this valley that the French traveller M. Bacot had come down two years previously. He is of the opinion that the stream down which he came is the main source of the Irrawaddy.

The true source of a river of the size and importance of the Irrawaddy is a matter of considerable interest. The account of M. Bacot's journey was published in *La Géographie* on April 15th, and had not been seen by me when I reached this point on June 18th. Never dreaming that there could be any doubt that I was following up the main valley, I did not pay particular attention to the stream coming in from the north which M. Bacot believed to be the larger river. Had I recognised the importance of this I would have paid some attention to the size of these two streams and might have measured the amount of water in each.

Captain Kingdon-Ward and Lord Cranbrook ascended from Burma and, coming thus from the south, reached to within three days of my road at Ridong. In his book, *Plant Hunter's Paradise*, Captain Kingdon-Ward, by comparing the size of the streams where he saw them, came to conclusion that those rising between the two passes, the Tsong La and the Zhasha La [present name is Rishu La], contained more water than those rising east of Tsong La. This is also my opinion. These streams are also further from the main river, as can be seen from the map.

As is seen above, Bacot thought that the headwaters of Ridong He were the source of the Irrawaddy River while Bailey and Kingdon-Ward concluded that the Jida Qu/Gada Qu led to the true source. Kingdon-Ward entered from Burma (now Myanmar) having crossed Namni La and stationed himself at Jida village by the Jida Qu (Kingdon-Ward's Lokong Chu), but did not reach the Ridong He (Kingdon-Ward's Kalaw Chu) and was not able to compare water discharges of the two rivers.

In 1993 a young American, Wade Blackenbury, accompanied by a French photographer and Chinese interpreter arrived to explore the Drung Jiang. They were arrested at Ridong and expelled after detention for several days at the Peoples Liberation Army garrison. The American had reached a glaciated mountain in the source area, but his description was ambiguous and no useful maps and photographs were included in his book, *Yak Butter & Black Tea, A Journey into Forbidden China*, North Carolina, 1997.

So the question remains, which is the true source of the Irrawaddy? Since no detailed survey report of the Chinese authorities was available to me, I was unable to reach a positive conclusion. However, the headwaters of both the Ridong He and Jida Qu/Gada Qu are located within 18km of each other, east to west, according to the Russian 1:200,000 topographical map. Both rise from untrodden mountains of 5200m-5500m in the Baxoila Ling and run southward. If such factors as the northernmost location and the shortest distance to the watersheds of the three rivers Lohit (Brahmaptra), Irrawaddy and Salween are acceptable indicators, then the peak called Rulong Xueshan (5525m) and a neighbouring 5240m summit to the east, both in the headwaters of Jida Qu/Gada Qu, stand at the true source of the Irrawaddy. This point is the most northerly and closest to the junction of the three watersheds.

Zayul to the Brahmaputra (Lohit) – Irrawaddy Divide

Early on 8 October 2003 we left Rawu (3900m) for the Dema La (4802m), a pass on the Lohit-Tsangpo divide and the gateway to Zayul County. Rawu is an entry point for Kangri Garpo East, a mountain group dominated by the magnificent Ruoni (6882m). Called 'Chombu' by Kingdon-Ward, Ruoni is the highest unclimbed peak in eastern Tibet. Other breathtaking and untouched 6000m summits range north-west from Ruoni.



49. Kangri Garpo East group, south-east face of Ruoni (6882m), highest unclimbed peak in eastern Tibet, viewed from the road to Dema La. (*Tamotsu Nakamura*)



50. Kangri Garpo East, north face of Gheni (6150m), south-east of Rawu. (*Tamotsu Nakamura*)

The landscape changes on the watershed. To the west spreads a colourless Tibetan plateau, while in a U-shape valley to the east are the headwaters of the Lohit River, the upper Brahmaptura River (Chinese name: Zayul Qu-Sang Qu). Here we entered Zayul, a closed land where entry by foreigners is strictly controlled. Following the Sang Qu we drove down a valley of yellow autumn leaves and beautiful conifers to a junction with a trade path that leads to Yunnan. At the village of Sangju (3090m) we organised our caravan and departed with 11 horses and Tibetan muleteers. We spent the first night in a grazing hut at Minchi (3635m) where Bailey stayed on 20 June 1911. The trail separates at Mingqi, one route heads north-east over the Ti La (4764m) to a crossing of the Salween (Nu Jiang) near Gula and the other (our route) goes south-east to the Rishu La (Bailey's Zhasha La) thence to Ridong. Both are old and major trade routes still in use. Following Bailey's footsteps we climbed a valley, with a deep gorge in the lower part, and camped at a pasture called Chonchung (4170m). When Bailey passed this way he described the blue and yellow poppies, probably *Meconopsis horridula*, that were growing by the wayside.

Next day we reached the Rishu La (4730m) and thanked the Gods for allowing us to get so close to the headwaters of the Irrawaddy. Patches of snow remained but the trail was clear and the views spectacular. To the NNW, we could see the peak Baxoika Ling (6011m) and to the north Yambayisum (6005m) rose from behind subsidiary ridges. A rocky range to the south marked the China-Myanmar border. Rhododendrons flourished on both sides of the pass, on the eastern side reaching as far as our crossing point. 'I was now getting within distant touch of India,' wrote Bailey when he gained the pass.

An eight-hour descent south-eastwards brought us to a junction of waters where the main stream, a stretch of clear turquoise water, 15-30 metres wide, poured from headwaters that sprang from a glaciated snow mountain to the left and a challenging rock peak to the right. Here was the source of the Irrawaddy. Our muleteers knew the snow peak as Rulong Xueshan ('snowy mountain'). It stands 9km to the north of the junction and, according to the Russian topographical map, is 5525m high. The main stream is formed from two feeders, one flowing directly from a col between two peaks and the other from a 5200m rock peak above an eastern valley. The latter was probably a greater distance though the actual headwaters were out of sight behind a ridge. We set up camp on a pasture at 4040m a few kilometres upstream from Dokong.

We left the main stream of the Gada Qu and entered a tributary descending from the Tsong La (4460m) on the watershed with the Ridong He. The pass was wide and flat. Crossing it on 14 October, we saw two large caravans of 20 to 30 horses carrying fertilizer, rice and dairy produce from Zayul to Ridong.



51. Kangri Garpo East, north face of unnamed peak and glacier south-east of Rawu.
(*Tamotsu Nakamura*)



52. East face of Zharachoni (5429m) in the Baimang Snow Mountains on the
Mekong-Yangtze divide. (*Tamotsu Nakamura*)



53. South face of Rulong Snow Mountain (5526m) above the headwaters of the Irrawaddy. (*Tamotsu Nakamura*)



54. Headwaters of the Irrawaddy and south face of peaks in the Baxoila Ling range. (*Tamotsu Nakamura*)

From the Tsong La the trail descended gradually among dwarf junipers, rhododendrons and willows, and then tall junipers and firs to a beautiful circular lake some 140m across. The scenery appeared to us to be almost artificial; a feature in a park to which a gardener had given great thought. Continuing our journey down the valley, on 16 October, we visited a small abandoned lamasery where Bailey had met a lama from Sera Monastery in Lhasa. Beyond the confluence with the main branch of the Ridong He, the river formed a deep gorge, blue water raging fiercely through primeval conifer forest. Below the gorge, near Ridong village, the valley opened out, with Tibetans watching over their grazing yaks.

In 1909, when Bacot came down to Rodong after crossing a 5300m pass on the Irrawaddy-Salween divide, he believed he had descended by the headwaters of the true source of the Irrawaddy. However, comparison of his map and the Russian map identifies the stream he traced as a tributary of the Ridong He, east of the main stream. This might possibly lead to the headwaters cited in *International Rivers in China*. As pointed out by Bailey, Bacot's maps are incomplete and unhelpful.

Remote Lands – Ridong and Mengkung

Ridong village is located on the fertile and well-cultivated terrace of the Ridong He. Here we changed horses and muleteers. Our main concern was a garrison of the frontier guard of the China People's Liberation Army stationed in the village. We knew of the arrest in 1993 of the American traveller and French photographer, but fortunately nothing happened to us. The 10 young soldiers, Han and Tibetan, Bai, Nashi and Manchurian minorities, were cheerful and showed no hostility. We asked villagers whether any foreigners other than the American and his French companion had come to Ridong in recent years. The answer was 'no'.

On 17 October, in a caravan of 10 horses and three muleteers we marched east toward Tsama La (4710m) on the Irrawaddy-Salween divide. Leaving the Ridong He we ascended a forested valley, the last 800m of the trail climbing very steeply to the pass. When we reached the crest, cloud already blanketed Mukong Xueshan (6005m) to the north. It was here that Bailey mistook the stream he had seen and later wrote:

Owing to bad weather and untrustworthy information, I am unable to say for certain whether the No La or Tsema La is on the Salween-Irrawaddy watershed. From the Tsema La I saw that the stream which I had crossed lay between the two passes. I could not see the actual river, and the people could not tell me whether this flowed east to the Salween or west to the Irrawaddy: it seemed to me most probable that this stream flowed to the Irrawaddy. I have made it so on my map, but it is still an open question which remains to be cleared up.

In fact the stream was flowing to the Salween, not the Irrawaddy.



55. Pilgrims at No La. (*Tamotsu Nakamura*)



56. Salt wells on the banks of the Mekong River at Yangjing, worked by monks.
(*Tamotsu Nakamura*)

On the following day we crossed the No La (4269m) where many pilgrims were resting. They were on the way back home to Baxoi County, north of Zayul, after a circumnavigation of the holy mountain Kawagebo (6740m). From the pass we briefly glimpsed the main peak and large glacier of the Mukong Xueshan massif.

On 19 October we arrived at Mengkung (2200m-2350m), situated on terraces high above the Salween (Nu Jiang), and stayed two nights at a Tibetan house. It had been a long-cherished desire to visit Mengkung as the village is a centre of the history and culture of Tsawarong district. *Tsawa* means 'warm' and Tsawarong is a warm place. Fields are elaborately cultivated and the water supply system well constructed, irrigating crops of barley, wheat, corn, walnuts, apricots, apples and pomegranates. The local people were polite and hospitable. More than 100 families – 1700 villagers – lived there with a primary school of 170 pupils. By a curious coincidence Kingdon-Ward arrived at Mengkung two days after Bailey had departed. Kingdon-Ward attempted to reach it again in 1913 but Chinese officials refused him a permit.

The highlight of our stay in Mengkung was an interview with a 100-year-old man named Paima, the oldest resident in Tsawarong district. It went as follows:

Nakamura: How many children and grand children do you have?

Paima: Six daughters, 27 grandchildren and so many to the fifth generation.

Nakamura: Did you meet foreigners when you were a child?

Paima: I did not meet, but heard that foreigners came here and stayed.

Nakamura: Did you travel to the remote places? Where did you go?

Paima: When I was 20 years old, I visited two places. One was a holy temple of Buddhism in Shaanxi Province and the other was India, to a sacred place for Tibetans called 'Monkey Mountain' near Kalimpong. By an order of High Lama (Living Buddha) of the Mengkung Monastery I went to India via Lhasa. The purposes of the travel were a pilgrimage to the holy place and trade business too. I carried Chinese silver coins and musk to India and brought back tobacco to Lijiang in Yunnan. I travelled to lower Zayul too.

Nakamura: Would you please talk about slaves?

Paima: I employed slaves in a trip to India. All of them were Tibetan slaves.

Nakamura: Did you remember that aircraft of the Allied Forces crashed in the mountains of the Salween valley during the World War II?

Paima: Yes, I heard that several aircraft met accidents.

A century ago, Mengkung was a centre for the slave trade. Bailey

encountered many slaves of a dwarf race who had been brought from the country along the lower Salween, seven days' journey south of Mengkung. One of the women had a tattooed face. They might have been Nu or Lisu, and the tattooed woman must have been Drung, but at present no such minorities live in Mengkung. The younger generation knows nothing about slavery and old people keep silent. Kingdon-Ward wrote:

To return to Tsawarong. I have asked myself how it is that the men of Kam are so highly civilized in this dour land, and the answer I found was, because they are great travellers; their horizon is unbounded. They go far into China to trade, and far into Tibet to worship. They see other civilizations – China, India, even Burma. They are a pastoral people who have settled down to an agricultural life without ever losing their nomadic instinct. (*The Mystery Rivers of Tibet*, Seeley Service, London, 1923)

Development, pilgrims and Journey's End

On 21 October we said goodbye to the villagers of Mengkung and descended with seven mules and two muleteers to a suspension bridge (1920m) over the Salween. A half-day trek to the south took us to Zhanang (2100m) on a flat terrace 200m above the left bank of the Salween. The village is an administrative centre for Tsawarong and an important crossroads. When I was here in 1996, there were only a few Tibetan houses, a local government office and a small lamasery. Since then change has been rapid. The village has become a township and a base for the 'West Development Drive' being launched by the Chinese government. The newly-built street was busy with pilgrims and trade caravans. Sometimes the sound of blasting echoed across the valley. A road was under construction from Baihanlu to Zhanang along the Salween, a distance of about 75km as the crow flies. The project was already two-thirds complete and the road is planned to reach Zogong along the Wi Qu. Our original plan was to follow the trail to Baihanlu-Gongshan in Yunnan, but with construction work in full swing the route was impassable and dangerous for horse caravans. There was no alternative but to continue our trek along the Wi Qu, north to Pitu and across the Beda La to Yangjing, following exactly the footsteps of Bailey and Kingdon-Ward.

We should have met John Nankervis, President of the New Zealand Alpine Club, at Zhanang but missed him by a day. His party entered a branch valley from Longpu to the western side of Peak 6509m and Kawagebo (6740m), the main summit of the Meili Xhueshan range, and climbed Bungxung Laka (5877m). They abided by a promise not to make a reconnaissance of Kawagedo. John remarked in a letter on the huge amount of litter left on the trail by pilgrims. However, 2003 was an auspicious year, and the numbers making a pilgrimage around the holy mountain increased ten-fold.



57. Pilgrims crossing the Wi Qu river in Gorge Country. (*Tamotsu Nakamura*)

On 22 October we ascended to the Tondu La (3352m) through dense forests of firs and tall prickly oaks that grew almost to the pass. From here we had a fine view of the Salween flowing south and the extraordinary meanders of the Wi Qu. The pass itself was strung with colourful prayer flags. We descended into the heart of the deep gorge country. The Wi Qu gorge north of the Tondu La is a natural wonder, a most magnificent and breathtaking landscape. For two days we marched along a flat trail 300m above the right bank of Wi Qu, crossing the Tong La (3270m) and entering a beautiful valley to reach Pitu (3170m), another rich place of Tsawarong. There is an impressive ruin of a large monastery, probably destroyed by the Red Army at the time of the Cultural Revolution in 1966-75.

On 25 October the weather deteriorated as we left Pitu and ascended to the Beda La (4540m) on the Salween-Mekong divide. We would have had a spectacular panorama over glaciated rock and snow peaks soaring to 5800m and also the beautiful valley of Wi Qu had it not been snowing. On the last day of our trek, we visited the monastery of Lagong, sited about 1000m above the salt wells of the Mekong in Yangjing where 70 lamas now work. The Chinese destroyed the monastery in 1907 and many of the monks were killed. When Bailey came in 1911 the building lay in ruins. Yangjing marked the end of our journey of new discovery in the autumn 2003. The Gods had favoured us.

Summary: An account of a journey by horse caravan in search of the source of the Irrawaddy and on across the Salween and Mekong gorge country. Undertaken in October 2003 by two Japanese, Tamotsu Nakamura (leader, aged 68) and Tsuyoshi Nagai (70) accompanied by guide Shaohong Cheng, (Tibetan, 31) interpreter Guo en Qiao, (Han, 24) and Asong, a 40-year-old Tibetan woman cook.