
Surveys



Julian Cooper, *Allalinhorn*, oil on canvas, 61 x 40cm, 2013

JULIAN FREEMAN-ATTWOOD

Nepal's Wild West

Last of The Hidden Himals

'No man travels so far or so fast as he who is lost.' H.W. Tilman



Phil Wickens on Pk 5930m in the Kanti Himal with Kaqur Kangri (6859m) in the background. (Luke Hughes)

The Karnali zone of North-west Nepal comprises some of the least explored of the Nepal Himalaya. The districts on the Tibet frontier within this zone are from east to west, Dolpo, Mugu and Humla. The prominent peaks (not necessarily only in Karnali zone) that were climbed in the 1960s and 1970s, such as Kanjiroba (1970), Saipal (1963), Nampa (1972) and Api (1960) lie as almost isolated massifs to the south of the main Tibet watershed. These mountains were, 50 or more years ago, very difficult of access requiring at least three weeks' caravan time and often much more, from Nepalgunj or Surket in the far south near the Indian border. Were it not for the present airstrips at Simikot, Gamghadi (Rara Lake), Jupal (Dolpo) or Jumla, it would still take that long today.

The Maoist insurgency, which was strong in the west and around Jumla, deterred mountaineers and tourists from the area for two decades until after the 2006 revolution. Of the few who ventured in, the Japanese were

the most active with some substantial exploration accomplished over the last 15 years.

Geographically, I am referring to areas west of Dolpo and from there up to the extreme north-west frontier near to Gurla Mandhata (7694m), itself in Tibet. Nowhere on that long, Tibet frontier boasts a 7000-metre summit but there are dozens of 6000-metre peaks as well as extremely challenging mountains just under that height. My attention was particularly drawn to this area due to seven journeys I have made to the Transhimalaya of Tibet (Gangdise) and a subsequent visit to Mt Kailash. (I was fortunate to have had the Lake District artist Julian Cooper with me on the Kailash trip and more fortunate to have had the chance of obtaining a painting of that holy mountain from him.)

If you look some 30 miles south to the main Himalaya from the road to



Nick Colton at 6000m on south ridge of Gave Ding (6571m) in the Changla Himal. (Julian Freeman-Attwood)

Kailash, near Laru township, you see a line of mountains unbroken for 150 miles prior to reaching Lake Manasarovar. At this point the line breaks at the start of the Karnali river which denotes the border between West Nepal and India. To geographers, rather than to holy men who revere Gangotri, the Karnali is the true source of the Ganges emanating from Lake Manasarovar just south of Kailash. From the road at Laru, two particular peaks show up above all others: Kaqur Kangri (6859m), which is known in Nepal as 'Kanti' and as lying in the Kanti Himal, and Rongla Kangri (6799m). Kanti translates as 'light of the face' or just 'the lovely' and has Sanskrit origins, often being used as a girl's name. Rongla is the name used for the whole range by Tibetans.

The border region of interest to me ran from the western end of Dolpo: beginning with the Palchung Hamga Himal, linking westward with the Kanti Himal and running further west still to the Kanla Himal (between the trading passes of Namje La and Kang La). This is followed by the Gorakh Himal, Changla Himal, Chandi Himal and finally the Nalakankar group near to Gurla Mandhata. As the border goes, this is a distance of about 300 kilometres.

The earliest travel to the region by a westerner seems to have been undertaken by Thomas Webber in 1863. He was hunting *banchowr* (wild yak) for game and may possibly have been the first to identify the approximate



North-east face of unnamed Pk 5816m in the Kharpunath Lekh, Gorakh Himal. (Julian Freeman-Attwood)

region of the source of Tsangpo/Brahmaputra river. In July 1900 a Japanese Buddhist priest, Ekai Kawaguchi (known to Viceroy Lord Curzon), crossed the border from Dolpo to Tibet, struggling across a 5000-metre pass, carrying all that he needed on his own. Kawaguchi was the first Japanese ever to enter Nepal; his narrative was published in Japan in 1904 and an English version entitled *Three Years In Tibet* followed in Madras in 1909. Following the cessation of Younghusband's expedition to Lhasa, captains C.H.D. Ryder and C.G. Rawling, in 1904, made an acclaimed journey westward across southern Tibet from the Chumbi valley. They incorrectly concluded that the Brahmaputra's source was just north-east of Kailash, whereas it was more accurately pinpointed by Sven Hedin a few years later. Ryder and Rawling left Tibet via passes near Kamet southwards into the Garhwal. Next came Sven Hedin, whose more widespread Tibetan journeys spanned 1904 to 1908. Hedin (also well-known to Viceroy Curzon) journeyed further west than Kawaguchi and in 1907 reached the Kubi Kangri area – the true source of the Brahmaputra.

The contemporary Japanese explorations and climbs are largely as follows and my thanks for this information go to Tamotsu Ohnishi, Sadao Yoshinaga and Toyoji Wada as well as to Tamotsu Nakamura.

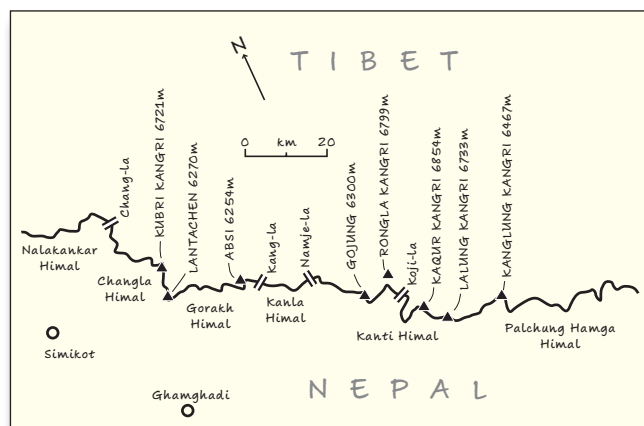
Yoshinaga of the Osaka Alpine Club mentions in his report various travellers who visited the north side of Kanjiroba in the 1960s and '70s but never went up to the frontier peaks in the distance. These included Tony Hagen (geologist), Oleg Polunin (botanist), Giuseppe Tucci and David Snellgrove (Tibetologists).

The first attempt on any peak was not until 1983 with the 'Japanese Women's Expedition' to the Nepal side of the Changla Himal. A new map, and subsequent peaks entered into the Nepal Ministry of Tourism list, had



West faces of Langtachen (6284m) (left) and south peak (6196m) (right) in the Gorakh Himal. (*Julian Freeman-Attwood*)

named Changla (6563m) as the highest in that Himal. This lies unsurprisingly next to the Chang La on the Tibet frontier, but is not the highest in the range. That accolade goes to Kubi Kangri (6721m) (aka Dong Dong named after the Tibetan Dong Dong Tsangpo). This peak lies some 15 miles south of the Chang La; the glaciers round about, including those of the Gorakh Himal, were identified by Sven Hedin as the source area of the Tsangpo/Brahmaputra.



Sketch map showing relative positions of watershed peaks of NW Nepal. (*Julian Freeman-Attwood*)

In our 2011 travels to Changla Himal, I and my colleagues Ed Douglas and Nick Colton presumed Kubi Kangri to be a Tibetan name, as the locals we came across on the Nepal side only knew the name Changla. This is likely due to the fact that Kubi Kangri cannot easily be seen from the Nepal side until you are right under it in the valley of the Lachama Khola. The



Gojung (6300m) (left) and Churau (6419m) (centre) from Kojichuwa Khola in the Kanti Himal. (*Julian Freeman-Attwood*)

Japanese women ascended the Dojam Khola, and then into the Lachama Khola where they took the left branch of the valley looking for a route on Kubi Kangri. This was unsuccessful, but a peak of 6162m was climbed, just to the west of Kubi Kangri and easily accessed from the moraine of Kubi Kangri's main west-flowing glacier.

Between 1997 and 2000 Sadao Yoshinaga did some of the most prolific exploration. He started with a trip to Mugu District and entered the Koji Khola valley, a day north of the Bhotia village from which the district takes its name. This is the Kanti Himal, known on the Tibet side as the Ronglai Kangri range, named after the 6700m mountain of that name lying entirely, but only just, in Tibetan territory. Yoshinaga climbed one peak of 6159m to the north of the Koji La and another at 6300m to the south of the La. (this pass is high and seldom used today). They ascertained that the main Kanti Himal's highest summit, known in Tibet as Kaqur Kangri (6859m), could not be reached from here and that an expedition from the Tibet side was more likely to succeed.

The next year (1998), expeditions examined the southern approach to Kaqur Kangri with an excursion between the Namja La and Kang La. This brought them within sight of the Gorakh Himal from the Take Khola. They ended in Simikot and finished a recce of Changla Himal.

In summer 1999, Japanese expeditions looked at peaks in Dolpo and west into Palchung Hamga Himal, including the peak Danphe Sail (6103m). The only mountain climbed in this sector had been by an Austro-German expedition of 1993; unable to get to their intended peak on the north side of Kanjiroba due to swollen rivers, they instead climbed an unnamed border peak of 6455m at the far west end of the Palchung Himal, approaching



Rongla Kangri (6799m) (in Tibet) seen from Gojung across the Rongla Glacier (first explored on the author's 2007 trip). (*Julian Freeman-Attwood*)

from Shey Gumpa. A higher peak, still unclimbed at 6528m, lies just one mile east of this. The expedition again ended up at Mugu and then left via Gamghadi.

In 2000, exploration was done in the Chandi Himal to the west of Changla and an ascent made of Nalakankar (6062m) in the Nalakankar Himal. The highest peak in this range is, in fact, the unclimbed Takphu (6422m), 10 miles further south nearer to Hilsa.

In 2002 Kaqur Kangri (6859m), the highest peak in the whole region, was climbed by a team led by Toyoji Wada. They approached from Laru in Tibet with Chinese permits. In 2007 Wada again entered the region from the Tibet side and climbed Kubi Kangri (6721m), the highest in the Changla Himal as described.

In 2007 I attempted to obtain a permit from the Chinese for the unclimbed Rongla Kangri (6799m) in the Kanti Himal. Demonstrations ahead of the forthcoming Chinese Olympics along with video footage of a Buddhist nun, and another Tibetan, being shot dead on the Nangpa La near Cho Oyu, had made for uncertain times. As we still had no permits right up until three weeks before leaving the UK, we decided to change tack. Besides myself, the team consisted of Nick Colton, Luke Hughes and Phil Wickens. So, we thought we might try to approach Rongla Kangri from Nepal, instead of Tibet, and climb its south-west ridge which joins in with the frontier ridge. We began our approach march from Jumla on 13 September and arrived in Gamghadi four days later (luckily in time for a colourful festival). Two days later we continued east up the Mugu Karnali river. This was hard trekking, never flat by the river for long, our route branching north above the confluence with the Namlang Nadi which flows



Rock spire in Kojichuwa Khola, Kanti Himal. (*Julian Freeman-Attwood*)

in from Dolpo in the east. Here was a great chorten and the beginning of the Bhotia (Tibetan) region. At Mugu, which is an ancient trading village, we noticed large quantities of salt-laden yaks (no less than 80 yaks on one particular day) coming in from the Namje La on the frontier. In Mugu traders transfer loads from yaks to mule or pony, for travel lower down. The village lies at about 3000m: yaks cannot operate comfortably below this altitude and it is in consequence the level at which the Bhotia people have settled. They go only where their yaks go, hence trade back and forth over the passes suits them well rather than travel lower into Nepal.

We headed on up into the Koji Khola and camped where the Japanese must have done in 1997. Although we also went to the Koji La, we turned north-west up an unnamed glacier (site of our advance basecamp) that gave access onto the Tibet frontier at its head. We were thus the first onto the Rongla glacier. (That glacier's head is three miles up on the edge of the next main Nepali valley, the Kojichuwa Khola.) The glacier top culminates in a peak called Gojung (6310m). Meanwhile, we had tried in very poor weather to get onto Rongla Kangri's west flank by a 300m-high, 50-degree section of mixed ground off the glacier. Pinned down for many days by snow on the Tibet side of the frontier ridge (5495m) we had to give it up but climbed two unnamed peaks from the frontier pass of 5984m and 5930m respectively.

In 2009, myself, Nick Colton and Ed Douglas returned with the intention of climbing Lalung (aka Chandi) which lies east of Kaqur Kangri. It was spring and too early for pack mules to cross a crucial high pass, the Chyargok La. We should have made it a post-monsoon trip to get to Lalung. Disappointed, we therefore headed again past Mugu, noticing en route a great rock arch, like Shipton's Arch near Kashgar, high up in the

Mugu Danda. We went past the entrance to Koji Khola and into the Kojichuwa Khola. Some Spanish climbers had been there for the previous two weeks but had not achieved the climb on the rock spire they had come for. Again bad weather stopped much activity but we climbed two peaks of 5100m and 5311m. Many *bharal* (blue sheep) were seen and we were told of wild yak in the next valley north. What we also noticed was a very good ice line on Gojung, the peak the summit of which we had seen from the Tibet side the previous year, marking the head of Tibet's Rongla glacier. This 1300m face looked like a Mick Fowler route, which is what it indeed turned out to be.

A little later in June 2009 Tamotsu Ohnishi climbed a newly opened peak called Kaptang 5965m near the Namje La. It had been Ohnishi's intent to then try Danphe Sail, much further east in the Palchung Hamga Himal but there was no time. In autumn under the leadership of Michihiro Honda, three Japanese climbers ascended a pre-summit north of Kojichuwa Chuli (6439m) via the long North-west ridge, but were unable to make the main top. In 2010, the Japanese went up the Dojam Khola from Simikot and climbed Changla, the second highest peak in the Himal as mentioned above.

In April 2011, I returned with Colton and Douglas, this time we too heading up the Dojam Khola from Simikot. This is an exceptionally beautiful valley with spectacular waterfalls and old growth timber. We had taken 15 mules from Simikot and four porters for carrying the kerosene as well as our old team of Prem Tamang (cook), Pasang Tamang and Nima Sherpa. We continued into the Lachama Khola. The 1983 Women's expedition had passed this way, but after a few miles we branched into the right-hand, unexplored Khola. Our main objective was Gave Ding (6571m), just south of Kubi Kangri and west of Langtachen (6300m). Basecamp was set up at 4600m. The weather was not kind, nonetheless we established an advance base around the corner at the top of the khola in a hidden amphitheatre below Gave Ding's south face. A glacier climb followed by 250m of 50-degree snow and ice landed us on the sharp south ridge at c5800m. We had come up with the intention of returning to put a small camp here, but for now we pushed on to near 6000m. Foul weather from the west was threatening and the summit remained a fair distance away, as much horizontally as vertically. Time never gave us the chance to have another go. Later Colton and myself got up to the Luruppa La (5300m) and gained a view of the far end of the khola of that name which would take you circuitously back to Dojam. This khola is unexplored by foreigners, though used by yak herders in high summer, seemingly only to procure the medicinal plant *yartsa gumba*. We obtained oblique views of the south side of Langtachen, the source of the Brahmaputra (see note). It had been a vague plan to try Langtachen another time from the Luruppa Khola, however we decided that the best solution would be to approach it from the unvisited Gorakh Himal.

With our information and photographs of Gojung, Mick Fowler and the



The author in front of Gave Ding, Changla Himal. (Ed Douglas)

BMC's Dave Turnbull climbed the ice line mentioned in October 2011, getting to the summit on the fifth day and down in two more. This is the hardest climb accomplished to date on any Karnali zone mountain (*AJ* 116, 3-15; 2012).

Having experienced mostly poor weather in the pre-monsoon season over recent years, and as Fowler had had fair weather, by and large, on Gojung in October 2011, we decided to try a post-monsoon trip in 2012. The team was again to include Douglas and Colton with the addition of Phil Bartlett with whom I had been in Sikkim and in Tibet's trans-Himalaya on several occasions. On arrival in Simikot, the first blow was to be informed by mule men that we could not access the Take Khola with pack animals to the Tibetan village of Nepka due to a precipitous gorge at the khola entrance and the unlikelihood of procuring porters at this harvest time of year. As a second best we could still access the western end of the Gorakh by the Luruppa Khola, a valley that no foreigner had previously explored. With 19 mules, five muleteers and three camp staff we set off up this 28km-long valley. This was to take six days, much of it through very fine old forest of walnut, pine and, higher up, great old birches. In two places the way was so steep that the mules had to be unloaded and loads ferried around. Even unladen it was near impossible for mules to get up the rock, but they did, with only one falling, happily without injury. The only settlement in the khola was a short way in where half a dozen families live in summer. From basecamp at 4500m we did a series of recce trips through



In the valley of the Luruppa Khola: (left to right) Phil Bartlett, Nick Colton and Ed Douglas. (Julian Freeman-Attwood)

hideous moraine where there had been a lot of glacial recession. The west faces of Langtachen (6270m) and Langtachen South are hidden by many other peaks and had not been photographed before. Sadly there was no safe route to be found on the faces, guarded by some evil-looking séracs. Such are reconnaissance trips where no previous information can be found. We also looked at some fine peaks between 5500 and 5800m to the south in the Karpunath Lekh.

Note on the source of Brahmaputra: Whilst the source of the Yarlung Tsangpo (Brahmaputra) is traditionally thought to be the east face of Kailash, it is in fact some miles to the south-east of there. The general area of the source was ascertained early on, as mentioned above, but the exact source is more difficult to determine and the truth is probably that there is more than a single source. Three contenders are Changla (feeding lake Rabgyai Tso), the peak Kubi Kangri and the peak Langtachen both feeding the Dong Dong Tsangpo (this stream was suggested by Sven Hedin). The furthest point upstream on the Dong Dong is Langtachen and this peak is as good a single contender as any for the title.

Summary: An account of exploratory mountaineering in the far North-west of Nepal, along the border with Tibet in the districts of Dolpo, Mugu and Humla.

TAMOTSU NAKAMURA

Rock Peaks of Gangga and Forbidden Kawarani



South face of Punyu (5413m), aka Pomiu or Celestial Peak, in the Siguniang massif, viewed from near the Balangshan pass. (Tamotsu Nakamura)

As I write this in January 2013, the political situation in Tibet remains uncertain and sensitive. No foreigners were allowed to enter the remote areas of my field of interest, eastern Tibet, in 2012, and so instead I organised an elderly survey team from the Hengduan Mountains Club to visit the West Sichuan Highlands and Yunnan. There would be three of us: Tsuyoshi Nagai, Tadao Shintani and myself.

Our main objective was to photograph, map and identify peaks of the Gangga massif and the less known Kawarani group. The Gangga massif is the northernmost extension of the Shaluli Shan range and lies just south of Garze town and the Yalong Jiang river. Kawarani is a sacred mountain in the Gongkala Shan range, east of the Gangga massif and the Yalong Jiang and north-west of the Daxue Shan range. The Yalong Jiang is one of the large tributaries of the Yangtze (Chang Jiang). A reconnaissance of the Gangga massif was made in 2005 by a Japanese party from the Nagano