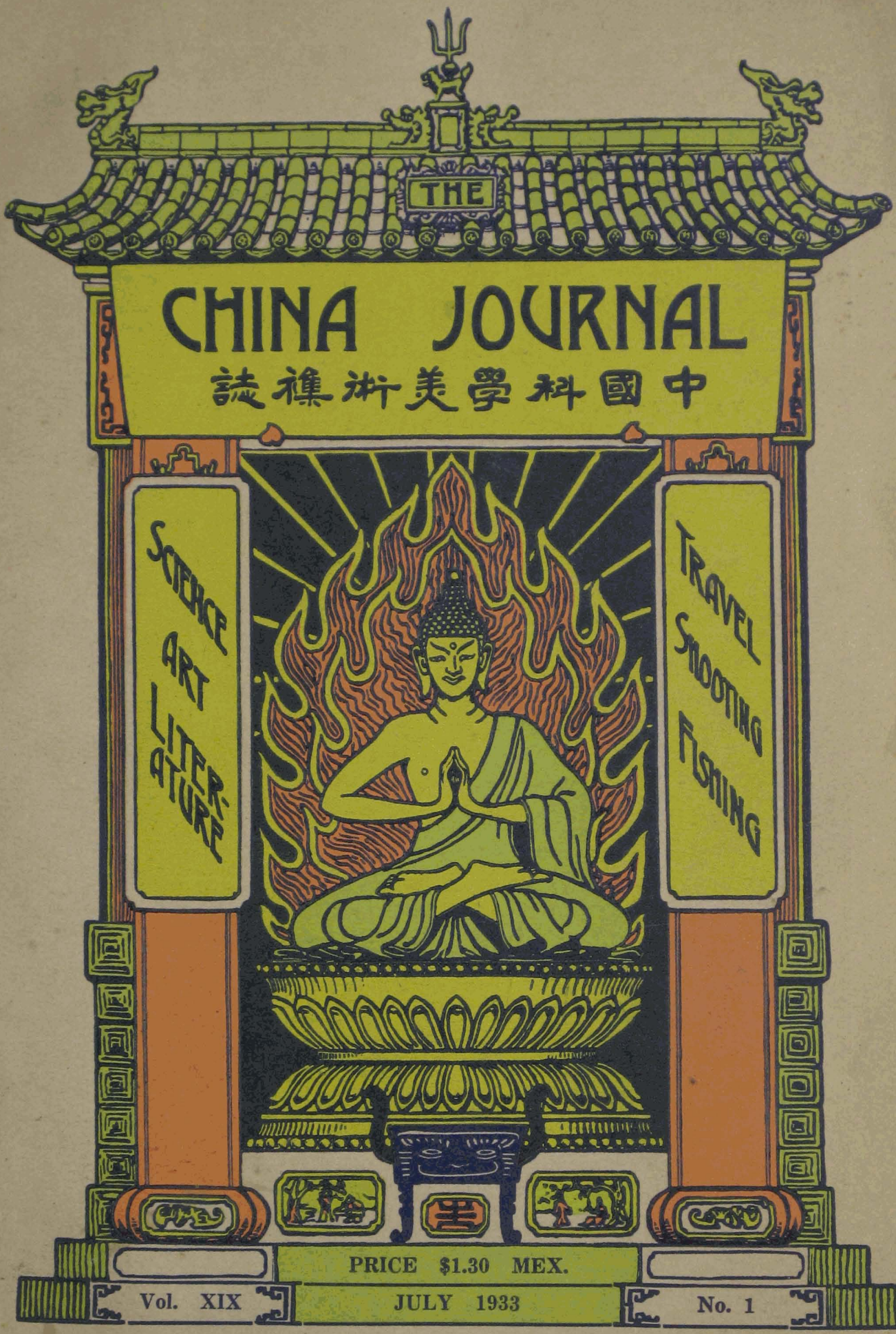

THE
CHINA JOURNAL
中國科學美術雜誌
SCIENCE
ART
LITERATURE
TRAVEL
SHOOTING
FISHING
PRICE $1.30 MEX.
Vol. XIX
JULY 1933
No. 1

THE CHINA JOURNAL

中國科學美術雜誌

Editor : ARTHUR DE C. SOWERBY, F.Z.S. *Manager :* CLARICE S. MOISE, B.A.

[ENTERED AT THE CHINESE POST OFFICE AS A NEWSPAPER]

VOL. XIX JULY 1933 No. 1

CONTENTS

Contributions of a suitable nature are invited and all manuscripts not accepted for publication will be returned.

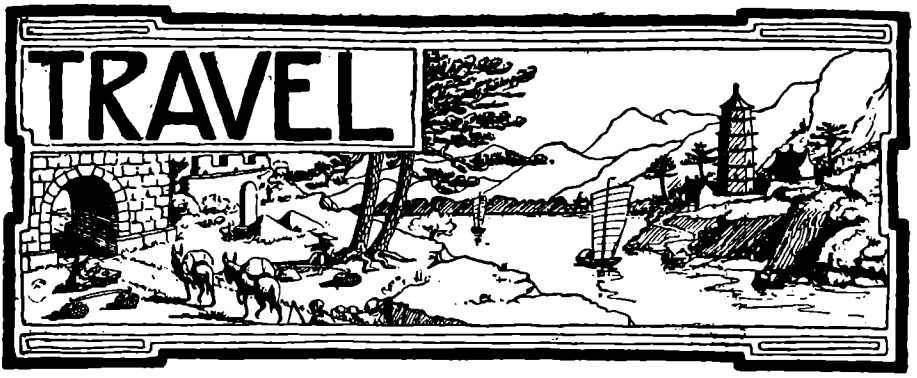
Books for review should be sent to the Editor as early as possible.

The subscription for one year (twelve issues) in China is $12.50, Shanghai currency; in Hongkong $13.50 ; in Japan Gold Yen 10 ; in Indo-China Piastres 13.50 ; in the Netherlands Indies Fl. 15 ; in the U.S.A., the Philippines and Canada Gold $6.00 ; in Great Britain, British Colonies and Europe £1 : 5s., or its equivalent. Postage free.

Crossed cheques, drafts or postal orders should be sent in payment of the annual subscription from Outports and countries abroad direct to the Manager.

Office : 6 Museum Road, Shanghai, China.

PRINTED BY THE NORTH-CHINA DAILY NEWS AND HERALD, LTD., FOR THE PROPRIETORS



THE CONQUEST OF MINYA KONKA

BY

ARTHUR B. EMMONS, III

To the west of the great Red Basin of Szechuan, between the vast Chengtu plain and the high Tibetan grasslands, lies a considerable area of wild rugged mountains and deep jungle-filled valleys, sometimes known as the "Tribes Country." The hills rise steadily, range on range, from the lower reaches of the Ya, Tung, and Min Rivers until they culminate in the giant snow peaks which form the boundary of Tibet itself.

Conspicuous among these higher ranges stands pre-eminently that of the Minya Konka (or Bö Yul Konka), whose main peak reaches 24,000-ft. in elevation. The position of this range is such that it lies well away from the ordinary routes of travel. Hence, due to its isolated location, the peak has been little known until very recent years. It has enjoyed the reputation of being something of a "Mountain of Mystery," and the Tibetans of the region worship it as holy. Recently, however, this region has attracted more attention, for it is rich in geological, zoological and ethnological interest. The result has been that a number of expeditions have visited this neighbourhood since 1925, notable amongst which are those of Dye and Heim.

The Sikong Expedition, as it was known at least to its closer friends, began to function as such for the first time in the spring of 1932. As expeditions go, it might have been called unpretentious, but, despite its size, it had, like many another humble institution, great ambitions. The personnel consisted of four men, three of whom were still somewhat interested in the curricula of certain well known Eastern American universities. The fourth, although older, felt the call of adventure scarcely less than they. In fact, the greatest asset which the expedition could boast might have been said to be its unbounded enthusiasm for the task it contemplated. The members of the party were Terris Moore, Richard L. Burdsall, Jack T. Young and the writer, all American citizens.

Our plans and aspirations may be roughly summed up thus: First and foremost we hoped to complete a first ascent of the Minya Konka, or, failing this, some lesser peak in the vicinity. To this end our equipment required much special thought and attention, and, contrary to an erroneous idea conceived by several of our friends, later proved itself not only adequate but eminently satisfactory. A number of estimates had been made of the Konka's altitude. These estimates varied so widely, and had been made, as a rule, under such adverse conditions, that some discussion had arisen. It was our wish to clear up this discrepancy, if possible, by making an accurate triangulation survey of the mountain from a well established datum line. The Academia Sinicia at Nanking graciously became interested in our plans, giving us both encouragement and the use of its equipment towards big game hunting and the formation of the zoological collection along the Tibetan border we proposed to make. This last was to be in the hands of Jack Young, who had hunted in the region before as a member of the Kelly-Roosevelt Expedition in 1928, when they shot the first giant panda ever killed by a foreigner.

Passports and gun permits were obtained from the Central Government through the good offices of the American Legation. Then, as the approaching monsoon season in Western China would wait for no man, and as all our surveying must be done before its arrival, Burdsall and I, who constituted the surveying party, took leave of our companions and of Shanghai, and, departing amid admonitions of, "Don't get eaten by bandits," and, "Stay away from the Communists," headed for the interior two thousand uncertain miles away. Moore and Young remained behind to attend to some expedition affairs still hanging fire in Shanghai and would join us later at a rendezvous in Tibet.

Ten days on a Yangtze steamer saw the "Vanguard," as we called ourselves, in Chungking. Here we met the naturalist-explorer Mr. F. T. Smith, and by good fortune he happened to be travelling the same road as we, so, joining forces, he accompanied us as far as Chengtu in Central Szechuan before our trails again diverged.

From Chungking we obtained deck passage on a cranky little Chinese upper river steamer, which for seven days churned its muddy way up through the hills and rice paddies of Eastern Szechuan. We disembarked at Kia-ting, lying at the confluence of the Min and Tung Rivers. Our baggage then went overland by coolies under a military escort, and we put ourselves at the mercy of a Szechuanese 'bus, a matter not to be taken lightly, and ten hours later what was left of us emerged at Chengtu.

After three days spent in the capital city and at Kuan-hsien, a two day trip overland by 'bus and ricsha landed the "Vanguard" at Ya-chou. Here another coolie caravan of eighteen men was organized for the trip over the mountains to Ta-tsien-lu on the Tibetan border. This phase of the journey was particularly interesting, as the wild mountain scenery was very striking, and the road twice climbed up into passes that were over 9,000-ft. high, and wound for many miles through the valley of the turbulent Tung, at times clinging precariously to the cliffs hundreds of feet above the river. The trip was divided into eight stages, and

all travelling was done on foot. The caravan was accompanied the whole way by a military escort, as this stretch of country is notorious for bandits, and we did not want to get " eaten ! "

At many places along our way the foreign missionaries not only took us into their homes, but gave us inestimable help in arranging coolie hire, changing money and attending to many other such troublesome details. Here again at Ta-tsien-lu we were hospitably entertained by Dr. and Mrs. Cunningham of the China Inland Mission, and we stayed four days.

Arrangements were made for a yak caravan, and on July 27 the trek south into Tibet began. On the third day of riding we crossed the Djezi La, a pass of nearly 15,000-ft. elevation at the northern end of the Konka Range, and here we got our first close view of the snow peaks. Another day's ride brought us to the little Tibetan village of Yulong Hsi, which was to be the headquarters for our survey work.

After a bit of preliminary exploration a base camp was pitched on a line of hills running parallel to the snow range of the Minya Konka beside a tiny lake at 14,000-ft., a truly ideal location. Little time was wasted in getting to work, as the monsoon was due shortly, and all the observational data must be obtained before it came. A baseline of nearly a mile was laid off in the broad Yulong Valley, and then by means of theodolite transferred to two high hills overlooking a vast stretch of country, with snow peaks visible at nearly every point of the compass. The weather favoured us, and in two weeks over twenty-five outstanding snow peaks had been measured.

The day after our observations had been completed, however, a great black cloud came up from the south, and from then on we caught only occasional glimpses of the heights. We had not been a day too soon ! Despite the bad weather, we occupied this camp for several weeks more to work out the calculations and take further readings with the mercurial barometer. This instrument was used to establish a datum level from which all the observed elevations were taken, and thus was a most important factor in the accuracy of the survey, any error in this datum necessarily being transferred to all calculations based upon it. The mercurial barometer, though one of the most accurate types, is delicate and easily broken. Burdsall and I had taken turns walking and carrying this one all the way from Ya-chou, and we now felt rewarded for our trouble in the added accuracy it gave our work.

The Minya Konka had been variously estimated at anywhere from 25,000 to 30,000-ft. in altitude, thus making it possibly the highest mountain in the world. We felt rather disappointed, therefore, when our figures placed it at only about 24,000-ft. in elevation. The Jara Shan, a singular isolated snow peak some fifty-five miles to the north, considered by the Tibetans to be higher than the Konka itself, proved to be only 18,000-ft. high. In general the other peaks we measured ranged from 17,000 to 22,000-ft., with the Konka towering well above everything.

Moore and Young were not due to put in an appearence for several weeks yet, and it was decided that in the time that intervened we should

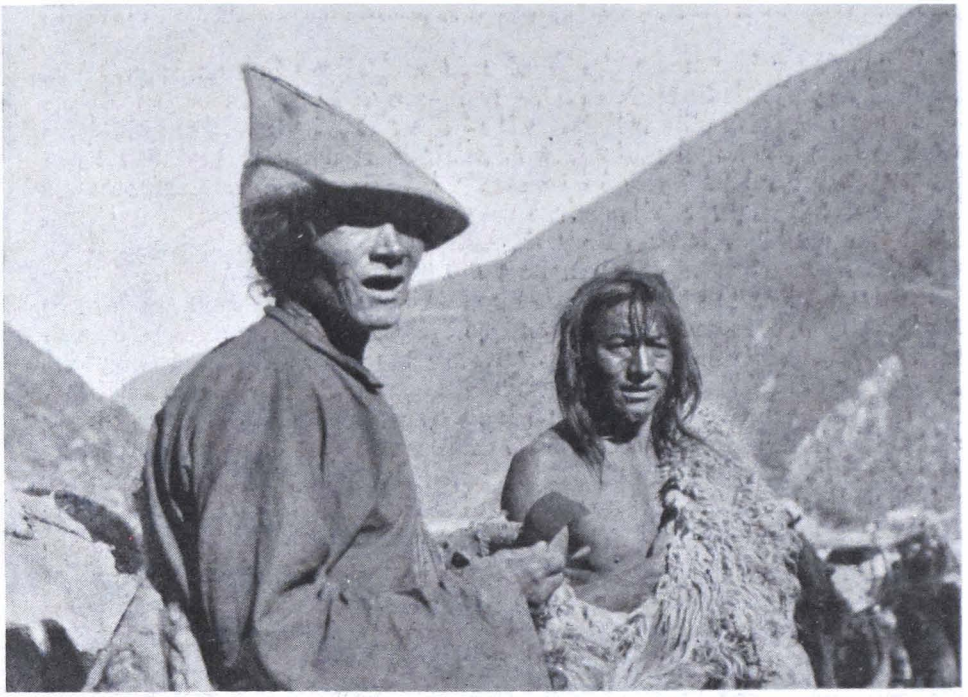


Photo by Terris Moore.

Types of Tibetans who inhabit South-eastern Sikong.

Photo by Jack T. Young.

Tibetan Porters offering a Sacrifice to the Gods of the Mountains

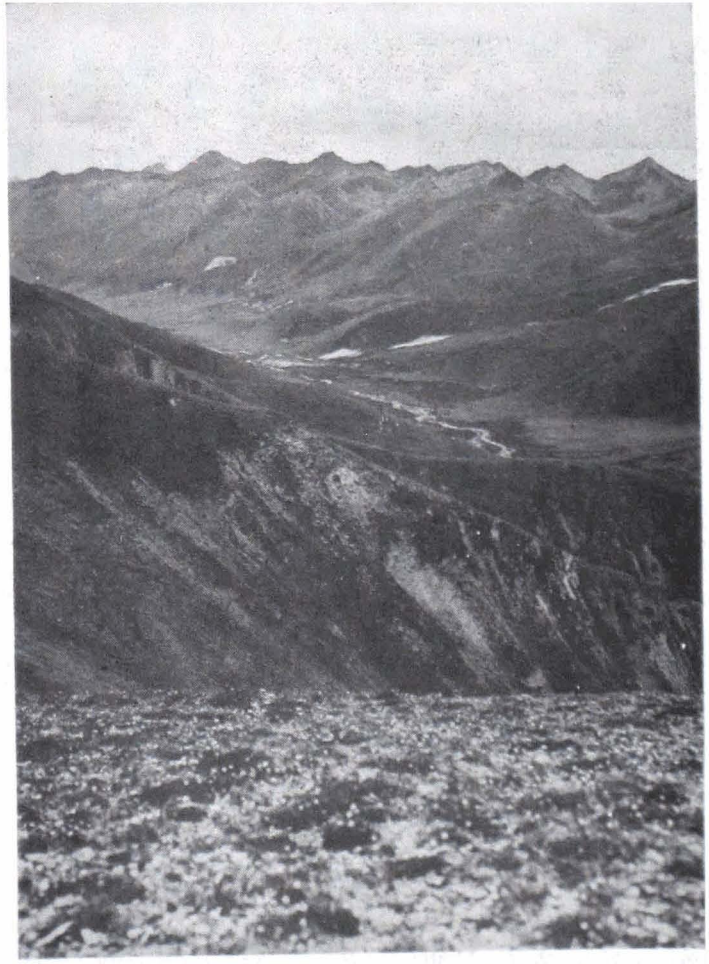
Photos by R. L. Burdsall.

A Ta-tsien-lu Yak Caravansery. The Bales of Tea stacked in the Background are bound for Lhassa.

Photo by Jack T. Young.

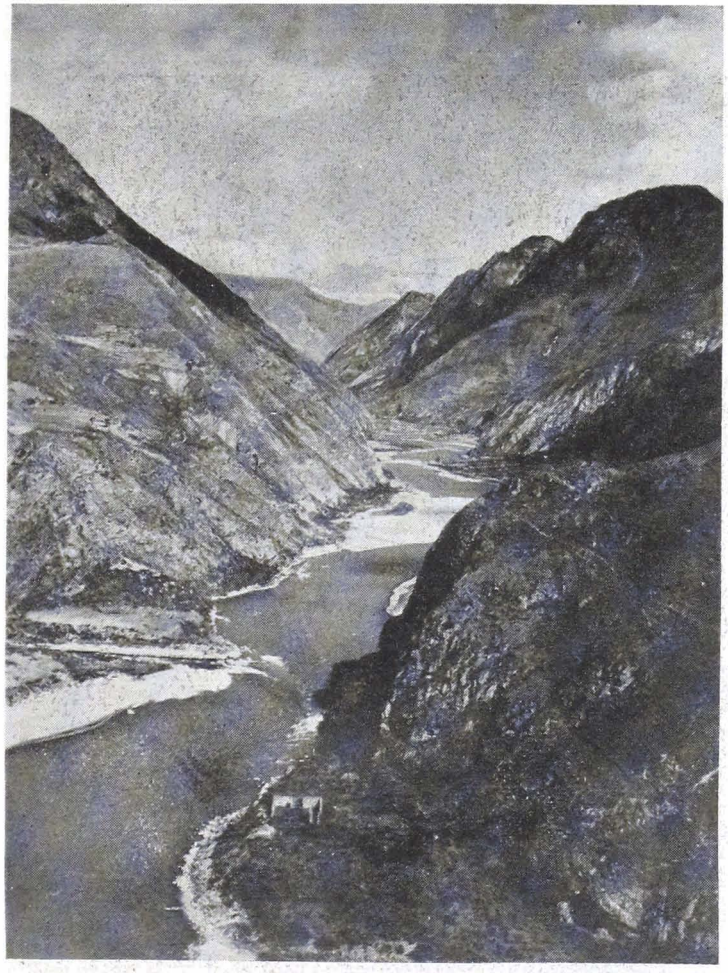
The black Yak-hair Tent of a Tibetan Nomad.

The Highway to Ta-tsien-lu passes into the Shadow of Mighty Peaks

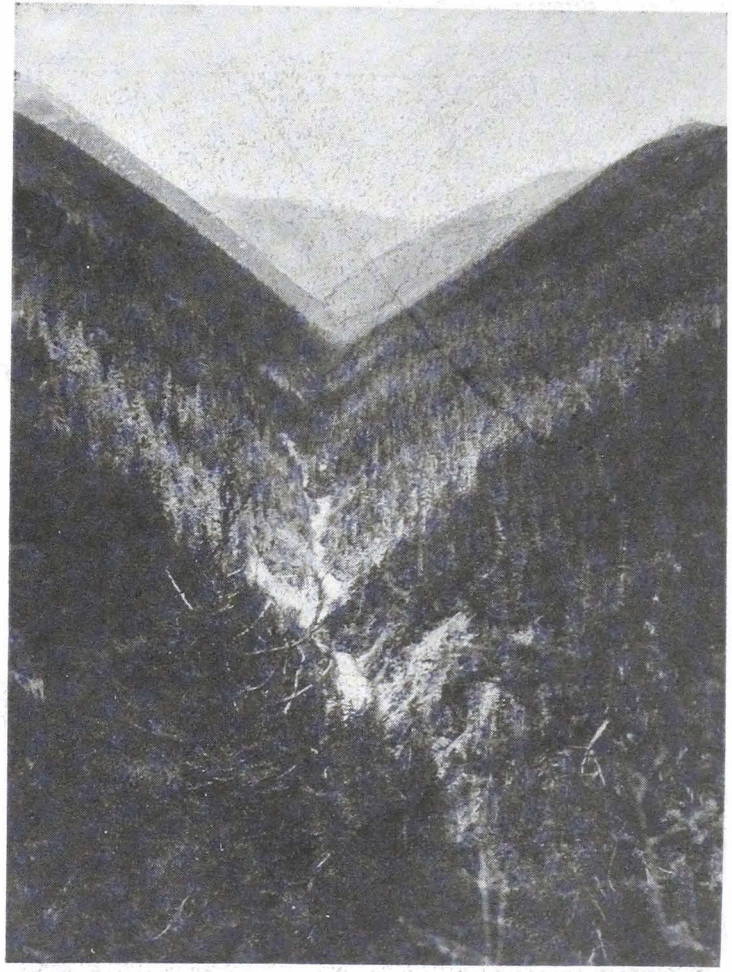


Photos by A. B. Emmons.

The High Tibetan Country of the Yulong Valley.



Wild Country of the Tung River near its Source in Eastern Sikong.



Photos by A. B. Emmons.

The deep wild Valley of the Buchu River, whose rushing Torrent is a Tributary of the Tung.

Photo by Terris Moore.

The Men who dare the Rapids—a Min River Steersman at the Helm of his Craft.

Photo by A. B. Emmons.

The temporary Living Buddha of Minya : the Head of the Konka Gompa Monastery

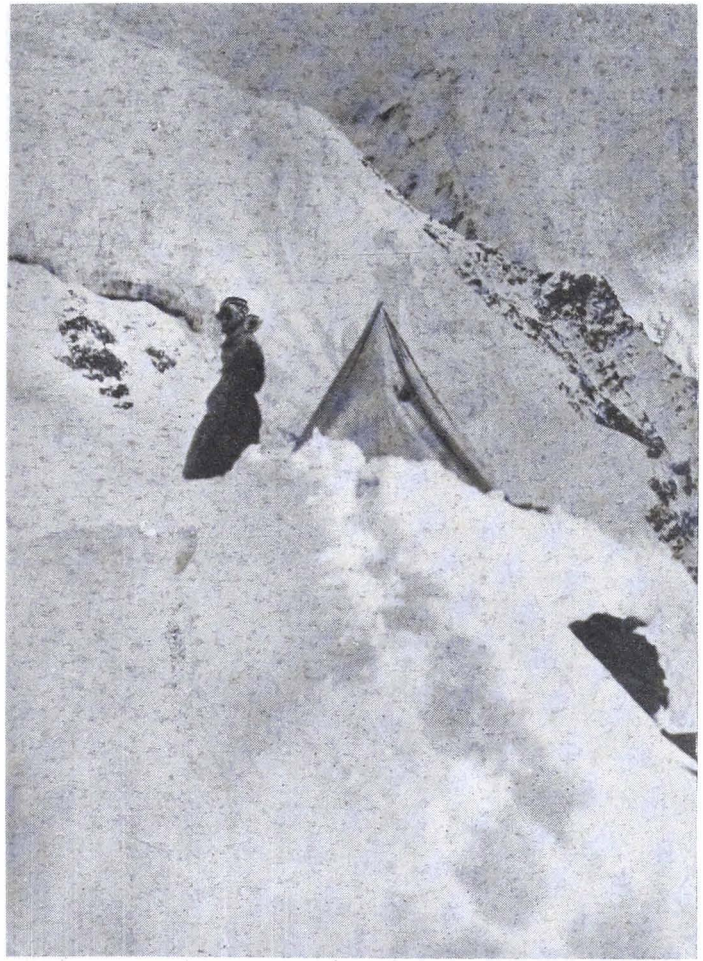


Photo by A. B. Emmons.

The cold bleak World of a High Altitude Camp.

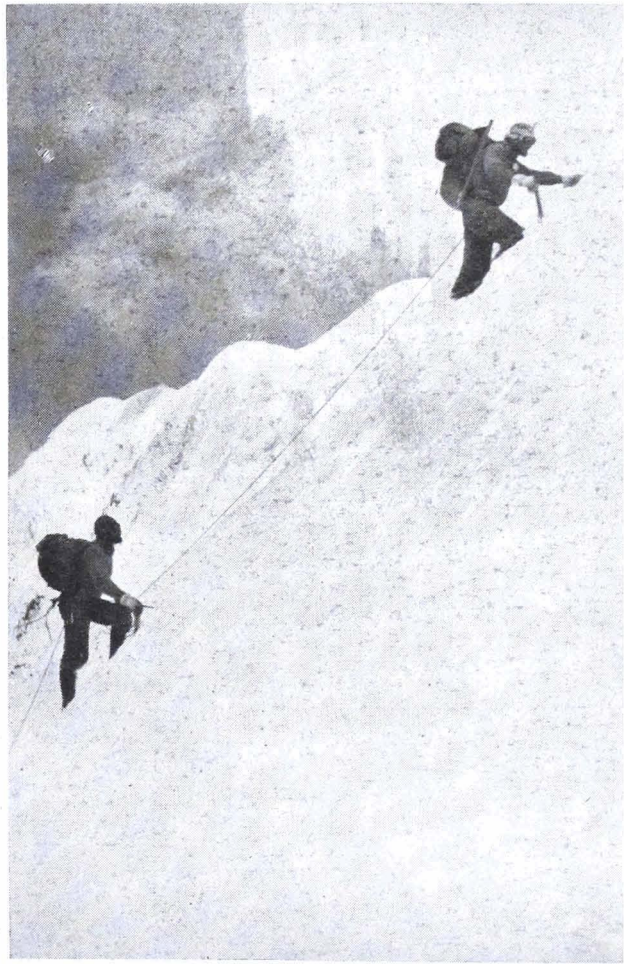


Photo by R. L. Burdsall.

Climbing a steep Slope at 18,000 Feet, where Work is Work indeed.

explore the lower reaches of the Konka in search of a route by which it might be climbed. From the west no very encouraging prospects revealed themselves, and so it was the southern and eastern slopes which drew our attention.

Late in August the surveying camp was dismantled, and with a yak train we crossed a pass to the south, the Tseme La, and descended into the deep Büchu Valley at the foot of the range. Travel in this valley was impeded to such an extent by the hazardous and extremely poor road that it soon became impossible to proceed with our yaks. A camp, therefore, was pitched near a small Tibetan hamlet, Boka by name, and from here our reconnaissance was carried on on foot. Carrying our packs, we two trekked eastward along the Büchu valley for some miles and then struck back into the mountains to the north in the hopes of gaining a high vantage point from which to view the east face of the Konka.

After five rainy days spent in back-packing, a camp was established at 15,000-ft. in a magnificent cirque of peaks immediately to the south-east of the Konka. On the eighth day after leaving Boka the weather cleared, and an attempt was made to climb a steep headwall and gain a shoulder at 19,000-ft., whence our coveted view should be obtainable. Four feet of fresh snow made progress so slow and difficult that we were unable to reach the shoulder. By now food and fuel had run so low that we were forced to beat a retreat, and we forthwith returned to Boka, leaving the camp intact, however, for a second attempt later on.

The weather continued hopelessly bad, and we delayed any further explorations for some days, spending the time in adding to the Expedition's bird collection. Moore and Young arrived on September 19 with additional supplies and equipment. Moore and I immediately set out for the reconnaissance camp, reaching it in two days. The weather this time was fine, and, as much of the snow of the previous occasion had now melted, our efforts to reach the shoulder were successful. The Konka from this new angle, however, presented an appearance even more formidable than that from the west. Great cliffs, surmounted by huge cornices of ice fell away for thousands of feet. The mountain on both the south and east appeared absolutely unclimbable.

There was nothing for it but to change our line of approach and return to the western side, where a long steep ridge on the north-west had given us our only faint glimmer of hope. To be sure, even this ridge was so formidable and treacherous looking that it had been given but little attention, and now we turned to it only as a last resort.

A large glacier flows down the western flank of the Konka and fills the floor of a long deep valley. Perched on the side of this valley is a small Tibetan lamasary, the Konka Gompa, built there to honour the Thunder God of the Minya Konka. To this lamasary we moved with all our kit, and there established headquarters for the climb. The Lamas, though very cordial, at first opposed our project, which their superstitious beliefs led them to fear would bring famine and pestilence to the land, but at length they became reconciled and even favoured our cause with a few prayers.

A trail was picked among the boulders beside the valley glacier, and after four or five miles it came out on a beautiful little alpine meadow at the very base of the long spur that ran north from the foot of the north-west ridge. Here, with the help of six Tibetan porters, a comfortable base camp was erected. Then we threw ourselves into the task at hand with all the energy and resources at our command.

Our immediate aim was to gain the top of the northern spur, as this alone gave access to the main summit ridge. On a flank of this spur at 17,000-ft. the first of the line of camps was placed with the aid of two of the more daring of the Tibetan porters. Above this point even they refused to go, and from there on everything had to be carried on our own backs. Moore and I occupied this camp at once, and from it picked out a route up over steep snow slopes and through mazes of huge broken blocks of ice to a point on the crest of the spur at 19,000-ft. Meanwhile Young and Burdsal lived at the Base Camp and relayed supplies to Camp II. Then they, too, moved up. The four of us, climbing in two ropes, and carrying loads up to forty-five pounds in weight, then began on the next stage.

An alpine tent was set up in the lee of an ice wall on the spur at 19,000-ft., somewhat sheltered from the terrific blasts of wind that constantly swept across it. At this point the altitude began to tell on us, as we were still unacclimatized to it. A lassitude descended upon us, rendering every physical action extremely laborious. While climbing our breath came in gasps, and at night we would frequently wake up half choking. After two or three days, as our systems became adjusted to the new conditions, these symptoms would pass off until a new altitude was attained.

Again Moore and I occupied Camp III on the spur while the other two remained at Camp II and brought up more supplies from the Base. One day was spent in the tent while a storm was lashing along the shoulder. We then climbed up along the spur to the point where a gap separated it from the main north-west ridge, and, perceiving the ridge to be accessible, returned to Camp III.

A camp was next established at about 20,000-ft., just below the gap. Here, again, we were storm-bound while a howling gale lashed the snow into a fury of flying spindrift which no human being could face, and the temperature dropped to nearly -15 degrees Fahrenheit.

When the weather cleared once more we started on a reconnaissance of the gap and the ridge immediately above. Luck did not favour us, however, and we gained the ridge only after some almost precipitous snow and ice climbing, which consumed nearly a whole day. The ridge was ascended for only a short distance. On the return a new and much easier route was found, which simplified matters considerably.

The following day Moore and I again crossed the gap, and this time ascended the summit ridge to a point at about 22,500-ft. before turning back. Above here the ridge became decidedly steeper, and was interrupted by several abrupt pitches of ice-covered rocks, an altogether discouraging looking spectacle. After a hurried consultation it was decided, however, that it would be worth while to continue our

campaign and to advance the line of camps this far, at least making an earnest try for the summit.

Another night was spent at Camp IV, during which a severe thunderstorm raged about the mountain. The wind at times must have attained a velocity of 90 or 100 miles an hour to have had such force in air as thin as that at 20,000-ft. The stakes on one side of the tent gave way, and Camp IV was threatened with being blown bodily from the spur. We well knew that to be caught out in such a storm on the higher ridges without shelter could have but one ending.

By morning the storm had abated, though the temperature remained low. The food in all the upper camps was now almost exhausted, and, as both Moore and I had been living for two weeks above 17,000-ft., we decided a rest was in order, so, leaving everything intact, we descended to the Base Camp.

Two days of relaxation and a change of diet did wonders, and we were soon ready for the final attempt on the summit. While Moore and I had been reconnoitering high up, Burdsall and Young had accumulated at Camp II a big depot of fuel and supplies, which had been recently sent out from Ta-tsien-lu by Mr. Cunningham. It remained, then, only to stock the higher camps and extend the line to about 22,000-ft. before we would be in a position to strike for the summit.

Someone, however, must stay at the Base to supervise the porters and act as a support party in case emergency arose. Jack Young magnanimously volunteered for the job, giving up his chance of going to the top, and returned to the Gompa. Moore and I joined Burdsall at Camp II. From here we carried one relay to Camp III, and on a second day went with packs all the way through to Camp IV, a rather arduous trip. After one more trip between Camps III and IV we were consolidated at the latter, ready to establish Camp V on the main summit ridge.

After one day spent in the tent because of dense clouds, which reduced the visibility almost to nil, the climbing party moved on, crossing the gap and climbing laboriously up over the ice hummocks and across the crevasses of the north-west ridge. A steady demoralizing blast of wind whipped around the peak, so strong that, despite heavy packs, it would cause us to stagger and sway to hold our balance. We were more than thankful for our staunch windproof clothes and warm parka hoods, which, even in sub-zero weather, stood the test.

At about 21,500-ft. we found the first place that gave any semblance of shelter or even approached being level enough for a tent. Here the snow was levelled off with ice axes and a cache of food and clothes left. On the following day Camp IV was broken and we again made the climb to 21,500-ft., where our last outpost, Camp V, was set up.

That night tragedy descended upon me in the form of a jack-knife, which, while I was endeavouring to slice a piece of frozen bread, slipped and made a deep gash in my hand. The wound itself was not serious, but it meant that I would be unable to handle a rope or an ice axe properly. The final attempt on the summit would require every last atom of skill and strength on the part of the climbers, and, as Moore and

Burdsall were both fit and could make the ascent without a third man, I resigned my place in the summit party.

Another day off was taken on the small supply of precious food to rest for the dash for the top. I remained to "hold down" Camp V and act as support in case of emergency. At half past three in the morning of October 28 Camp V was astir. A hot breakfast was served out, and then my two companions, Moore and Burdsall, dressed after the fashion of Arctic explorers, disappeared out into the darkness.

I lay all day in my sleeping bag and listened to the wind screeching through the peak of our tiny alpine tent. Fortunately the day was not very cold. At five in the afternoon I lit the Primus stove to warm up some soup against my companions' return. A few minutes later I heard a faint shout above the roar of the wind. Undoing the door, I beheld two very exhausted looking men, covered with frost from head to foot, their beards and eyebrows a mass of ice—they seemed like men from another world and, indeed, they were!

One of them in answer to my question smiled wearily and said, "Yes, we made it." Made it! The thrill was electric. Conquered the Minya Konka! It seemed hard to realize that this giant peak which had so long challenged and defied us had at last been subdued. As they revived a little under the influence of the hot soup and sheltered tent, their story gradually began to unfold. For an hour they had climbed by flashlight, until dawn broke, keeping going steadily with only short rests. By ten o'clock they had reached the point where Moore and I had turned back on the previous occasion. The physical difficulties of the ridge above here, while requiring most careful negotiation and taxing the climbers nearly to the utmost, were apparently not as bad as Moore and I had anticipated. The men set willow sticks at intervals along their trail to insure a safe return under conditions of poor visibility, a trick learned from Alaskan gold prospectors in their winter travels.

The top was reached at half past two in the afternoon, 24,000-ft. above sea level, to the best of our knowledge the third highest mountain in the world to have been climbed up till that time, and establishing an altitude record for American alpinists. The American and Chinese flags were flown from the summit, and several rounds of photographs taken, during which process Burdsall froze a number of his finger tips.

An hour later the descent began. The wind became dangerously strong for the first time during the day as they left the summit, but soon subsided again. The rest of the descent to Camp V was without incident.

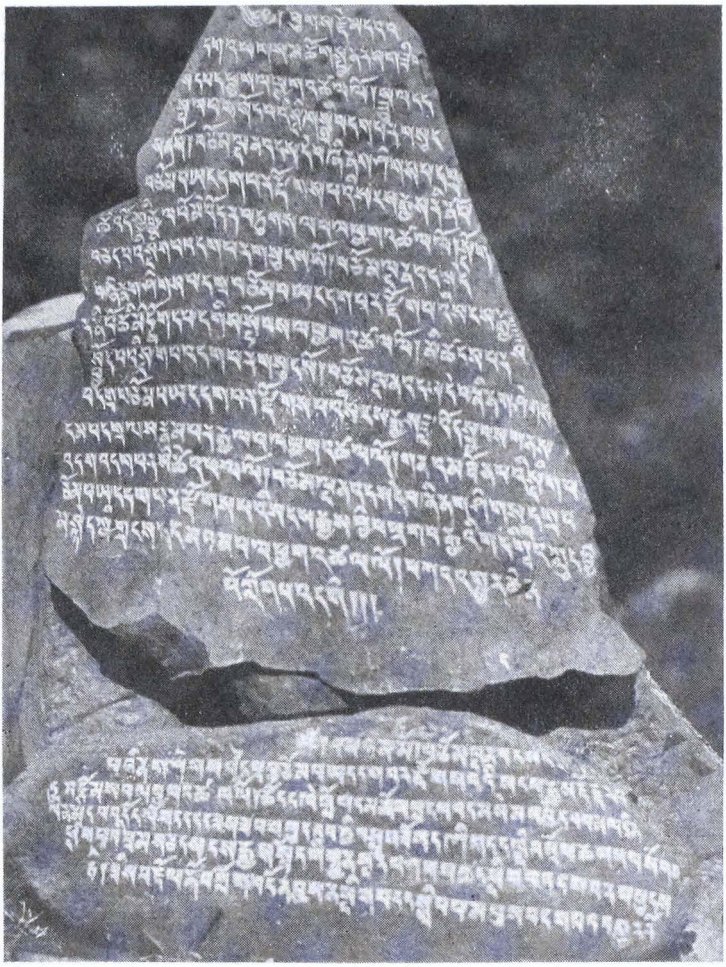
We believed this to be a new precedent in the annals of mountaineering in the Tibetan region, in that the ascent was made at so late a date as October 28, when at such great altitudes severe weather conditions should have made climbing impossible. Whether we just happened to strike an unusual season or such weather is the rule rather than the exception is a matter of conjecture.

The strain under which we had been working during the past month now began to make itself evident in an all consuming desire to get down and off the snow as soon as possible. Therefore, the day after the climb

Her Majesty the Mighty Minya Konka.

Photos by Terris Moore.

From the South at 19,000 Feet Minya Konka presents a tremendous unscalable Wall.



Tibetan Mani Stones on which are carved Sacred Buddhist Texts by the Monks of the many Lamasaries.

Photos by A. B. Emmons.

An elaborately carved Mani Stone, on which is inscribed the Sacred Phrase "Om Mani Padme Hum," or "the Jewel is in the Heart of the Lotus."

Camp V was struck and we set out for the Base, anything that could not be carried in one load being abandoned. On reaching Camp III it was discovered that our tent was completely buried by drifted snow. A hole had to be cut in the peak and the more valuable of the things inside fished out with an ice axe.

By now I had discovered that both my feet were badly frozen, and so I abandoned my pack and made a bee-line for the Base Camp, while the other two, who made slower progress, descended to Camp II for the night. My feet gave out completely at dusk on a large glacial moraine just below the snow line. Being unable to walk further I picked out a nice soft boulder and spent the night on it.

Two porters, whom Jack young had dispatched for our loads, discovered me still sitting on that boulder the next day. These men carried me for two days on their backs to the Konka Gompa. Here horses were obtained, and Moore accompanied me for the four arduous days' ride to Ta-tsien-lu, where I received medical attention. Burdsall remained to bring in the equipment, for, although his fingers greatly inconvenienced him, his frostbite fortunately was not of a very serious nature. With the aid of ten porters, obtained by Jack Young, the Base Camp was dismantled and everything brought down to the Gompa. Burdsall returned with a caravan to Ta-tsien-lu a few days behind us.

But our story is not yet finished. As I have said, Young was in charge of the hunting side of the Expedition, but, due to force of circumstances, the rest of us had been able to give him but little help in this line. In the last stage of the campaign when the rest of the Expedition was on the mountain, he made his headquarters at the Gompa, where he could supervise the porterage staff. During this period he did as much hunting in the vicinity as time would allow, and among other things bagged a large bear of a type somewhat resembling a grizzly. This specimen is believed to constitute a new subspecies, and if it does is truly a notable find. By this time, too, he had shot a fine family group of bhurrel, or blue sheep, which are not the easiest thing in the world to hunt, as they frequent only high precipitous mountain-sides between 13,000 and 16,000-ft.

Young did not return to Ta-tsien-lu with the other men, but, accompanied by several native bearers, set off down into the wild Lolo country to the south-east. We did not hear of him again for over three weeks. He subsequently arrived in Ta-tsien-lu, bringing with him two fine gorals, two golden haired monkeys, another bear, a wild boar and a live Tibetan eared pheasant, quite a formidable array for one man to collect in a semi-hostile country in two weeks' hunting.