

VOLUME XLI

NUMBER THREE

[1922-1935]

OUR MAN IN CHINA



Joseph Rock

BY MIKE EDWARDS
ASSISTANT EDITOR

PHOTOGRAPHS BY MICHAEL S. YAMASHITA
ARCHIVAL PHOTOGRAPHS BY JOSEPH F. ROCK

Braving bandits and courting kings, Joseph Rock mounted elaborate expeditions to Asia's rough hinterlands. His adventures came to life in the ten articles he photographed and wrote for NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC magazine from 1922 to 1935. This article, designed in the style of his time, celebrates the work of an imperious and determined explorer.

THE EDITOR

\$3.50 A YEAR

50c. THE COPY



MENACING FIGURES DRESSED AS SKELETONS HELP USHER IN THE GOD OF THE DEAD DURING A DANCE AT A TIBETAN MONASTERY. THIS AND OTHER PHOTOGRAPHS MADE FROM BLACK-AND-WHITE GLASS PLATES WERE HAND-TINTED BY NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC ARTISTS USING DESCRIPTIONS FURNISHED BY ROCK.



TURNED OUT IN TIBETAN COLD-WEATHER GARB, TRAILBLAZING EXPLORER AND JOURNALIST JOSEPH F. ROCK STRUCK A REGAL POSE IN THE JONE BUDDHIST MONASTERY IN GANSU PROVINCE, CHINA. HIS PHOTOJOURNALISM OPENED WESTERN EYES TO SUCH IMPRESSIVE SIGHTS AS JAMBELYANG (FACING PAGE), IN SICHUAN PROVINCE. THE DISCOLORED PRINT SHOWS THE DRAWBACKS OF PROCESSING PHOTOGRAPHS IN THE FIELD.



He saw it, he survived it, he recorded it in words and pictures.

TO THE BANDITS who preyed on travelers in the backcountry of China in the 1920s, the caravan approaching on a mountain trail must have looked like an invading army.

There were 26 mules and 17 men, escorted by 190 soldiers with rifles. The leader had an imperious demeanor, and, in contrast to the ragged soldiers, he was well dressed in boots, riding breeches, and pith helmet. And he was *white*.

This was no invading troop, however. Joseph F. Rock, NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC explorer, writer, and photographer, was on another marathon expedition through the unmapped mountains and kingdoms of premodern China. Rock had surrounded his caravan with soldiers to keep the bandits at bay.

Had those brigands been able to peer into the boxes lashed to his mules, they would have discovered things as strange as the sight of this stern-visaged foreigner who had penetrated their territory. Setting out for months at a time, Rock traveled like royalty. His baggage included tents, a folding bed, chairs, table, and, naturally, table linen and china. There was even a battery-powered phonograph. Sometimes he played opera for astonished nomads or monks at a Buddhist monastery; he duly noted that the nomads howled with laughter at the sad parts of *La Bohème* and *I Pagliacci*.

Freelance photographer MICHAEL S. YAMASHITA first traced Joseph Rock's footsteps while photographing "The Mekong, A Haunted River's Season of Peace" for the February 1993 issue.

Oh yes—he also took along a portable rubber bathtub, purchased from the famous New York outfitters, Abercrombie & Fitch.

Rock was a complicated man, a loner, stiff, proud, self-made, extraordinary, imperfect. Born in Vienna, the son of a nobleman's

servant, he came to the United States in 1905 at the age of 21 and became an American citizen in 1913. Yet he never shed his autocratic, Old World ways.

He usually traveled on horseback, but when he called on a local ruler, Rock's expense accounts—among the most memorable at the GEOGRAPHIC—might contain such an entry as: *Chair coolies, 4 coolies at 80¢ per day.*

Since there were

no roads where Rock operated, and hence no automobiles, the sedan chair, a compartment borne on two long poles, was his limousine. When the four porters put it down, the figure who alighted wore a white shirt, tie, and jacket. "You've got to make people believe you're someone of importance if you want to live in these wilds," he once said.

That was probably true. It was also true that Rock liked being important, and if he did not receive what he considered proper respect, his temper, always short-fused, would explode. Once, when a Chinese merchant entered his quarters and sat down without offering a greeting, Rock seized the man by the collar and tossed him out. "I will not put up with an impertinent Chinaman," he wrote in his diary, revealing the racism that was also among his imperfections.

The first record of Rock in the GEOGRAPHIC's archives is a memo written by Editor



EVER MINDFUL OF CREATURE COMFORTS, ROCK SET UP SHOP IN THE VILLAGE OF NGULUKO, CHINA, NOW YUHU, WHERE PHOTOGRAPHIC PLATES DRY ABOVE HIS BED.



HEIRS TO GENEROSITY, LI JINYUAN AND HIS WIFE CARRY A CHEST CONTAINING CARPENTRY AND DENTAL TOOLS GIVEN BY ROCK TO LI'S FATHER. HE BUILT FURNITURE FOR ROCK IN YUHU, WHERE LI NOW PERFORMS DENTISTRY. A SIMILAR CHEST (BELOW) IS BORNE ACROSS THE YANGTZE RIVER DURING ONE OF ROCK'S FORAYS.

Gilbert H. Grosvenor in 1921. It says: "Mr. Joseph F. Rock called here today regarding an article on 'HUNTING THE CHAULMOOGRA PLANT.'

"I offered him, for an article on the above subject, and a selection of 40 of his photographs, \$400." In 1921 this was a goodly sum.

Rock had taken up botany in Hawaii, where he eventually settled after emigrating from Austria. Though he had no university education, he applied himself with determination — another personal characteristic — and became an expert, even teaching courses at what is now the University of Hawaii.

In 1920 the U.S. Department of Agriculture sent him to Siam, Burma, and India for a year to search for seeds of the chaulmoogra tree. An extract from chaulmoogra oil was believed to be useful in treating leprosy, and



the department wanted to grow the tree in the U.S. Rock returned doubly successful; he not only brought a cache of seeds but also demonstrated that he could survive in the wilds of Asia. (Extract from chaulmoogra oil, unfortunately, proved to be of limited value against leprosy.)

His experience appealed to Grosvenor, who, seeking accounts of daring exploits for the magazine, eagerly supported explorers. Among the fruits of this policy were articles by Adm. Richard E. Byrd, describing his 1929 flight over the South Pole, and by William Beebe, writing of his record-breaking undersea dive in a bathysphere in 1930.

Rock would contribute accounts no less astonishing. Nine of his articles about China, accompanied by scores of photographs, were published from 1924 to 1935, bringing to



SHARING A CHORE, NAXI PEOPLE SORT CHESTNUTS ON THE PORCH OF ROCK'S HOME IN 1923. IN 1996 THE NAXI CLASSICAL MUSIC ORCHESTRA PRACTICES MUSIC OF THE TANG AND SONG DYNASTIES IN FRONT OF THE BUILDING, NOW A FARMHOUSE. THE MUSICIANS — WHO AS CHILDREN KNEW ROCK — BURIED THEIR TRADITIONAL INSTRUMENTS TO PROTECT THEM FROM COMMUNIST ZEALOTS DURING THE CULTURAL REVOLUTION OF THE 1960S AND '70S.





A GRAND RETINUE PASSED BELOW THE YULONGXUE SHAN — JADE DRAGON SNOW RANGE — AS ROCK RETURNED FROM AN EXPEDITION IN 1928. ROCK ROUTINELY TRAVELED WITH RETAINERS TO ENSURE THAT HE CAMPED IN GRAND STYLE AND WITH SOLDIERS TO WARD OFF BANDITS.

readers' living rooms exotic kingdoms, faraway peoples, and snow-mantled peaks that were little known even to geographers.

He was the GEOGRAPHIC's man in China in 1923-24 with the imposing title, "Leader of the National Geographic Society's Yunnan Province Expedition," a title renewed in 1927 for three years. From mountainous Yunnan in the south, bordering Burma and Tibet, he worked his way almost a thousand miles north, close to the Gobi and Inner Mongolia. "No white man, since time began, ever stood here," he boasted as he overlooked the gorges of the Yellow River in Qinghai Province—a claim he repeated in most of his articles.

In "Through the Great River Trenches of Asia," August 1926, he wrote of sliding across



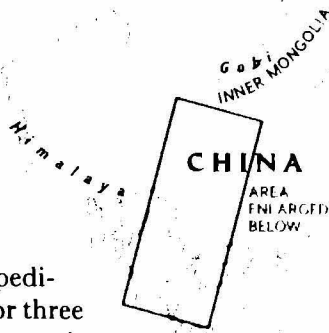
the frothing Mekong River on a rope of twisted bamboo strips. In "The Glories of the Minya Konka," October 1930, he described travel under blizzard conditions among some of China's highest peaks: "We packed our tents and bedding with numb hands. As we left our camping place the blizzard increased in fury." Rock often camped above 10,000 feet, sometimes exchanging exhausted mules for yaks, which were better suited to high altitude. He suffered bandit attacks on the trail, despite his large escorts, and dysentery attacks while staying in villages that stank from accumulated filth.

Writing of his difficulties, he began one article, "Much of a most unpleasant nature has happened to me in recent months." For him, that was an unusually simple sentence.

His editors straightened his contorted prose

Joseph Rock

INTRIGUED BY ASIA SINCE CHILDHOOD, ROCK INITIALLY TRAVELED THERE AS A BOTANIST IN 1913. ON HIS FIRST EXPEDITION (MAP) HE EXPLORED THE REGION IN SEARCH OF MEDICINAL TREE SEEDS, THE SUBJECT OF HIS FIRST GEOGRAPHIC ARTICLE. THOUGH OFTEN DISDAINFUL OF OTHERS, ROCK BECAME FAST FRIENDS WITH THE KING OF MULI, WHO POSED BETWEEN ROCK, AT LEFT, AND HIS ASSISTANT W. I. HAGEN.





HOLIDAY CROWDS JAM THE MARKET OF TENGCHONG IN 1923 THE DAY BEFORE THE CHINESE NEW YEAR. TODAY PIGS HAVE THE RUN OF THE STREET IN A MORE SUBDUED SHOPPING DISTRICT IN YONGNING, ANOTHER YUNNAN TOWN. THE EVER FASTIDIOUS ROCK SELDOM FAILED TO COMMENT ON CONDITIONS THAT DID NOT MEET HIS OWN STANDARDS OF HYGIENE — OFTEN THE CASE IN HIS ADOPTED HOMELAND. YET HE ALWAYS YEARNED TO RETURN.



and trimmed his manuscripts of interminable digressions. "Whole paragraphs of the history of Chinese revolutions, which occur in the first few pages, could be eliminated," an editor declared in a critique of one submission.

Such excising displeased the proud explorer, who once asked if an entire issue of the magazine could be devoted to his adventures. At least, "I hope you will find it possible to publish more than two articles of mine a year," he wrote, noting jealously that Assistant Editor Frederick Simpich, Sr., "has three articles in the magazine within six months."

Editors described Rock as "cantankerous." But offsetting his touchiness was one great, redeeming asset. Doggedly tenacious, he fulfilled the first rule of exploration and journalism: He *got there*.

A 1926 letter to Rock from Franklin L. Fisher, chief of GEOGRAPHIC illustrations, began: "We have finally been able to get together the material for your experiment in natural-color photography."

Besides ponderous manuscripts, Rock had been sending back photographs in black and white. Grosvenor believed color photos from Rock would "be worth thousands of dollars to our Magazine," but Fisher's word "experiment" suggested a more cautious outlook. At the time, color photography was a novelty; most of the "color" photos then published in magazines were black and whites that had been artificially tinted.

The odds against the success of this "experiment" were formidable. First, there was the shipping problem, for Rock would be working with five-by-seven-inch glass plates of the Autochrome color process. And indeed, many of the carefully packed plates broke en route to China.

The process was extremely slow. To make the colors, the plates bore a coating of potato-starch grains dyed orange, green, and violet.



The image passed through this layer before it reached the emulsion. Even when photographing a landscape in bright sunlight, Rock had to expose the

plates for a whole second. Of course, Rock's human subjects had to stand still at least that long while confronted by his big tripod-mounted camera—and few of them had ever even seen a camera.

None of these obstacles discouraged the indefatigable Rock. In fact, he usually processed the plates as he traveled, once, as he wrote, "tying our black developing tent to the

branches" in a forest. He filtered water through cotton and lit dung fires to warm the chemical-developing baths to the required 65°F. A helper waved cardboard to shoo flies away from the sticky emulsion.

"I have one great difficulty in drying the plates," he complained in August 1929. "At this time of year the atmosphere is saturated with moisture . . . unless they dry

quickly the film bursts in spots and leaves green spots all over the plate."

Sometimes defective coatings simply floated off the glass.

Inevitably, some of the developed plates that Rock shipped to magazine headquarters in Washington, D.C., also arrived in pieces. Still, nearly 600 reached us intact, and Rock's depiction of subjects both sublime and bizarre—glacier-topped peaks, temple rituals performed by dancers in frightening masks—began to be published with a chromatic breadth that approached the real thing, providing a glimpse of China that was both vivid and unique.

ROCK WAS DRAWN TO CHINA as a boy, learning to read a bit of Chinese by studying on his own in a Vienna museum. As an adventurer he was intrigued by the cultures of China's minority peoples and relished the prospect of plunging into its



PUNISHMENT FOR A MURDERER SERVING FIVE YEARS IN A MULI DUNGEON INCLUDED A NECK BOARD THAT PREVENTED THE CONVICT FROM FEEDING OR GROOMING HIMSELF.

forbidding mountains—of being “the first white man who. . .”

Inevitably, however, on his months-long journeys he became disgusted with China’s chaos and corruption and with its “miserable comfortless towns” and “opium sots,” as he called the many addicts.

He vowed many times to leave China forever, and indeed he did depart several times. But he kept going back. Like a man without a country, he found that he was also repelled by “automobile-mad America” and the “so-called civilized world.” He wrote in 1930: “I have lived on excitement for the last ten years and a humdrum existence is next to unbearable to me.”

When visiting GEOGRAPHIC headquarters, he would wander down to the office of a sympathetic illustrations editor and pour out his homesickness for the mountains of Yunnan. He saw them last in 1949, when, with the communist takeover imminent, he departed for good, after 27 years.

Rock, who died in 1962, would be enormously pleased that he is still remembered in the village of Nguluko, in Yunnan Province in southwestern China, where he made his headquarters in 1922 and resided off and on until 1949.

When I went to the village last year, every oldest I talked to recalled Luo Boshi, as they still call him. “Luo” is the approximation of Rock, since the *ro* sound is difficult for some Asians to pronounce. “Boshi” means doctor—an honorific he liked and which even found its way into the GEOGRAPHIC, despite Rock’s lack of formal education.

The villagers are Naxi, a Tibetan-related people with their own language, numbering about 275,000 in Yunnan today. They are slightly darker than the Chinese and are often tall. Some of the Naxi (also spelled Nashi, Nakhi, and Na-Khi) who were hired by Luo



Boshi for his caravan journeys were taller than their employer, who stood five feet eight inches.

Rock won the loyalty of many by treating their illnesses. “When my great-grandmother was very sick, Luo Boshi gave her some medicine, and she recovered,” declared Li Congguang, who lives in a house that Rock occupied. “That is the main reason all my family helped Luo Boshi in his work.”

Another man, 75-year-old Li Shijun (most of the villagers that I met had the surname Li) said Rock enabled him to avoid being forced into Chiang Kai-shek’s army in the 1940s. Rock looked contemptuously upon that corrupt regime, just as he abhorred the communists. When soldiers came to take away the young men from the village, Rock hid Li Shijun in his own house, probably as a favor to the young man’s older brother, a Rock bodyguard.

Several villagers still cling to things that Luo Boshi brought to their families from the U.S. or left behind when he departed. A saw and chisels, for example, and even dental tools. Still used by a villager who practices rough-and-ready den-

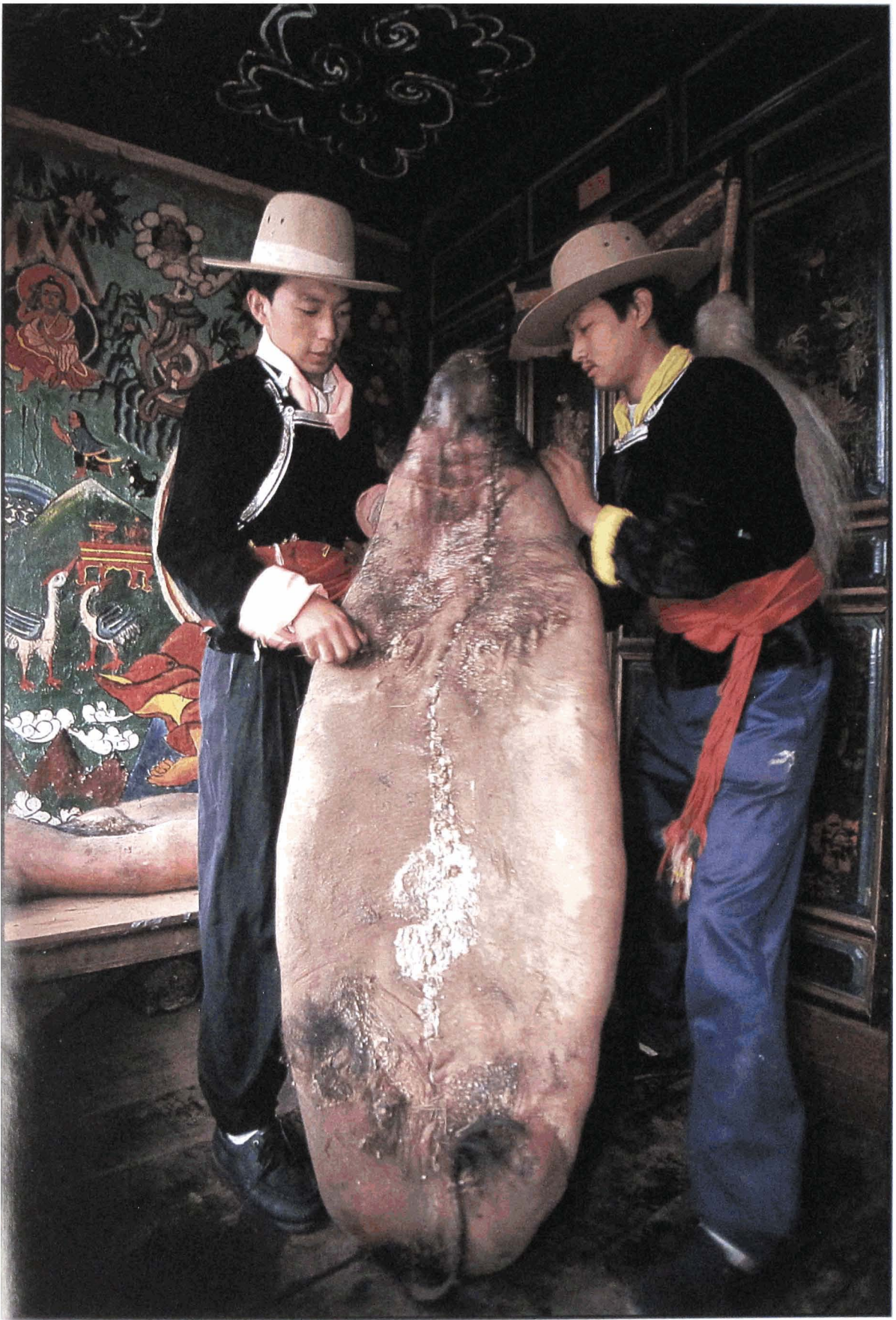
tristry, the dental pliers have by now extracted hundreds of local teeth.

I hoped I might discover Rock’s rubber bathtub. But when I asked about it, the villagers responded with blank stares.

■ GULUKO’S plain houses of wood and stone cluster beneath the towering Yulongxue Shan—Jade Dragon Snow Range. The village has changed little since Rock’s day, although it is now called Yuhu, Jade Lake, for a nearby body of water.

It was summer when I went there, and in the fields women, along with a few men, were bent at the waist, scything grain. Rock had noted that women did most of the daily labor; a





CANNED HAM, CHINESE STYLE: TWO BOYS POSED FOR ROCK WITH A HOG GUTTED, BONED, SALTED, AND SEALED—PRESERVING THE PORK FOR YEARS. THE CARCASSES, WHICH SOMETIMES DOUBLE AS MATTRESSES, ARE STILL PREPARED TODAY (ABOVE). PHOTOGRAPHER YAMASHITA FOUND THE MEAT “SWEET AND QUITE TASTY.”

Naxi tradition that survives today.

Rock's first article as GEOGRAPHIC expedition leader was about the Naxi *dongbas*, shamanistic priests who conducted fantastic rituals—dancing, leaping into bonfires, dipping hands into burning oil—to drive evil spirits from a sick person.

Soon he began to translate ancient pictograph manuscripts that recounted the Naxi history and described their religious beliefs and rites, which are rooted in the ancient Bon traditions of Tibet. In this he relied heavily upon *dongbas*, for only those shamans had learned to read the pictographs.

Eventually, supported in part by Harvard University, he completed two copiously footnoted Naxi histories and a 1,094-page Naxi dictionary.

“What Rock did was very important,” emphasized Yang Fuquan, a Naxi specialist in the Yunnan Academy of Social Sciences in Kunming, the provincial capital. “Today we can't get information like he got from those passed-away priests.”

The Naxi culture suffered greatly during the Cultural Revolution, 1966-1976, when Naxi religious practices were banned and shamans were outlawed.

But in the more relaxed China of today scholars want to explore that culture, and officials say the Naxi may return to their old beliefs if they wish. Rock's efforts to record Naxi lore are reckoned so important that Yunnan plans to erect a memorial to him.

WHEN HE SETTLED in Nguluko in 1922, at the age of 38, Rock called the village “charmingly situated, if not overclean.”

The situation was important; besides exploring for the GEOGRAPHIC, Rock would collect plant specimens, and the mountains close by burgeoned with varieties of rhododendrons and other plants that might grow well in



the U.S. And the conifers, ferns, and other flora, if not of practical value, were of interest to scholars.

Under the GEOGRAPHIC's sponsorship 60,000 plant specimens reached the U.S., pressed between paper. They were turned over to the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C., to be shared with universities and botanical institutions. He sent seeds to the Department of Agriculture packed in powdered charcoal to prevent them from drying out. (Some of his rhododendrons grow today in gardens in San Francisco and Seattle and

in Great Britain.) He also sent 1,600 specimens of birds for American ornithologists to examine. Rock collected thousands of additional tree and shrub specimens with the financial support of Harvard's Arnold Arboretum.

People in Nguluko recall that Rock trained a Naxi cook to prepare Western-style meals. He was the only villager who ate with a knife and fork. And he usually ate alone.

A lifelong bachelor, Rock had many friends in Europe and America, but when he recounted his China experiences, “he never spoke of a buddy, someone to have a couple of shots with,” remembers Paul Weissich, retired director of the Honolulu Botanical Gardens.

Weissich knew Rock in his last years and was executor of Rock's modest estate. “He was so oriented toward scholarship that I think he had little time for friendship.”

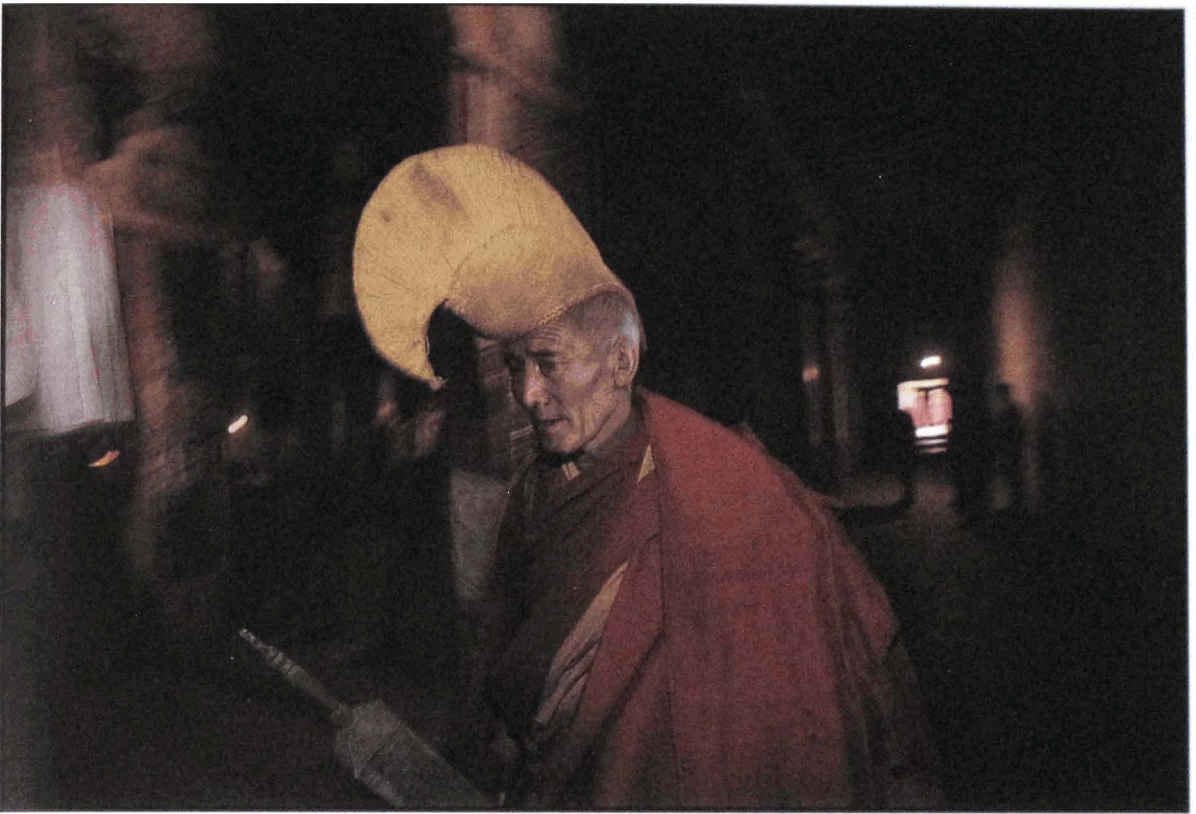
Sometimes he took a missionary or another Westerner on his journeys. Once he took Edgar Snow, the American journalist who chronicled the rise of the Chinese communists in the 1930s and '40s.

But, rigid and demanding, Rock inevitably found fault with his companions and parted company. He thought Snow naive and grumbled that one missionary was too full of “brotherly love and sweet words.”

That the intrepid explorer yearned for



WITH STERN PIETY, TIBETAN MONKS GRASP STAFFS THAT SIGNIFY THEIR RANK. ROCK TURNED THEIR HATS SIDWAYS FOR THIS PHOTOGRAPH.



BRIGHT HEADPIECE, WORN CORRECTLY, CROWNS THE SENIOR MONK OF AN ORDER OF TIBETAN BUDDHISTS KNOWN AS THE YELLOW HATS. THEIR MONASTERY AT ZHONGDIAN WAS REBUILT AFTER BEING VIRTUALLY DESTROYED IN 1959 WHEN CHINA INVADED TIBET. PHOTOGRAPHED BY ROCK IN 1929 (BELOW), THIS MONASTERY AT YONGNING WAS ANOTHER STRONGHOLD OF THE YELLOW HATS, ALSO KNOWN AS THE ORDER OF VIRTUE.





BEFITTING HIS EXALTED STATUS, THE 81-YEAR-OLD HIGH LAMA OF DZANGAR'S MONASTERY IS AFFORDED THE LUXURY OF RIDING IN A LITTER. ROCK OFTEN HAD HIMSELF CARRIED INTO VILLAGES IN A LIKE MANNER TO CREATE AN AURA OF IMPORTANCE, THUS EARNING THE RESPECT AND COOPERATION OF LOCAL LEADERS.

companionship is sadly clear from his diary, in which deep melancholia is mixed with his observations of plants and wildlife and the compass bearings of his travels.

"Today I have been frightfully lonely," he wrote while putting up at a Buddhist monastery. And on New Year's Eve 1937: "I am unspeakably lonely." Such was the flip side of what he once called his "romantic" travels.

Invariably, Rock recovered. "Where I live," he wrote contentedly to an editor during the Great Depression, "we know nothing of depressions. . . nobody works for a living—that is, in an industrial capacity—hence there are no hard times."

LL NGULUKO was out to see us off," he recorded as he began a journey to Yongning in 1928. His mules were laden with personal gear, canned food, animal feed, photographic equipment, and paper and charcoal for preserving plants and seeds.

With him, as usual, went a Naxi team, including his cook, muleteers, and men trained to collect and pack the specimens.

Sometimes he complained that his helpers were lazy and careless, just as, at one time or another, he railed against almost every group he encountered in China: Buddhist monks who rarely bathed, Muslim soldiers, whom he called "absolute robbers," and overbearing Chinese officials. But on the whole he liked the Naxi, and once when he visited the U.S., he even brought along two of his assistants.

His caravan moved at the rate of 10 to 20 miles a day. Rock always stopped to visit local rulers and officials; to ward off robbers, he needed the armed escorts they could provide. In exchange he might offer the official a much prized Colt .45-caliber pistol. Rock himself carried two of them.

Sometimes he had an escort of as many as 200 men, but despite this protection his caravan was attacked at least twice. "We pushed on under fire as best we could," he wrote of one encounter. His soldiers fired back. "Thanks to the bad aim of the brigands we lost only one soldier killed."

That night he stayed in a Buddhist temple. At midnight soldiers came to warn that the



ENSCONCED ON A PLUSH PERCH, FOUR-YEAR-OLD LOBSANG YESHE — THE HIGH LAMA OF YONGNING — EXUDES A SOLEMNITY BEYOND HIS YEARS. NOW 66, LOBSANG IS PERMITTED BY THE COMMUNIST GOVERNMENT TO WEAR HIS OFFICIAL ROBES ONLY ONE WEEK A YEAR, DURING THE SPRING FESTIVAL CELEBRATING THE CHINESE NEW YEAR.

brigands were nearby “and that they could not protect me.” Rock laid out his pistols and prepared to flee or fight. “I opened up my trunks and distributed [silver coins] among my men, wrapped up some extra warm underwear, a towel, condensed milk and some chocolate. . . . Every minute I expected the firing to commence.” The bandits, however, never attacked.

On an arduous winter journey in 1924 Rock crossed 13,000-foot-high mountains into Sichuan province to reach “one of the least-known spots in the world,” the ancient Buddhist kingdom of Muli, the size of New Hampshire with but 22,000 citizens.

Inside the walled monastery, Rock “donned my best and sallied forth to meet the king.” Chote Chaba was a huge monarch, six



feet two and corpulent. He offered his guest buttered tea along with “ancient mottled yak cheese, interspersed with hair,” and cakes “heavy as rocks.”

Rock cautiously sipped his tea while taking in the scene. He noted golden plates and porcelain cups. The necks of the monarch and his attendants were greasy and black, which “showed that soap was not in demand.”

Muli became the subject of one of Rock’s most fascinating articles, in part because Chote Chaba, as unlearned as a babe, peppered him with questions. Could a man ride horseback from Muli to Washington? Was that near Germany? Did Rock have binoculars that could see through mountains?

More challenging targets for Rock were



FEARSOME ORACLE, A MAN CALLED THE SUNGMA BALUNG CHO JE WAS SAID TO BECOME POSSESSED BY A DEMON WHEN HE DONNED HIS CEREMONIAL ROBES. AS MONKS CHANTED, THIS GLOWERING AGENT SPAT, GROANED, AND SHOOK AS IF IN AN EPILEPTIC FIT, THEN SHOT OFF ARROWS TO BANISH OTHER DEMONS.



KEEPER OF ARCAINE LORE, HE ZOUYI, 82 (BELOW), TRANSLATES A STORY WRITTEN WITH NAXI PICTOGRAPHS (ABOVE). ROCK WAS ENCHANTED WITH THE SCRIPT AND THE CULTURE. BOTH BECAME A LIFELONG SCHOLARLY PURSUIT FOR THE ADVENTURER, WHO PRODUCED TWO HISTORIES AND A NAXI-ENGLISH DICTIONARY.

mountains even higher than those that enclosed Muli, especially the little-known ranges along the border of China and Tibet.

He spent more than a year trying to reach the Anyemaqen peaks in Qinghai Province, delayed by hostile nomadic tribes and a war between Buddhists and Muslims. Enduring fierce snowstorms, he finally penetrated deep into the Anyemaqen Shan, where "even the valley floors . . . reach a height of more than 15,000 feet." He made an extensive photographic record of the peaks and believed that the highest soared to

18,000 feet. According to modern surveys, he overestimated by more than a mile; the height is 20,610 feet.

That was not his only surveying error. Early in 1930 the *GEOGRAPHIC* received an astonishing cablegram. It said: MINYAKONKA HIGHEST PEAK ON GLOBE 30250 FEET ROCK.

Really? Had Rock discovered in unmapped western Sichuan a mountain that exceeded Everest's 29,028 feet? If so, it was exciting news. However, the *GEOGRAPHIC* delayed issuing a press release.

Rock had pushed resolutely toward Minya Konka (now called Gongga Shan) equipped



with an aneroid barometer and other gear for measuring heights. But he was more than eight miles away when he estimated the altitude of this "white pyramid . . . which made me gasp."

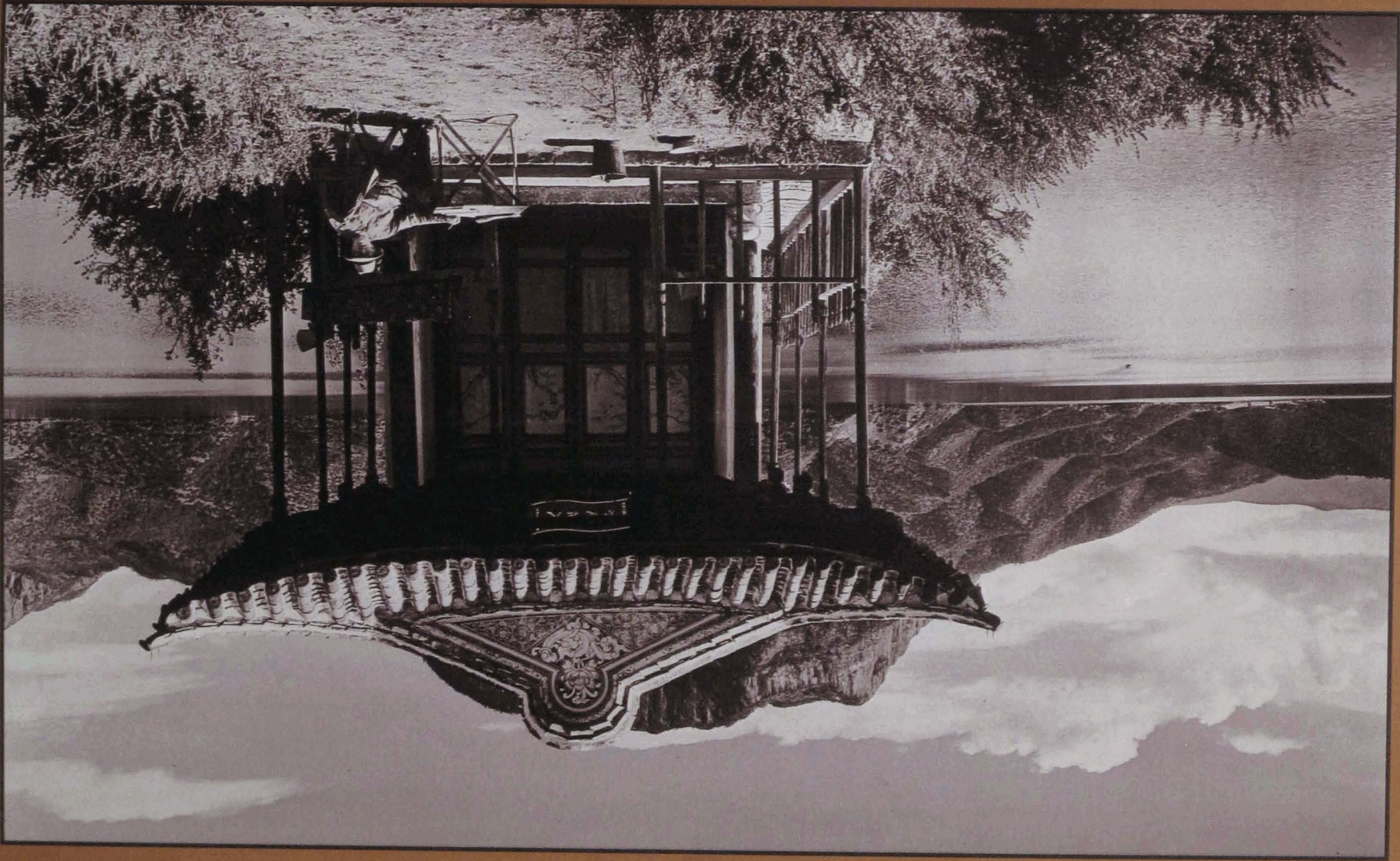
When "The Glories of the Minya Konka" appeared in October 1930, Rock's editors had cautiously scaled his calculation down to 25,600 feet, based on other estimates. (Today it is reckoned at 24,790 feet.) Still, Rock had brought back the first Minya Konka photographs—in color.

Rock had an abundant knowledge of the terrain of western Chi-

na as well as that of Siam and Burma, the main locus of his search for chaulmoogra seeds in 1920-21. At the height of World War II the U.S. Army wanted his help in drawing maps for pilots flying the "Hump," the lifeline for Allied forces fighting the Japanese in China. The cargo planes departed India and flew over Burma's mountainous border with China, landing at Kunming.

Rock was plucked from India, where he had gone to escape the war, and flown to Washington. He sent his belongings by ship. In those trunks was much of his Naxi research, including the dictionary that he had been working on

IN ELEGANT ISOLATION, ROCK BID HIS TIME ON THE ISLAND OF NYOROPHU IN LUGU LAKE, A FAVORITE RETREAT. THIS VIEW SHOWS HIM MAROONED IN 1929 AFTER CIVIL WAR BROKE OUT AND FERRYBOATS WERE DESTROYED.





OLD WAYS SURVIVE ON LUGU LAKE, WHERE THE MOSUO PEOPLE WEAR THE SAME TRADITIONAL DRESS AS THEY DID DURING ROCK'S DAY. ROCK KEPT HIS OWN TRADITIONS, TAKING HIS MEALS ON FINE DINNERWARE WHEREVER HE CAMPED. THE GRAND EXPLORER WAS ABSORBED IN, BUT NEVER BY, THE CULTURES HE FOUND SO COMPELLING.

for more than a dozen years. The trunks went to the sea-floor when the vessel was torpedoed.

Rock was apoplectic. But he seems never to have considered *not* returning to Yunnan to start over. With Harvard's support he was back in 1946, hiring dong-bas to help him translate Naxi manuscripts anew.

He had to hurry. "The political situation is not too good," Rock wrote early in 1949 to his friend Kip Ross at the *GEOGRAPHIC*. "The southern and eastern parts of this province are in the hands of bandits" — that is, communists.

Dayan (Lijiang), a small city near Nguluko, fell in July 1949, and "red soldiers with guns and bayonets searched my belongings." A month later Rock packed and departed.

He spent his last years in Hawaii, collecting



plants and continuing to work on Naxi lore and language. His two-volume Naxi history had been published by Harvard. He wrote Kip Ross that he looked forward to the appearance of the dictionary by his 79th birthday on January 13, 1963. But on December 5 he died of a heart attack at home, surrounded by Naxi pictograph manuscripts. The first volume of the Naxi dictionary was printed soon after his death. The second was published in 1972.

Our man in China was, of course, not just ours; as a botanist he was Hawaii's and Harvard's, and Harvard also claimed him as a historian and lexicographer. But most of all, he belonged to China. He saw it, he survived it, he recorded it in words and pictures. He *got there*. □

On Assignment



JOEGER BIRMAN, NGS STAFF

■ JOSEPH ROCK
Rock Collectors

A GEOGRAPHIC ARTICLE can start anywhere—all it takes is an idea. When he began work in our Image Collection ten years ago, picture editor Joergen Birman (below) took special interest in organizing materials from an early contributor, Asia specialist and explorer Joseph Rock. Back home in Denmark, Joergen had studied Chinese history. He also lived in China to learn to speak the language.

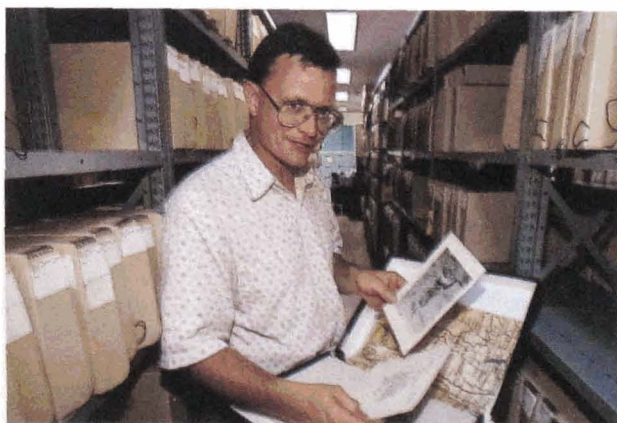
Putting order to Rock's collection was a gargantuan task. Holdings include 3,000 black-and-white prints, 100 sepia prints,

and 600 Autochromes, as well as movies, artifacts, journals, letters, and books. When he was through, Joergen thought we had more than a collection—we had the story of a fascinating life. He proposed an article, and the piece was soon under way with photographer Mike Yamashita (above).

"I already knew Joseph Rock

through his writings on the Mekong," says Mike, who shot that river for the February 1993 issue. "I had an interest in this story, since I'd traced his footsteps there." Following him in Yunnan, Mike photographed these Mosuo women, who live—and look—much as their grandmothers did when Rock came through.

"Unless I can work in the wilderness and the unexplored regions," Joseph Rock once wrote, "I would have no incentive to living." Not much has changed in southwestern China anymore—thanks in part to Rock himself. But he might be glad to know that much is wilderness still.



PETER KRUGH