

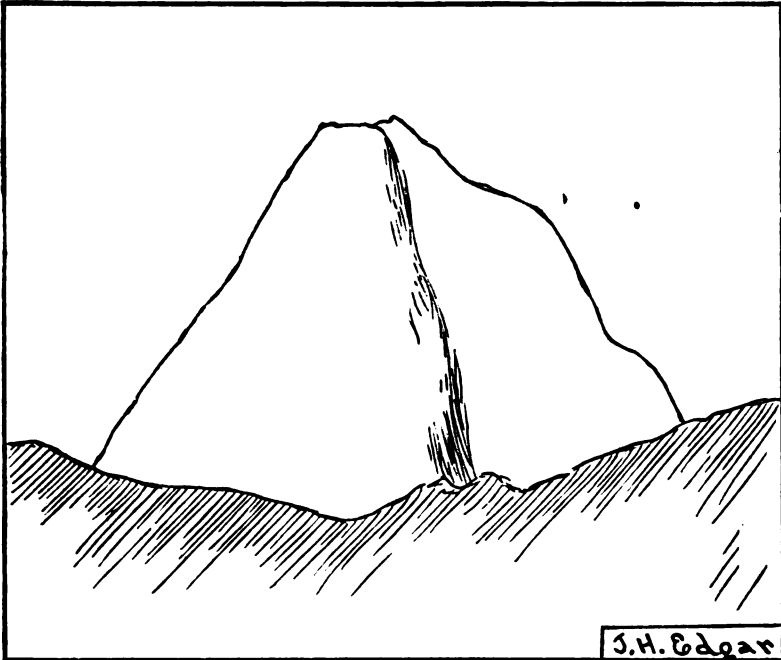
## THE GANGKA—A PEAK IN EASTERN TIBET

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The Gangka is one of the very remarkable features of the world, and it is certain that neither the poet nor the artist could adequately sing the praises of the glorious spectacle that remains the heritage of a few nomads occupying limited areas of the planet's roof. It may sound incredible to many, but it is nevertheless a fact, that even here in the highest habitable zones on earth the Gangka is a strikingly exceptional feature. For Eastern Tibet is not obtrusively a land of snows. Indeed, anyone may travel for weeks over richly grass clad passes and plateaus without gloating his eyes on virgin snow, and latterly when it does appear the deposits are confined to the sharp ridges and isolated peaks of exceptionally high ranges. But owing to the general abnormal altitudes of the adjacent valleys and tablelands Tibet is very often a poor second when compared with mountain areas of many other lands. The Gangka, however, and other land masses on the Eastern fringe of Kham, or Chinese Tibet, are noted exceptions. Why this is so must puzzle geographers for many years to come. But it is a fact that our frontier ranges like those frowning over India seem to bulge up and eventually form gigantic rims which overlook plains and mountain country of relatively insignificant altitudes, This is peculiarly so with the Southern part of the Tung—Yalung divide.

The feature in question is one of several sweeping extensions from the Eastern portion of a great water parting which send supplies North to the Yellow River and South to the Salwin, Mekong, and Yangtse systems. The section of the Tung—Yalung divide under discussion begins about forty miles North of Tachienlu and ends about fifty miles to the South. In the North it bifurcates and forms a circle around the Tachienlu depression and unites in the vicinity of the Cha-Ze Pass. At the top end, at the beginning of the Western rim, we have Zha-Ra with peaks near or above 25,000 feet and a smaller range further South with snow clad country four or five thousand feet lower. On the Eastern rim, apart from much high broken country, we have five snow peaks South-East of Tachienlu which must exceed the 20,000 feet line. Near the Southern junction of the rims we again find mighty peaks of a similar altitude, but which are probably disregarded by modern map makers. They are the beginning of a short range which runs in a Southerly direction

towards the Eastern bend of the Tung and undoubtedly contain some of the earth's highest land. As seen from the region around Yin Kwan Chiai the tract exhibits a truncated cone of great altitude and exceptional charm; an extensive broken plateau well over 20,000 feet; and the peerless Gangka, perhaps the earth's culminating point outside the Himalayan system.



The Gangka from the Mi Chi Heights looking roughly northeast.

(Note: The shaded part has grass and brush wood.)

The Gangka is a mysterious mountain. Many Europeans seem certain that it may be seen from Chengtu and other cities on the Chengtu Plain. If so, scores of missionaries and others, although ignorant of its true position, have been privileged to admire the extensive snow deposits on or below the summit. There are others, however, who scornfully reject such claims; and the writer who has certainly seen snow clad peaks from the China Inland Mission balcony in Chengtu, while sympathizing with the majority, is content to leave the question open. However, he has no doubt that the Gangka is plainly conspicuous from the summit of Mount Omei. But to Europeans living in Tachienlu the Gangka, even now, has elements of mystery surrounding it. This is partly explained by the fact that the tract of country between T'ien-Wan and Tze-Ta-Ti and Westward to

the Yalung is still largely a *terra incognita* to modern geographers. Hence the Gangka has no place on recent British maps. But someone might argue: "It is often on view from centres traversed by famous travellers." We admit the claim at once but point out that owing to shrouds of dense clouds many a man interested in conspicuous earth forms has passed on his way entirely unconscious of the superb view ready to bewilder him "when the mists have rolled away." But both the Zha-Ra and the Gangka are cases of mountains having been found, then unaccountably lost, and finally found again.

The French fathers who have been in Tachienlu for more than half a century must have measured the Gangka before most of the present readers were born. So must many famous travellers who reported on these regions thirty or forty years ago. If not, why was it on the maps of those days with both position and altitude relatively correct? The writer probably saw it during September 1903, and certainly many times after that. But owing to an idea that description of scenery without exact measurements was poor geography he refrained from discussing or publishing his opinions. However, early in 1922 he suggested to Professor. A. E. Johns, head of the mathematics department in the West China Union University, Chengtu, the necessity of a survey by experts. Unfortunately, our plans did not mature owing to the retirement of this brilliant and very charming gentleman from the China field. About the same time a sketch, imperfect in many ways, and not too correctly reproduced, was printed in the Journal of the West China Border Research Society. Then during 1926, when the writer was in Australia, a party from the West China Union University visited the Yin Kwan Chiai region, but no report of their work has been published. The Roosevelts were the next to meet the opportunity, but they were after pandas, not mountains! H. Stevens, however, the naturalist of the same expedition, obtained many fine and varied views later; and apart from sketches, has valiantly advocated the claims of the Gangka to a place on the Royal Geographical Society's maps. Dr. J. Rock, also, has practically circumambulated the Gangka block, photographed it extensively, and made measurements from high altitudes and close quarters. Up to the present his results have not appeared in print, but it is almost certain that he will do in America what Stevens has done in England. As regards the position of the Gangka it will probably be found approximately West of Tien Wan at the extreme North of the Chien-Ch'ang Valley some distance from the point where the Tung turns towards the East.

The Gangka on the Tibetan side may be seen from almost any point on the passes and high plateaus; but every angle, altitude, time of the day and climatic condition adds to but never detracts from its excellent grandeur. Seen from beyond T'ai Lin, one of the more distant views, it rises as a terminal giant high above wonderful peaks and extensive broken snow-clad wastes, and is impressive almost to the point of stupefaction. But the view from the plains around Yin

Kwan Chiai is most pregnant with possibilities for poetic and artistic exploitation. Above the partly ruined village we look down a valley flanked with grass-clad rounded hills where an unattractive green is modified by the darker shades of some forest clumps. Just beyond the Cha Ze Junction similar hills seem to run across the main valley and incidentally form a concave line above which appear the base and peak of the Gangka enveloped in a thick blanket of eternal snow. It is difficult to decide at what time of the day and under what conditions the Gangka's glory is best displayed. One view, however, must always live in my memory, pre-eminently. On July 19th., 1930, our party rode down a valley that might have been the home of Rasselas. The air was warm and softly tinted with an exquisite haze. Suddenly from behind the light brown hills a cloud like structure appeared in the form of a phantom mountain of unearthly size. Was it a delusion, or a trick of the clouds? or a sweetly haunted world enveloped in an atmosphere of ethereal softness? Or was it the Heaven of Loyal Buddhists, Mount Sumern itself? No; it was something real in this world of ours; the mighty Gangka in evening dress; the pride of the Marches; the glory of China; and the wonder of the world! The next day clouds hid it from our view as if in excess of admiration we had unwittingly offended some law of celestial etiquette. But in the afternoon it was out again, and although angry and defiant in demeanour, occasional modifying influences in the form of cloud patches and changing shadow, seemed to assure us that amends were being made for the mistakes of yesterday. "The Peak" in the crystal air of day stands out grim and stern like a terrible God: dead, detached, and forever unapproachable. What we see from the Yin Kwan Fort is, apparently, a three cornered pyramid rising from a coronet-like base of mangled, ice clad country, where ridges, chasms, and cataracts of ice sag down from both bluffs, sheer precipices and hummocky plateaus to the line of brown hills which hides the snowline. From this wild defiant mass "The Peak" towers up thousands of feet. The Northern side, of great extent, looks out steep and wildly broken, while the Southern one seems to suggest a gigantic sloping sheet of slightly frosted glass. In some places discoloured markings would imply that a mighty mass from the summit had broken away, and slipping down, had formed the large hummock which occupies an important position in an extensive cirque. Very often a peculiar cloud seems to hover slightly to the East of the summit. It is no doubt the result of wind driven snow, and has no more connection with internal fires than a venerable fact appearing at times in one of the ice clad caverns, has with colonies of immortals thriving comfortably in an environment of eternal death!

The effect of the Gangka on men and women, naturally, must be profound, but, nevertheless, as varied as are the temperaments of races and individuals. The immense size and grim majesty of to towering outline will of necessity engender awe and reverence. But the writer often turns away conscious of a mild stupefaction which ends in a

vague, tantalizing depression. The grandeur is too overwhelming; and such peerless displays of Nature too rudely proclaim human limitations and man's inability to fully enjoy the works of God. But humiliation and depression are only a part of the story. At eventide, for instance when the unshaded parts near the apex lie immersed in pale but golden shades how hard it is to forget a dead mother's conception of Heaven; or when it glistens in the morning with the entrancing whiteness made sacred by the transfiguration is one not reminded, that after all, victory is the ideal for man.

To the ordinary practical Chinese the Gangka is no asset. It is an uninhabitable waste without cereals for food or forests for dwellings or fuel. Moreover, if gold, silver, or precious stones exist under the frozen mass they are forever beyond the reach of man. Chinese companions have, at times, it is true, remarked on the Gangka's great cold height, and even discovered in it traces of unusual beauty; but it may be doubted if poet or painter of moderate ability in our adopted land has ever sung its praises, or reproduced its beauty on art material. Again, it has failed in the case of the Chinese to engender that awe and reverence which is so closely akin to religion. In any case Chinese temples there are non-existent or of little importance; and the number of pilgrims who visit it, if any, would hardly entitle it to a place in the lists of holy mountains in China.

But the Tibetan, less practical and with a keener susceptibility to religious influences, is more powerfully affected. If our deductions from chains of *mani* mounds and the frequency of white quartz capping stones are correct it must possess potency of an unusual kind. We can well imagine it being a symbol of power. It laughs at human effort and man's understanding is challenged; that is he has not the physical equipment to conquer it, nor the capacity to appreciate its glory. But the Gangka to the Tibetan could mean more than a God-like defiance of man. Although lone and detached, its peak, high in the crystal heavens, may suggest the omniscient eye of God; the pure, cold snow the negation of passion and impurity; and the monstrous base and towering peak the source and fount of retributive justice. Moreover, it is the crowning mystery of these regions and potentially possessed of all kinds of sinister possibilities; hence fear is a natural result, and worship and sacrifice are usually in such cases closely and surely associated. But the Gangka with its frozen base and glistening peak will exhibit to many the almost incomprehensible, awful beauty of Death, for the snow is eternal and consequently all life is banished from this appalling realm. And to the devoutly trained Buddhist that is Nirvana,—the cessation of being and desire, a salvation which insures that "ache of the birth, ache of the helpless years, ache of hot youth and ache of manhood's prime, ache of chill gray years and choking death" will curse man again no more forever.