

1999 Mekong Headwaters Expedition Pete Winn and Ma Da



Summary

Dates: August, 1999 (9 full river days)

Nearest major airport: Xining, Qinghai

Round trip driving time: 8 days

Put-in: 40 miles north of Moyun, near Zadoi, elevation 15,000', flow about 500 cfs

Take-out: 20 miles east of Zadoi, elevation 13,500', flow about 2,500 cfs

Total distance: 100 miles (11 miles per day)

Average gradient: 15 feet/mile

Participants: 8 total using 8 inflatable kayaks

Grade: Class III, one class IV and one portage (class VI)

Introduction

With the cooperation of the Center for International Scientific Exchange (CISE) of the Chinese Academy of Sciences, Earth Science Expeditions (ESE) has conducted five river expeditions in China since 1994: three first descents on the Mekong in Yunnan, one second descent on the Mekong in Yunnan, and one almost first descent on the Mekong Headwaters in Qinghai (the subject of this journal). The first one in Yunnan took nine years from conception to execution and was undoubtedly the most difficult. The next three were progressively easier. We knew that an expedition to the headwaters would be a challenge, but we encountered difficulties we've never had to face before.

To get to the put-in for the eight day, 100 mile float trip, we traveled for two days by air, five by road and four by horse and yak, with four days for rest and tourism interspersed. From home to the put-in: fifteen days. Then ten days on the river, another three days by road and two or three days flying to get home, for a total of 31 days. We knew this would be hard on folks, but other challenges kept popping up unexpectedly that made it seem like we'd made a big mistake.

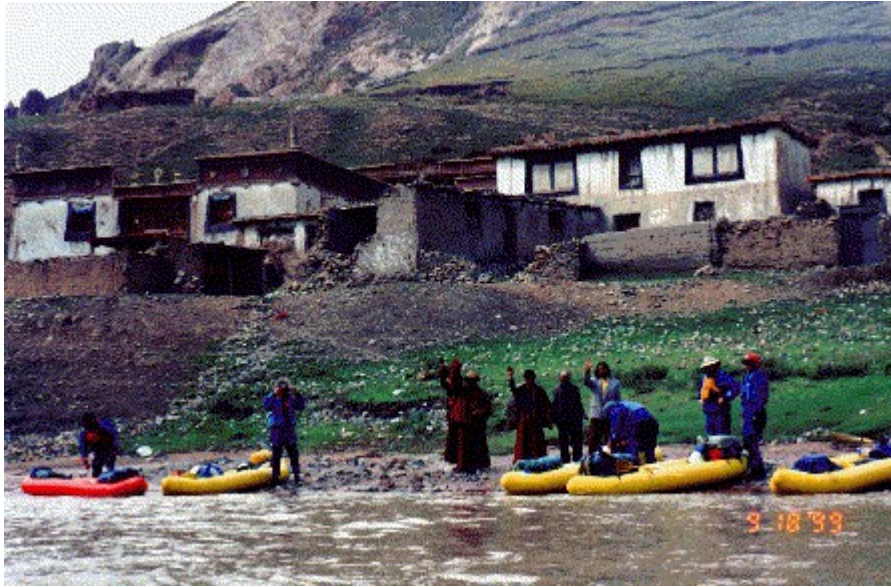
We thought we knew where the source of the Mekong was located based on a book that gave the exact longitude and latitude. However, another branch of the Chinese Academy of Sciences moved the source from one major tributary to another about a month before we departed from the US, so we had to change our itinerary.

About the same time, two of the ten American participants canceled for medical reasons, causing CISE and ESE to take a financial beating. Then a few days before we left the US, UPS lost a package with a passport, visa and plane tickets, causing a three day delay and all of the hassles and increased costs that come with changing reservations for planes, hotels and vehicles.

When we arrived in Xining, Qinghai, from which we planned to drive several hundred miles south over the next four days, we found that two of the four vehicles our local travel agent had rented weren't suitable for the Class V roads. We had no choice but to use them, with the result that the drive took an extra day. One of the drivers was a maniac and another was incompetent. This latter driver's vehicle also broke down regularly (partly his fault), and a third vehicle (a two wheel drive pickup with a competent driver) got stuck 40 times the last two days. What a relief when we reached the end of the road and loaded our gear onto yaks. Then, on the third night out on horseback, when we were a day's horseback ride from the put-in, our Tibetan yak herder blackmailed us into paying double for yak rental.

The final blow hit us at the put-in. After traveling for fifteen days from home and several hundred miles on Class V roads across the "Roof of the World", we found Polaroid film wrappers with Kanji script and a Tibetan yak herder who informed us that another boat had put-in that morning. A Japanese team had beat us to the first descent by one day. That night a snow storm hit us (although it was August, the put-in was at an elevation of 15,000 feet) and we had to postpone our put-in for another day to wait for the blizzard to end - no chance of catching them. While we were on the river, one of the vehicles overturned on the shuttle with Ma Da in it. Fortunately, no one was seriously hurt. Then, at the end of our farewell party in Xining, we gave the drivers what we thought was a healthy tip for getting us back safely, only to find that it was small compared to the last tip they'd gotten (from another Japanese tour group) and they were quite upset with us.

Whew!



Zi Xi La Wu Monastery

Fortunately, we had a competent, compatible group that stayed upbeat and coped well with the adversity. Once we got on the river and had control of our own destiny, things went really well. No injuries, no serious illnesses. The scenery was spectacular and the river was fantastic. One day, monks at a riverside monastery in a Shangri-La setting (photo above) opened their prayer room to us. On another day a Tibetan family brought us fresh yak milk. We saw a Snow Leopard, and, as one participant put it, "that made up for everything." When we arrived at the only town on the river, Zadoi, there were hundreds of spectators waving "hello" (in English!) and they set off fireworks to welcome us. We were in Nirvana by the time we reached the take-out - with the exception of failing to make the first descent, all the hassles of getting to the put-in were forgotten.

Good and evil, pleasure and pain, yin and yang. They need each other.

We had several motives for planning this expedition. One was to go to the source of a major river and watch it grow. Unfortunately, when CAS moved the source, it was too far for us to travel to within our itinerary, so we were only able to see the snow capped 20,000' mountains from a distance of 25 miles. Also, the cost of expeditions in China is so high that it's difficult to attract people with the time and money unless the expedition is a first descent. Unfortunately, this goal was not realized.

On the other hand, we were really looking forward to visiting Tibet and with its Buddhist monasteries. We enjoyed the Tibetans so much that we'd really like to return.

The Source of the Mekong

Two participants in our 1995 and 1997 first descent expeditions on the Mekong in Yunnan, Steve Van Beek and David Hettig, told us they would participate in an expedition to the headwaters of the Mekong if we planned it. Both of them had been to Tibet and knew we would really enjoy a trip to the Tibetan Plateau.



Riding Ponies with yaks carrying gear across the tundra. Unknown photographer.

The Mekong is the tenth longest river on earth. The sources of most major rivers in the world were discovered in the 1800's, including the source of the Mekong. In 1994, however, French and Japanese teams independently decided this source was not the true source, and sought to correct this error.

According to National Geographic and the US Geological Survey geographical conventions, the "true" source is the furthest one from the mouth. Ideally, it is also the biggest tributary and the highest in elevation, but these are not determining factors. If there are two sources equally distant from the mouth, the largest is the true source, and if both are equal in size, the highest is the source. Also by convention, the official geographical agency of the country within which the source is located is the final arbiter of disputes regarding the "true" source and is the repository for the survey data.

The source identified in the 1800's, Lungmo La, is a spring discharging northward into a large tributary flowing from the west, the Za Na Qu. Michel Peissel, who led the French team, used a 1:500,000 scale 1987 jet navigation chart to select Rupsa La as the source. It is a spring further east which also discharges into the Za Na Qu. They then went there with a GPS unit to determine the exact longitude, latitude and elevation.



Wan Lin (left) and our guides at Ga Na Song Duo, with chortans in the background. Some chortans contain the skull of a famous local monk, but these were built because the confluence of the Zayaqu and Zanaqu is a spiritual site. Visiting Tibetans circumambulate (walking or prostrating) clockwise around them while praying. Photo by Scott Sanderson.

In his account of this expedition, Peissel mentioned that a Sino-Japanese team just a few days ahead of him (can they read minds?) went towards the source of a large tributary flowing from the north, the Za A Qu (or Zayaqu). Apparently Peissel did not go to the confluence of the two tributaries (called Ga Na Song Duo by the Tibetans) to measure their relative size but the Sino-Japanese group did. Below Ga Na Song Duo the river is called the Za Qu. It becomes the Lancang near Qamdo, and the Mekong after it leaves China.

Peissel convinced the British Royal Geographic Society to list Rupsa La as the "true" source and in 1995 published a book on his expedition, "The Discovery of the Source of the Mekong." The Chinese surveyors with the Japanese team published an article in March 1995 listing a tributary to the Za A Qu as the source, but Peissel didn't mention it and we didn't find out about it until after our expedition.

In January, 1994, a Russian mapping agency sold complete sets of 1:200,000 scale topographic maps of China made in the 1960's to many major university libraries. Peissel was apparently not aware of the availability of these maps on his August, 1994 expedition. We didn't learn about the maps until after our first Mekong expedition in October 1994.

After acquiring appropriate Russian maps from the Stanford University library, we began to plan an expedition to the source identified by Peissel. However, from the Russian maps it appeared that the Za A Qu was longer, had a larger drainage area (i.e. was larger) and the source area was higher in elevation. This was not apparent on the maps Peissel had used and we didn't know how accurate the Russian maps were. In early Spring of 1999 Ma Da checked Chinese 1:100,000 scale maps. These are the best maps, but they are not available outside of China.

Ma Da confirmed that the Chinese maps supported our conclusion, and, assuming that a Japanese team had been to the source of the Za A Qu in 1994, he began to search CAS for someone who knew about their expedition. He eventually located a CAS representative who

had accompanied the Japanese, and confirmed that CAS thought the source was on the Za A Qu. At the time, the CAS was unaware of the Royal Geographic Society's support for Peissel's claim to have discovered the source.

Ma Da, in the process of questioning CAS for info on the source of the Mekong, informed them of Peissel's claim, which precipitated a decision by the CAS to measure the distance from the western and northern sources to Ga Na Song Duo using satellite photos, then go to the source of the longest tributary to remeasure its location with a GPS. CAS completed their expedition in July, 1999 and by early August had confirmed that the source of the Za A Qu was the "true" source. The Japanese were right and Peissel was wrong. Less than a month before we were to depart we learned we had planned an expedition to the wrong source.

Unfortunately, the road to the Mekong headwaters area ends at Moyun, which is an abandoned Chinese military outpost halfway between the "wrong source" and Ga Na Song Duo. We had planned six days round trip travel on horse/yak to the "wrong source" and it was twelve days round trip travel on horse/yak to the "true source." If we were to travel to the "true source" and then begin floating from the uppermost point possible, we would have to extend our expedition by six days. Since most of us were river people, riding horses for ten days after flying for two days and driving for five days was just too much, so we opted to go directly to the put-in, which was about thirty miles downstream from the "true source."

So it goes. Zhou Changlin, the Chinese surveyor who had been on the Japanese expedition in 1994 and the CAS expedition in July 1999 to determine the "true source" accompanied us to Moyun, went on horseback to the "true source" to place a plaque there, then returned with our the vehicles to the take-out below Zadoi. Now we know the source of the Mekong is located at 33 42 N, 94 42 E, elevation 5224 meters (17,135').

First Descent

When we learned at the put-in that a Japanese team had inadvertently "scooped" us, needless to say we weren't jumping for joy. Steve was up for a moonlight put-in, but eventually sanity prevailed. He'd brought along an Explorer's Club flag that was now useless, and hoped to market a video of the first descent. On top of that, it snowed that night and didn't stop until the next afternoon, which caused another day's delay. For safety reasons, we couldn't justify floating a river none of us ever been down when you couldn't see a hundred yards through the blizzard.

We would have reached the put-in two days before the Japanese if UPS hadn't lost the package with David Hettig's passport, visa and plane ticket, and would have succeeded in our objective of completing the first descent. Since we didn't, we did our best to rationalize the situation. We did the first inflatable kayak trip, had the first woman kayaker with us, and were the first Americans to float the headwaters of the Mekong. But Steve was faced with using UPS's failure as a hook to market his film: "UPS screwup allows Japs to beat Americans!"

So we lost a race we didn't know we were running. It was a bummer for sure, but Ma Da later found out that the Japanese had begun the race in 1995, a big head start. They represented the same group that had unknowingly raced Peissel to find the "true source" and it had taken them four years to get the funding to raft the river and unknowingly race us. From their perspective,

we were newcomers and they deserved the honor. Sometimes you get the elevator, sometimes you get the shaft. But we did get to see a snow leopard!

We later learned the Japanese had been attacked and robbed just before their take-out at Qamdo, 200 miles beyond our takeout below Zadoi. We were never robbed, but just before Zadoi, we rushed to get on the river after being swamped by eight excessively helpful Tibetans led by an aggressive humpback who kept trying to buy everything in sight, including our boats.

The Participants

Needless to say, participating in a first descent implies danger. Who knows what's around the bend? You could encounter a death defying waterfall with no place to stop, realizing you haven't yet achieved Nirvana as you go over it. Your family and friends don't know if you're having a blast or on your way to Hell, and it's natural to think the worst.

Pete had told his wife, Cindy, that he'd try to send her a fax from Yushu on our way back to Xining from the take-out. He'd managed to send her a fax from Yushu on the way to the put-in, but due to our travel schedule he had to trust a hotel manager to send one to her on the way back, saying we were all alive and healthy. Unfortunately, Cindy never got the fax, and the first she heard from him was two days later when we reached Xining. Meantime, she and the kids, Travis (15, a Class V kayaker) and Carmen (10, a budding boater), freaked out and thought they'd never see him again. Another unexpected hazard.

When we left Xining, there were sixteen of us in four vehicles - eight Americans and eight Chinese. Technically, Ma Da and Pete were co-leaders, but Chinese drivers are pretty independent, and it was hard to keep them in a caravan. We ultimately gave one of them the nickname of Rambo because he was so aggressive - almost wild. One vehicle, a Nissan Pathfinder driven by an inexperienced but likable young man, Mr. Chun, kept breaking down. Mr. Chun didn't know how to fix it and the other drivers usually kept going, so it was up to the American passengers to fix it. Fortunately, several of us had some experience and we managed to get it running each time. This is the vehicle that rolled on the shuttle. Another vehicle, a two wheel drive pickup with bald tires and all our gear, kept getting stuck in the mud. Eventually, after having to backtrack several times to tow it out, we convinced the other drivers to caravan to avoid further delays.

By the time we reached the put-in, there were fifteen of us, plus fifteen horses and twenty two yaks - a big group to manage. We'd left the four drivers in Moyun to wait for Dr. Zhou before returning to the take-out to wait for us. In addition to the eight Americans, there were three Chinese - Ma Da, Mr. Shan and Mr. Wang, and four Tibetans - Wan Lin, our interpreter, plus a local guide and two yak herders.

Ma Da was essential to the success of the expedition. He's organized expeditions for foreigners to many parts of China for a variety of scientific purposes and really does a good job. We met his boss at CAS in Beijing on our way home, Mr. Han, who said he really worries when Ma Da goes on our expeditions because he can't afford to lose him. Ma Da's first river expedition was the first descent of Man Wan Gorge of the Mekong in 1997 - Class V, big whitewater. He rode on David Hettig's raft and loved it, acquiring the nickname "Hyside". On this expedition, his second and also a first descent, he needed to paddle his own inflatable kayak, so we brought

him to California in July to teach him to paddle.

We took him on three rivers, and in the process of learning he went for a swim on each one. Spooked him a bit, but he ended up doing just fine. The headwaters expedition was hard on him, though. After days of driving and four days of riding a horse, he paddled twenty-five miles the first river day, then because he didn't trust the drivers, the next day he left us at Ga Na Song Duo and rode another twenty-five miles on horseback up the Za Na Qu to Moyun, then rode 180 miles on Class V roads back to Zadoi the next day, rolling over in the Nissan on the way. No wonder he recommended such a small tip for the drivers!

Ma Da was relying heavily on Dr. Zhou, the surveyor who had led the Chinese expedition to the northern source in July, to arrange for our horses and yaks in Moyun. He knew that Dr. Zhou wanted to go to the northern source using horses to carry gear because they traveled so much faster than yaks and he had a long way to go. That meant Ma Da had to take eight Americans to the put-in with an unknown Tibetan guide, and as we all know there is a long history of mistrust between the two cultures. He was nervous about this, and as we later found out, rightfully so.

It could have been worse than it was, though. In Zadoi, on our way to Moyun, while eating dinner in a Tibetan restaurant, we heard what we thought was a couple of drunks singing at a nearby table. Eventually they got up to leave, and one of them (who really was drunk), started making a serious pass at our very pretty Tibetan waitress. The other guy (who could hold his liquor) came to her rescue, and then they both noticed that we were foreigners and wanted to visit with us. Before long, we were all friends - the really drunk guy was the governor of the county of Zadoi, and the other guy, Wan Lin, was the mayor of Moyun, who loved to sing Tibetan songs. He talked the pretty waitress into singing with him - a real treat for all of us. He and Ma Da became such good friends that Wan Lin agreed to drive to Moyun with us, arrange horse and yak rental, and guide us to the put-in. A big plus for Ma Da.



Ma Da dressed up in formal Tibetan clothes. Photo by Steve Van Beek.

Ma Da speaks excellent English but not Tibetan. Wan Lin speaks excellent Mandarin but not English. So we needed the two of them to communicate with the Tibetan families we met on the way from Moyun to the put-in. Turns out Wan Lin had grown up at Ga Na Song Duo and had relatives who still lived there, so he wanted to go to Ga Na Ang Duo (the put-in) then follow us on horseback along the Za A Qu to Ga Na Song Duo, then guide Ma Da back up the Za Na Qu to Moyun on horseback to make sure the drivers got to Zadoi on time to meet us. Wan Lin was tall, handsome and smart. He was chosen to go to high school in Zadoi, then to college in Xining and finally to become a communist party member, which is a requirement for becoming mayor.



Jaime Ross in Moyun meeting room. Photo by Scott Sanderson.

When we arrived in Moyun, a walled compound town about four acres in size occupied by two Tibetan families (with a defunct satellite antenna left by the Chinese military), we unloaded all the gear from the truck into the Moyun Communist Party meeting room, complete with two Chinese flags and a picture of Chairman Mao. Everywhere else in China, the Party is now the socialist party (because communism in the USSR failed so miserably), but the message hasn't yet reached Moyun. Wan Lin said no one (including his Chinese friends) pays any attention to all that crap anyway.

Mr. Wang was the Chinese equivalent of one of the Three Stooges. Young guy, great smile, loved to wear polyester business suits while doing everything, including riding horses wearing Ma Da's dry suit to protect his suit from the hail and rain. One night he forgot to zip the tent shut in a rainstorm, got his sleeping bag wet and then dried it over a yak dung fire so he could smell like yak dung for several days.

Every morning, after the yak herders loaded gear on the yaks, at least two would turn into bucking broncos and after dumping the gear they would stomp on it and then run away. We called them "yak attacks." It was funny if it wasn't your gear. We later had several meals with powdered noodles as a result of yak attacks. One morning the yak with Mr. Wang's suitcase decided it was his turn to attack, but the rope tying the suitcase handle to the pack saddle never came untied, so when the yak ran away it dragged his now open suitcase through a nearby marsh. Having learned from the sleeping bag incident, Mr. Wang decided to air dry his wet polyester suits.

Then at the put-in, when we'd blown up the boats to check them for leaks, the Tibetans and

Chinese wanted to see what it was like to float in one. Mr. Wang was the only one to try standing up, with the obvious result. 45 degree water - brrr. We really enjoyed him. Did we tell you he represented the company that provided the vehicles?

Mr. Shan is the CAS office manager. He came along as a perk for good work. Friendly guy, nice smile, helpful, and a good horseback rider. Within an hour of leaving Moyun on horseback, another horse ran into his, causing his to spook and run. Somehow Mr. Shan jumped off and landed on his feet. The horse threw his saddle, etc, all over the hillside. It took a good half hour to catch the horse and find the saddle. The Tibetans seem to trust the horses to hang around, and then don't seem upset when they have to go searching for them.

Then there were the Americans: Steve Van Beek, David Hettig, Mark Gamble, Scott Sanderson, Kerry Ross, Stephanie Morrisette, Jamie Ross, and Pete Winn. Each of us had our strong points, and these were remarkably synergistic. Everyone was from northern California with the exception of Mark, Scott and Pete.

It might have taken us more than five days of driving if Mark, David and Pete hadn't had some experience fixing vehicles when we were younger. Of course, the Pathfinder was 20 years old, so it wasn't long before we figured out that it had a dirty fuel filter and as a result wouldn't go uphill. After blowing dirt out of the filter, we could drive another half day or so, until Mark found a new one in the glove box. Mr. Chun had no idea it was there or what it was.

Mr. Chun, obviously a city driver, had this habit of speeding across every creek the "road" crossed, and eventually he shorted out the alternator so the battery wouldn't recharge. Then he had this terrible habit of shifting from 2nd to 3rd when he was going up a steep hill in the mud. Of course, he would stall out every time, and eventually the battery died. He thought it was because the battery was hot, and would take it out and put it in the creek. We had to tow-start his vehicle numerous times - they didn't have jumper cables. Not an easy feat in the mud. So, at David's suggestion, Mark and Pete set the idle speed so high it was hard for Mr. Chun to kill the engine (an unfortunate side affect was that he ran out of gas on the way back to Zadoi). Then Mark sat in front and every time Mr. Chun would try to shift to 3rd, Mark would grab his hand and prevent him from doing it unless it was appropriate. Ironically, they became good friends.

Mark lives in Grand Junction, CO and has a ten year old daughter, Logan, who is a "blood sister" to Pete's ten year old daughter Carmen. That's how they met. Mark has quite a bit of Class IV rowing experience and reads water well, but doesn't have much paddling experience. He picked it up paddling technique quickly, though, and was one of the few who volunteered to be lead boat. He was lead boat the day we encountered our only portage, and thank Buddha he stopped in time. He was also a really upbeat guy, in spite of the fact that he was tallest one of us and had the smallest tent (now property of the Salvation Army).

Steve Van Beek, a kayaker, author and photographer who has lived part time in Bangkok, Thailand for over 20 years and spends the rest of year in San Francisco, had been on two previous expeditions on the Mekong with me. He's planning an expedition from the source to the mouth of the Mekong, a very ambitious goal, and wants to write a book about it.



Blue sheep. Photo by Jamie Ross

Steve brought a video camera along on the expedition, and is producing a documentary film which includes footage of the snow leopard, which the abundant blue sheep. At first, he filmed everything, including all forty times the pickup got stuck and each of the daily yak attacks. He told us he had decided to turn the documentary into a comedy. At the time, it helped us keep our perspective.

Kerry Ross was a valuable addition to the group. The trip was a 30th birthday present from Jamie (Pops), who was teaching him the art of bird watching. Kerry was the most experienced inflatable boater of the group and had lots of Class IV experience. He wanted to be the lead boat most of the time, and everyone, including me, agreed he was the right person, especially after successfully picking the deepest channels over the first twenty five miles of shallow braided stream.



Kerry with monk at Xi Zhi La Wu Monastery. Photo by Jamie Ross.

Kerry was a Buddhasend on the portage. We had to cross 200 yards of river-polished boulders caused by a landslide into the river, where eighty percent of the river flowed under huge limestone boulders. At an elevation of 14,000 feet, it was a major chore to carry fifty pounds across these large obstacles, and he was carrying as much as a yak could carry - twice that much. Then, that night's camp was 150 feet above the river, and he was the only one with enough energy left to go back down to the river and get water for dinner after we'd hauled the kitchen and camp gear up.

Initially, there were three women on the expedition. At the last minute, two canceled for medical reasons, so Stephanie Morrisette, Kerry's "significant other," was the only woman left. She's a botanist, and although most of the plants we saw were unfamiliar species of grasses, she knew the genus or family. She works mostly with men, so handling the seven of us wasn't too difficult - traveling with Kerry was probably the biggest challenge, but she already knew that.

Steph didn't hesitate to do her share of cooking and dishes, and not a bit more than that. Good for her. She taught Mark a new word too, "al dente,"; has something to do with noodles cooked on a stove where you can regulate the temperature and where water boils at 212 F, not 180 F. She was one of the least experienced paddlers, but did really well. She cruised right through the only Class IV rapid we encountered.

David Hettig is a stalwart soul. UPS lost his passport and plane ticket days before the expedition, and we had to leave him in San Francisco to replace them as fast as possible. The rest of us traveled to Xining, spending an extra two days in Beijing being tourists to give him time to catch up. He arrived at 9 pm the night before we left Xining, and had to cope with jet lag at the same time all of us were coping with a major elevation change. David went from sea level to 13,500' in two days. Fortunately, the diuretic we were taking, Diamox, worked wonders and no one got high altitude sickness.

David has been on two previous river expeditions in China with me, has been to Tibet before,

and has Tibetan relatives so he has a strong interest in Tibetan culture. He had traveled to Tiger's Leap Gorge on the Yangtze and a remote monastery in northwest Yunnan in 1998 with Ma Nan, a CAS representative who assisted with our Man Wan Gorge expedition in 1997. She met us in Xining after the expedition and spent two days visiting Tibetan monasteries with him before they separated and David returned to his law practice in Palo Alto, CA. Watch out, UPS.

Twenty years ago, Scott Sanderson, now a transportation computer specialist from New Jersey, spent two months kayaking across northern Canada, carrying a canoe and gear from river to river and running Class IV rapids. His skill stuck with him: in the one Class IV rapid we ran, he was the only one to punch the big hole we were trying to avoid. Scott was a magnet for the Tibetans, always got his tent pegs pounded into the ground first by visiting yak herders. He brought along a backpackers' guitar and tape recorder, and had a knack for getting the Tibetans to sing for him.

At one camp, a couple of young Tibetan men were curious about the boats, so Scott showed them our air pumps, etc. David Hettig had gotten Wan Lin to write a famous Tibetan prayer on his boat, and Scott had gotten Wan Lin to write "air, water and earth" on his. One of the Tibetan men borrowed a marker, and wrote a prayer for Guru Padmasambhava in Tibetan on Pete's boat. Padmasambhava is one of the monks who introduced Buddhism to the Tibetans. Through David Hettig's relatives, Pete found a lama in the Bay Area to translate it: "May the Power of Guru Padmasambhava be merged with my body, speech and mind." We're sure it helped us get down the river safely. Thank you, Scott.



Photo by Jamie Ross

Jamie Ross is a birder. To some folks, that says it all - not just a member of the human race, but a well known subspecies. Cameras with huge lenses ("my Canon is bigger than yours"), high powered binocs, ability to see birds in outer space, etc. He identified 45 species of birds he's never seen before using a bird book written in Chinese. Good boater too, had owned a commercial river touring company that ran rivers in Idaho. Another one of those guys whose optimism was essential to the success of the expedition. He's the one who saw a herd of wild bighorn sheep and announced to all of us "those are Snow Leopard prey, keep your eyes open,"

then an hour later Mark spots one and Jamie says "I don't care if we didn't do a first descent, this makes up for it." And if you call him at home, his recording says "Yes, I'm back from the Tibetan Plateau, and yes, I did see a Snow Leopard!" But don't expect a return call, he's too busy looking at birds. Great group of folks.

The River

ESE had two slalom kayaks and two sixteen foot catarafts with all the gear for a two week expedition stored in a CAS warehouse in Kunming, Yunnan, and couldn't use it. It would have been difficult for the yaks to carry it, at the put-in, the river was too small for heavily loaded rafts, estimated to be 500 cfs or less, and the kayaks couldn't carry enough gear for the eight day expedition. So everyone had to bring their own inflatable kayak. Only Kerry owned one that was suitable.

Allen Wilson, an old Grand Canyon river guide who Pete had worked with in the 70's, had started running inflatable kayak tours on the Chetco River in the Kalmiopsis Wilderness in southern Oregon and recommended SeaHawk Inflatables. They can easily carry 120 lb of gear, are made of polyurethane which is tough but light weight for horse packing, and are relatively inexpensive. So we took a gamble and convinced everyone to buy one. When Jamie received his, he called and chewed Pete out for wasting his money. The boats had lots of cosmetic problems. But they worked just fine, and actually look good from a distance. Kerry even talked a Buddhist monk from the Zhi Xi La Wu Monastery into riding around in an eddy on one, so they've been blessed with hundreds of prayers.

From the Russian and Chinese topo maps and Ma Da's sources in CAS (especially Dr. Zhou), we determined the average gradient over the 100 mile stretch was about fifteen feet per mile, pretty mild. However, at 15,000 feet, we wanted mild. Most of the stretch flowed through open valleys, with a few short canyon stretches. Maximum gradient was about twenty-five feet per mile, between Ga Na Ang Duo and Ga Na Song Duo and in a canyon below Zhi Xi La Wu where we had to portage around a landslide.

The river frequently braided its way through gravel bar riffles and the biggest hassle the first day was picking the right channel. After Ga Na Song Duo the flow increased, and this became a minor problem. By the time we reached the take-out at 13,500 feet, we guessed the flow was over 2,500 cfs. In addition to the Class VI portage, we encountered a few Class III constrictions with three foot waves in the canyons below Ga Na Song Duo and one Class IV rapid resulting from a few huge boulders which had fallen off a steep hillside, making for very difficult scouting.

We called the Class VI rapid "Snow Leopard Falls." We don't know if the Japanese team named it, but for sure we gave it a better name. There was a small channel on the far right, maybe 6 feet wide, that would have been very difficult to get into - the rest of the river flowed under huge boulders from a landslide. It took us three hours to complete the portage, but we were happy to be alive and still exhilarated from seeing a snow leopard just after lunch. We later learned the Japanese had also portaged it.



Photo by Jamie Ross

We were all impressed by the amount of wildlife living in the tundra, especially considering the density of yaks and sheep and the degree of overgrazing. Maybe all that yak dung had some food value. Beside the doll sheep which were prey for the snow leopard, we saw wolves, foxes, wild horses and wild donkeys. There were thousands of picas and dozens of marmots which were prey for hundreds of vultures, eagles and hawks.



Red Fox. Photo by Jamie Ross.

The scenery was spectacular. We spent most of every day wearing shit-eating grins, spacing out on Buddha Nature. Massive cliffs of steel gray limestone projected from rolling hills covered with yellow grass. The Zhi Xi La Wu Monastery was surrounded by these cliffs. It was built near a large spring that is creating a huge multicolored travertine dome. On river trips in the US, we've always tried to put the portapotti where there was a good view. Here, we didn't have a portapotti, and it didn't matter. Everywhere was a good view.



Photo by Jamie Ross

Most of our camps were on grassy bars about 20 feet above river level. They're part of the flood plain, but it's been a long time since a big flood happened. Even the floods of 1998 didn't affect them. One camp was high above the river. We had just finished our portage, it was getting dark, and the first spot was a grunt to get to. Spectacular, though, in spite of the yak dung. Then in the morning a grandfather, son and grandson brought us some yak milk in a silver pitcher, and Steph, Kerry and Jamie had them identify birds and plants. Lots of grass, hawks and vultures up there.

For the most part, the weather was great. We had some rain, hail and snow on the horseback trip to the put-in, but once on the river Buddha smiled on us. Cold nights, but we expected that (most of us, anyway). 70 F in the afternoons, but a passing cloud could drop the temp to 50 F in a minute. We usually didn't begin floating until 11 am, when the frost had melted and the coffee (real stuff) was doing its thing, and we usually stopped around 4-4:30 so we could set up camp and cook dinner before the sun went down and the temp dropped to freezing. So it goes at 15,000', even though we were at the latitude of Los Angeles.

We laid over at the camp just before Zadoi, big sandy beach. The grassy camps had spoiled us - no sand in sleeping bags. This is the only camp where the locals just watched us from the hillside, didn't come into visit. Most of us went for solo hikes that day, exploring some Tibetan winter homes made of sod and mud, with garden walls of dry yak dung fuel.

The Tibetans

In February, 1995, Pete visited a placer gold mining area west of Muli, a small town in the southern part of the province of Sichuan in the mountains north of the Great Bend of

the Yangtze. Much to his surprise, the area was dominated by Tibetans, and Muli is two hundred miles southeast of Tibet. The town had both a Chinese and a Tibetan mayor, who were good drinking buddies (and tried to drink him under the table). When he got home, on an old National Geographic map showing the distribution of ethnolinguistic groups in China he found that the Tibetans occupied the western (mountainous) half of Sichuan and the southern and eastern two thirds of Qinghai in addition to all of Tibet.

In preparation for this expedition, Pete went to the library and checked out every book he could find on the history of Tibet. All but a couple were diatribes against the Chinese for their treatment of Tibetans during their invasion of Tibet in 1950 and subsequent violence during the Cultural Revolution of the late 1960's. From the more neutral histories, he learned that before the Tibetans had begun to practice Buddhism, they had been an aggressive culture and more than once had invaded territory inhabited largely by Han Chinese. The Tibetans tended to settle in the high country, while the Han farmers stayed in the river valleys. The Tibetans would trade yak meat for Chinese vegetables. Muli was a good example of this.

Buddhism was first introduced to Tibet in the 8th century, but its acceptance by the shamanistic nomads who worshipped animals was erratic. Several Buddhist sects developed and vied for control, but it wasn't until the 16th century that the first Dalai Lama was appointed and became their religious leader. Tibetan Buddhism incorporates some of their former religion, Bon, and is the dominant aspect of Tibetan culture - it is not just a religion. The Dalai Lama is also the political leader, which is one reason he is currently in exile.

Buddhism is also the primary means of education. Because of their nomadic nature, sending kids to school is usually not possible. Instead, each family sends their second son to a monastery to become a monk, and pays to support his education there. Periodically, the monks return home and teach family members them to read and write, about Buddhism and about other things they learn about the world. Peissel mentions in his book about his 1994 expedition to the Mekong headwaters area that one young monk, on learning that westerners believed that men evolved from apes, commented that Tibetans must be more highly evolved than westerners because Tibetans have no body hair.

Yak herders have lots of time on their hands, and everywhere we went there were piles of stones with prayers engraved in them. Their brother the monk had come home and taught them how to write the prayers. Some piles were over ten feet high, with thousands of stones. Some of the stones were so big it was hard to imagine two or three yak herders lifting them onto the pile.



Photo by Scott Sanderson.

We had many encounters with Tibetans, almost always positive. They're friendly, curious, resourceful folks. Nearly every time we'd stop for camp, a few yak herders would visit. Within minutes, they'd be helping us do everything, but pounding tent stakes was the biggest service. For some reason, balancing on a horse through pica mine fields and tundra marshes or paddling an inflatable kayak through shallow gravel bar riffles or Class III or IV rapids at 15,000' wasn't as difficult as bending over and pounding stakes. After planting two or three stakes, we'd have to rest and catch our breath.

At first glance, we thought the Tibetan families we visited were dirt poor. They live in tents (yurts) made of yak hair, drink yak milk/butter tea, eat yak yogurt, roast yak and sheep meat and unleavened "tortillas" made from winter wheat and barley dipped in yak butter, and sleep on piles of yak hair blankets on the ground. They burn yak dung for fuel, which results in smoky, stinky yurts that we often had trouble staying in for very long.

However, if they live near a road, they're likely to own a truck, and one yurt we visited about ten miles from Moyun had two battery operated cassette tape decks. Wealth for the Tibetans is their yaks, and we must have seen a million of them. Every family had at least a hundred. They look like long haired black or black and white Texas longhorns, and nearly everywhere we looked we saw black dots on the hillsides. Their milk and butter tastes just like cow milk and butter, and the meat tastes just like beef. In the other areas of China that we've visited, you rarely see cows, and much of the beef we get in many Chinese dishes is really yak meat.

There were so many yaks that in most places the tundra looked overgrazed. We later learned that the Chinese are establishing a national nature preserve in the source area, including our put-in site. They are concerned that overgrazing will cause erosion and reduce dry season flows, just as it has in the intermountain western US. The plan is to relocate all people, yaks and sheep living in a 100 square mile area encompassing the Mekong source (roughly 10 miles by 10 miles), and enforce zero population growth in an area of 10,000 square miles. They'll monitor the health of the tundra over the entire Mekong, Yellow and Yangtze headwaters area (over

100,000 square miles), and expand the zero growth requirement if necessary.

There are four million Tibetans living in Tibet, Qinghai and Sichuan. In the Mekong Headwaters area, we were in the province of Qinghai, not in the Tibetan Autonomous Region, but you really couldn't tell the difference. The Tibetans living near Muli in Sichuan herded yaks and sheep, carved prayer stones, lived in yak hair yurts and hung prayer flags everywhere, just like those in Qinghai and from what David and Steve told me, just like those in Tibet.

Over the past few hundred years, the Chinese have slowly taken political control over nearly all of the land occupied by Tibetans. Long before 1949, when Mao Zedung' communist party took control, they had incorporated the northern part of historic Tibet (Amdo) into the province of Qinghai and the eastern part (Kham) into Sichuan. In 1950, the communist party began to implement major changes, including banishing all religions, including both Chinese and Tibetan Buddhism. Communism demands that you worship the state, which meant Mao. Even today you can buy little red books of Mao's teachings, kind of like buying a miniature Bible for true believers in Chinese Communism.

Because Buddhism is an integral part of Tibetan culture, it was impossible to banish it by decree. In 1950, the Chinese army invaded the Tibetan Plateau and over the next twenty years destroyed 90% of the monasteries. The Kunbum Monastery near Xining, which we visited after the expedition, once upon a time housed several thousand monks. Now it has several hundred. The Sakya Ya monastery overlooking Yushu has been partially rebuilt, but the monks left the ruins of several buildings as a monument to the devastation. Only remote monasteries like Zhi Xi La Wu that we visited while floating the Mekong Headwaters were spared, and even it has only a few monks.

Times are changing, though. With the fall of Soviet communism and the acceptance of capitalism in China over the past decade or so, the governments of Qinghai, Sichuan and Tibet are rebuilding monasteries and encouraging tourism. The 14th Dalai Lama is still in exile in India, and occasionally Chinese police will imprison "rebellious" Tibetan monks in Lhasa, but a reconciliation of sorts is clearly underway.

It's not likely that China will allow Tibet to secede, but it is allowing more autonomy and it's under a lot of pressure to allow the Dalai Lama to return. For decades, Tibetans were forbidden to own pictures of the Dalai Lama, but we saw them in the monasteries and many people we met asked us if we had pictures they could buy.

Pete's a geologist and tends to put things into a long term perspective. Along the river we saw limestones deposited on the sea floor that were estimated to be 300 million years old. The Tibetan Plateau probably reached its current elevation about eight million years ago. It was probably first settled by humans over two thousand years ago. The past forty years of oppression of Tibetan Buddhism by the Chinese is not a long time compared to the centuries of conflict between the two cultures.

It's important to keep pressure on the Chinese to allow the Dalai Lama to return, but Americans live in a glass house and shouldn't throw stones at the Chinese, engraved with prayers or not. In the past two hundred years our government basically destroyed the culture of native Americans who migrated from China at the end of the last ice age, only 10,000 years ago. We personally

didn't do this, of course. And it was the Chinese government, not the Chinese people, which attempted to destroy the Tibetan culture. The Chinese people shouldn't be blamed for actions of a government that has taken their own religion from them. It was evident that even government employees like Ma Da and Ma Nan are very curious about Buddhism and want live in peace with the Tibetans.

The Tibetans struck me as resourceful and patient. Unlike most native American cultures, theirs will survive.