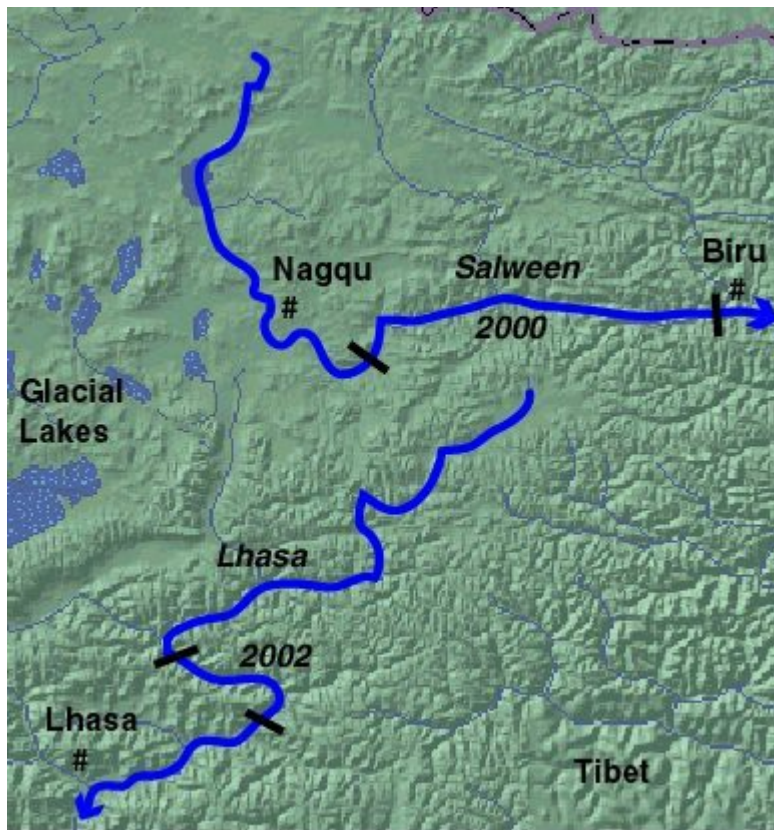


First Descent of the Salween Headwaters in Tibet

August, 2000

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All photos by Phil Kantor



The Salween is called the Nu by the Chinese and the Nag, or Black River, by the Tibetans. At its headwaters, it drains a large area of red shales and siltstones south, west and northwest of the town Nagqu on the Tibetan Plateau. As it passes into the transition zone on the southwest edge of the Plateau, it cuts through the red sediments into underlying black metamorphic rocks, probably the reason for its name.

Summary

Dates: August 9 to August 19, 2000 (10 full river days)

Nearest major airport: Lhasa, Tibet

Round trip driving time: 4 easy days

Put-in: Dagrang, near Nagqu, elevation 14,600', flow about 3,000 cfs

Take-out: Biru, elevation 13,100', flow about 15,000 cfs

Total distance: 154 miles (15 miles per day)

Average gradient: 10 feet/mile

Participants: 10 total using two 16' catarafts, five hardshell kayaks and one inflatable kayak
Grade: Class III

Why the Salween?

In 1999, we ran the headwaters of the Mekong River on the Tibetan Plateau in Tibet. It took us five days of driving and four days on horseback to reach the put-in. After reaching the take-out, we still had a three day drive back to the airport in Xining. A total of two days of Class V road plus six of Class III-IV road for an eight day river trip was not something I wanted to repeat, in spite of having a really positive experience. In 2000, I had hoped to run the next section of the Mekong, Zadoi to Qamdo - only six days round trip on Class III-IV roads, but a Japanese team had run this section in 1999. For the 2000 expedition, I considered putting in at Qamdo and running down to the Yunnan border, but had heard the Japanese also had plans to do this and didn't want to race them - I'd already lost in 1999. I found out later they didn't make the run, but planned to in 2001.

I canvassed the folks on the 1999 expedition, and it was unanimous: find an unrun river in Tibet. We had really enjoyed the Tibetan people, the river and the scenery in Qinghai. Tibet should be just as interesting if not more so. Out with the maps, get on the phone - who had run what where. Earth River had just run the Parlung Tsangpo, the southeast tributary to the Po Tsangpo, which is in southeastern Tibet, and it was such a good trip they were going back in 2000. The Yarlong Tsangpo above the Great Bend and the Yangtze had already been run, and the Tsangpo Great Bend is a suicide run.

That left the Salween or a some tributaries to it or the other major rivers in Tibet. I knew Steve Curry had tried to run the headwaters section of the Salween in September, 1995 but had to cancel at the last minute because a new dam had closed its gates, drying up the river. I figured by now the reservoir was full and there should be water, especially in August. Hopefully we could put-in below the dam. Plus, the put-in was only a one day drive from Lhasa and two days return from the take-out, piece of cake compared to the Mekong headwaters expedition.

In late 1999, I emailed Ma Da, my associate at the Center for International Scientific Exchange (CISE) of the Chinese Academy of Sciences in Beijing, and asked him to tell me where the dam was, how much water it released in August, if we could put-in below it, and to confirm that there was no road along the river from the dam to the next town with road access, Biru. Ma Da responded that he hoped to attend CCNY in for 2000 academic year and recommended I contact another CISE representative, Fan Ting from their Chengdu branch, who had experience taking foreign scientists on expeditions in Tibet. However, this would be his first river expedition.

Han Chunyu had organized the logistics in China of our expeditions in 1994-1996, and Ma Da had organized the 1997 and 1999 expedition logistics. They had both done a great job and I had a lot of respect for them. It was irritating to have to start over with another representative, but Ma Da assured me he would help Fan Ting move the equipment to Tibet and that Fan Ting had the necessary experience for organizing logistics in Tibet for the Salween expedition.

I contacted Fan Ting via email and he responded promptly: The dam was on a major tributary, not the main stream. I'd heard rumors that Curry had just had some bad luck with low water and the dam was only part of his problem, so I believed Fan Ting. More on this later. Ma Da

provided average water flow and precipitation information for August, and confirmed an average gradient of about 10 feet per mile with no road along the river except near the put-in and near Biru. So I arranged for Ma Da and Fan Ting to ship the rafting equipment to Lhasa, the capital of Tibet, and began planning a first descent of the Salween Headwaters.

The Salween, the Tibetans and the Chinese

A river expedition in China is not just a river expedition - even if it's a first descent. The main attraction is the cultural encounter, and the complicated history of Tibetan-Chinese interaction makes travel to Tibet even more attractive. One of my motives for running river expeditions in China is a strong belief that positive interactions between foreigners and the citizens of China, including Tibetans, will ultimately improve relationships between China and other countries.

There are only two English language books on the exploration of the Salween River, both written by participants in the same expedition in the 1930's. The best is the *Black River of Tibet* by John Hanbury-Tracy (1940), which describes their travel on foot and horseback from Burma to Biru (our take-out). They were seeking to reach the source northwest of Nagqu (near our put-in), but they never made it past Biru due to a war between two monasteries upstream.

Almost all Tibetans are Buddhists, who don't believe in killing, so it seems odd that they would engage in battle - especially among themselves. Buddhism was first introduced to southeastern Tibet in about 800 years ago, but it took centuries for it to take hold throughout the large area occupied by Tibetans (about the size of Alaska). There are a few Tibetan sects who maintained a warrior heritage in spite of Buddhism, however, and one of them is the Khampas. For the most part, the Khampas occupy Kham, the eastern portion of the historic Tibetan kingdom, and their warrior heritage is undoubtably related to their proximity to China and to a lesser extent Mongolia.

For centuries prior to the introduction of Buddhism and for several centuries subsequent, Tibetans, Mongolians and Chinese occupied much of each others' territory, sometimes peacefully and sometimes through battle. The Tibetans living in eastern Tibet were often the cause or the subject of these changes in political control, and as a result became the first line of offense or defense for the Tibetan Kingdom as it evolved. One of the best books on this subject is *"Among Warriors"* by Pamela Logan (1996).

Although we had encountered Khampas occasionally on our Mekong Headwaters expedition in 1999, they were a minority. This area was in Amdo, the northern portion of the historic Tibetan kingdom. Khampa men wear red or black wool bands woven into their straight, shiny black hair and carry large sheaved and beautifully decorated knives. They're tall and much more aggressive than their Lhasa brethren, who live in the southern part of the historic Tibetan kingdom. Khampas can be intimidating - a group of them more or less drove us out of one of our last campsites on the Mekong Headwaters expedition by trying to buy everything in sight and helping us pack up before the frost had melted from the boats.

Another excellent reference regarding the Tibetan-Chinese relationship is *"The Snow Lion and the Dragon"* by Melvin Goldstein (1997). Most books on Tibet are extremely biased against the Chinese, largely because of the Chinese government's invasion subsequent to the Communist takeover in 1949. Goldstein, however, puts this period of history in perspective: even today, the

Chinese are afraid of Khampas. The Khampas at one time or another invaded much of what is now western Sichuan and northwestern Yunnan. The Han Chinese live the lower valleys of these areas while Khampas live the high plateaus, high valleys and mountains. The Chinese name for Khampa means "bandit."

The borders of the Chinese and Tibetan kingdoms shifted over the centuries subsequent to the introduction of Buddhism into Tibet. In general they respected each others' religious beliefs because a large number of Chinese also practiced Buddhism. It wasn't until the Communist Revolution ended in 1949 that Mao Tse Tung invaded Tibet and began a systematic destruction of all religious heritage. This wasn't limited to Tibet - it occurred throughout China. In 1959, the people of Tibet, in particular the Khampas, revolted against this destruction, resulting in a Chinese government backlash that caused the Dalai Lama, the leader of the largest Tibetan Buddhist Sect, to seek exile in India.

Goldstein summarizes the chances for the return of the Dalai Lama to Tibet better than anyone I've read so far. The Dalai Lama insists on returning as both the political and religious leader of Tibet. The Chinese will only allow him to return as the religious leader, so he remains in exile, seeking support from sympathetic organizations in the US and Europe. No compromise, no return.

During the period from 1950 to sometime in the 1960's, the Khampas were the primary Tibetan Army. At first, they fought the Chinese army using guerrilla tactics as it progressed westward across the Yangtze, Mekong and Salween rivers. As the much better armed Chinese pushed past them, they retreated into the remote valleys of the river canyons. Eventually a few moved to northeastern Nepal (the Mustang area) and harassed the Chinese army for a few years after they had occupied Lhasa.

The Cultural Revolution began in the mid 1960's, when young people were encouraged to join the Red Guards and destroy anything "old" - so a "new culture" could be established. They renewed their destruction of religious structures throughout China, including Tibet. By the time the Cultural Revolution ended in the early 1970's, nearly 90% of Tibet's monasteries were destroyed. This stage of Tibetan-Chinese relations was among the worst in history because the monasteries were the basis of the Tibetan education system in addition to being the center of their religion and political system. Every family would send its second oldest son to a monastery, where he would learn to read and write. Periodically, he would return home to teach his family. With the destruction of the monasteries, the education system collapsed.

Over the past 20 years, the Chinese have made major strides toward rebuilding their religious heritage, including financing the reconstruction of a great many monasteries in Tibet, primarily as tourist attractions. However, the rehabilitation of the educational system will take another generation or two, and it probably won't be based on the monasteries.

The Expedition Participants

There were ten of us, most of whom had been on previous expeditions in China. Fan Ting's mother was seriously ill, so he decided to return to Chengdu while we were on the river, and sent Liu Li along as our English interpreter. Neither Liu Li nor Fan Ting spoke Tibetan, so Fan Ting sent Da Wa as a Tibetan-Mandarin interpreter. Liu Li and Da Wa rode on the catarafts,

rowed by Mike Connelly and David Hettig. I paddled an inflatable kayak carrying personal gear for my son Travis and I. Travis paddled a hard shell kayak along with Gordon Bare, Phil Smith, Phil Kantor, and Lisa Nelowet. Gordon used a kayak provided by ESE, the others brought their own. Phil S., Phil K. and Lisa donated their kayaks to ESE at the end of the expedition. Thanks, folks!

David Hettig had been on our 1995, 1997 and 1999 expeditions; Mike had been on our 1994 and 1996 expeditions; Phil S. and Gordon had been on our 1996 expedition. In 1966 Phil K. had run a first descent of the Salween in Yunnan with another group from the US. It was the first trip in China for Travis and Lisa, the first raft trip for Da Wa and the second one for Liu Li, who had run the upper Yangtze with a group of Chinese students a few years ago. All in all an experienced, compatible group.

The primary reason we ran the trip in August was to make sure we had enough water, since once of the reasons Steve Curry gave for canceling his trip was lack of water in late Sept. This made it possible to include Travis, who is a high school junior taking such a heavy course load (trig, physics, AP chemistry, etc.) that he couldn't take the time out of school. He's a competitive rodeo kayaker, brought his Wavesport XXX, and was a big hit on the river with his pirouettes and cartwheels. He's been around my adult (?) boating friends his entire life, so had no problem relating to them. He made friends with Liu Li before we left Lhasa, and other than problems with aggressive Khampa teenagers in one camp, seemed to get along with the Tibetans just fine. Although Cindy - my wife and Travis' mother - was nervous about his joining us, she was supportive.

Liu Li rode on Mike Connelly's boat. Mike and Li became good friends, and Mike spent a lot of time teaching Li to row. Li didn't know he was going for sure until we reached the put-in and didn't know what gear to bring so he brought too much. I'd brought sleeping bags, pads, tents, dry suits, rain gear and helmets for he and Da Wa, plus they brought their own huge foam pad - took up an entire large river bag. Not heavy, but bulky. Li's a good old boy, just took everything in stride. Near the end of the trip, Mike asked Li if he would prefer to be somewhere else and Li said he was perfectly happy to be on the river with us, wanted to return next year. He got an applause for that answer.

Mike's my partner and a hydrologist in Pasco, WA, an easy going, competent oarsman whose only complaint was the wind that blew us into shore when we first encountered the reservoir behind the Chalong Dam. Well, he also complained about a couple of river bags owned by kayakers that were unusually heavy. Of course, he could get away with this because he's also a kayaker.

Da Wa, a Lhasa Tibetan and botanist, rode on David Hettig's cataraft. They had trouble communicating because neither spoke the other's language, and Da Wa is very quiet. When aggressive Khampa teens would come into camp, he was intimidated. However, he would often spend hours talking with their parents. Next year, if we float another river in Khampa territory, I hope to get a Khampa who speaks English to ride on David's boat. That way we can avoid dealing with two translators, and maybe the Khampa will be able to handle aggressive visitors.

David's an estate attorney in Palo Alto, CA, and is an experienced China traveler with a strong interest in Tibet. One of his cousins married a Tibetan woman living in exile in India. They had

been to Lhasa several times visiting relatives and gave him a lot of good advice. For example, when we arrived in Lhasa, Fan Ting put us up in a noisy hotel with no hot water located in the Chinese side of town. After a couple of sleepless nights, David went in search of a better hotel in the Tibetan quarter where most of the foreigners stay. Most hotels were full, but he found one that was just opening and had room for all us, then took Fan Tang there and convinced him to let us move.

Gordon Bare is an old time boater from Washington DC and a former junior national kayak team coach who seemed to know everyone in kayaking circles. He works for the US State Department and knows a lot about politics, history and US foreign policy. He was the only one of the kayakers with a "long boat" - his Dancer was eleven feet, the other boats were eight to nine feet. The younger boaters were really impressed with his ability to surf.

Phil Smith is one of those guys who always looks fit. He was once one of the top slalom kayakers in Britain and it shows in his boating technique. He taught Travis some better paddling techniques and in return Travis traded boats with him and taught him some rodeo moves. On one of our layover days, they spent a good part of the day playing in a couple of holes near camp. Phil is a British citizen who has been living in Germany and France for quite a few years, doing computer programming for airline communications. He currently lives in Paris.

I'd met Phil Kantor, a professional photographer, while putting together a web site on first descents in China. He'd been on the first descent of the Salween in northwest Yunnan and had published some photos in Paddler Magazine (July/August 1998, Face-to-Face with a Leaping Tiger, pp. 54-57). I wanted to use one of his photos on the web site and tracked him down in Boulder, CO. He met his wife, Yu Juanjuan, on the Salween trip. She had completed an incredible loop around China, including Tibet, on a bicycle - took two years! She came to Lhasa with us, then while Phil was on the river, she returned to Beijing to visit her mother.

Juanjuan has the traditional Chinese opinion of Tibetans: prior to the Chinese occupation, it was a feudal society in which the poor herdsmen supported the rich upper class and the unproductive monks. This is true, but those monks are the sons of the poor herdsmen, and none of them are happy with destruction of their monasteries. On the other hand, in the cities and towns the Chinese have built hospitals and brought electricity and running water to homes and businesses and have established an educational system more suited to adjusting to the modern world. Of course, most Tibetans don't live in cities and haven't benefited from Chinese investment in Tibet. Not yet, says Juanjuan, but they will eventually. Be patient.

When Mike and I first began negotiations to run a river in China, the advice was three fold: Be Patient, Be Patient, Be Patient. The Chinese society is ten times older than ours, with relative differences in time perspective. We'd already learned that when it took nine years to get our first permit. It was fun to listen to Phil and Juanjuan argue from their different perspectives.



22,000' mountain on the drive to the putin.

Lisa and Phil K. have been boating partners for several years, and she joined the expedition on Phil's recommendation. She works for a major consulting firm in Golden, CO on greenhouse gas emission reduction projects. She's is an experienced world traveler, mountain climber and boater, and was a great addition to the group. Before the expedition, in spite of her high altitude experience, I urged her to take Diamox to minimize the risk of high altitude sickness. She reluctantly agreed (though I'm not sure she ever took it). At the put-in, about 14,600', we discovered the electric blower we used to blow up the boats was missing, and we had to pump the boats up by hand. Lisa easily did more than her share. On one of our layover days, she took both Phils on a hike from camp at 13,800' to a nearby peak measuring 16,300' - higher than any of us had been so far on the expedition. Then, after we returned to Lhasa, she managed to get a permit to go on a four day trek over a 17,000' pass to visit a remote monastery. As she put it, she hits her stride above 12,000'.

Logistics

Planning a first descent is a complicated process and requires a high degree of trust among the Chinese, ESE and the participants. Since Ma Da had decided to spend the 2000-2001 academic year in the US, I had to begin working with a new CAS/CISE representative, trusting Ma Da to recommend someone who could get the equipment from Yunnan to Tibet, get permits to access a closed area by river, and make hotel, meal and transportation arrangements for eight foreigners and their gear. The participants had to trust that ESE, with the assistance of the new representative, could complete these arrangements and plan the proper number of travel and river days such that they could get to the river, down it and back safely and in the planned time frame.

We had one major concern regarding the equipment. It had been stored in Kunming, Yunnan (south central China) since May, 1997 in a warehouse that was only inspected once or twice a year. In 1995, there had been minor damage to a tarp by rats, so the Chinese applied rat poison periodically. In May, Ma Da and the new CAS/CISE representative, Fan Ting, disassembled the raft frames and packed everything in 70 lb packages for air shipment to Lhasa - 19 packages total. Fortunately, everything arrived safely and on time. The cost seemed high, but was

significantly less than transportation by road.

When we opened up the packages from Kunming, we found the only rat damage was to two life jackets which were ill fitting extras anyway. The cataraft tubes had been stored in sealed food boxes and were in good shape, and after some head scratching we managed to reassemble the raft frames. What a relief!

Given the high elevation of Lhasa (over 12,000'), I assumed it would be difficult to buy fresh vegetables, eggs, etc. for the expedition, so Travis and I bought dry and canned food in the US for the expedition and shipped it as personal baggage, along with his kayak. Phil K, Lisa and Phil S. also brought their kayaks as personal baggage. Fortunately, everything arrived in Lhasa safely, on time and at a reasonable cost.

We bought some fresh vegies in Chengdu on our way to Lhasa and carried them as personal baggage. When we arrived in Lhasa, much to our surprise we found huge markets carrying almost everything you could get in any city in China. So we spent an afternoon buying fresh vegies, fruit and eggs, not realizing the main road from Lhasa to Nagqu, near our put-in, was closed due to construction and the alternate route would turn our new purchases to mush.



Lhasa is the capital of Tibet and the site of the Potala, formerly the headquarters of the Dalai Lama, the primary leader of Tibetan Buddhists. The 14th Dalai Lama now lives in exile in India, and the Potala is a museum crammed with tourists. When Travis and I visited, it was so crowded, mostly with Chinese tourists, that it was oppressive - almost hard to breathe, and not because of the elevation. The Potala is a very imposing building - 13 stories high, perched on a steep 500' high hill overlooking the town. However, the Chinese have built an amusement park with a ferris wheel behind it. I'm sure the previous Dalai Lamas, many of whom are interred in

the Potala, are rolling over in their crypts.

Lhasa's population is about 100,000, more than half Chinese. The Tibetan quarter is also a tourist trap. This is where one of the most sacred monasteries in Tibet, the Jokhang, is located. The famous circumambulation path around the Barkhor, the business district which surrounds the Jokhang, is a congested ring of stalls selling everything from tourist items to hard ware to food stuffs. Fun to browse, but seems out of place - no sense of religious peace and quiet here. We finally found some on the roof of the Jokhang - probably because we had to pay extra to go up. The Barkhor is full of aggressive beggars, many of whom were monks. There were times when I really wished I'd brought some monopoly money.

The big surprise on arrival in Lhasa was the sheer number of tourists - nearly a thousand a day arrive in the summer, 90% of whom are Chinese. Of the "big noses" or "round eyes," 80% were Dutch! Apparently the number of tourists drops to near zero in the winter. This would actually be a good time to visit, because the Tibetans come in from the high valleys for religious celebrations, to party and to trade yak and sheep products for hard goods.

We left for the river after three nights acclimatizing to the 12,000 elevation of Lhasa and relieved to get out of the noise and congestion. Knowing how bad roads in China can be, we carefully loaded the food boxes and securely tied all of the gear into the truck for the one day drive to Nagqu. As we left Lhasa, we turned east, up the Lhasa River, rather than west, where the map showed the main road went. Eventually I confronted Fan Ting, thinking we had a major misunderstanding as to which river we were going to run. Fan Ting explained that the main road was closed and we had to make a detour. Turned out to be a 100 mile detour over an incredibly bad washboard road. Within the first few hours one of the Toyota Land Cruisers had broken both rear shock mounts, and later in the day a front wheel bearing on the truck burned out. Somehow, though, we made it over a couple of 15,000'+ passes to Nagqu for a late dinner, and the truck arrived at 6 am the next morning (with exhausted drivers).

After badgering Fan Ting for a hot shower, we stayed in the best hotel in Nagqu, which proudly announced it was a one star hotel. We had to wait about ten minutes for the hot water to reach the room and some of the taller guys had to tape the shower head to the ceiling to use it (another use for duct tape), but we slept well. Amazingly, the hotel had a phone that we used to call home in the US, and even more amazing was that Phil Smith could use his cell phone to call Paris!

The River



By 10 am we were on our way to the put-in, about 30 miles downstream from the first bridge. After some confusion about which road to take because they had moved the road since the map was printed, we reached the put-in about noon, just in time for lunch in a rain storm. The Salween headwaters is a series of shallow lakes and marshes to the southwest, west and northwest of Nagqu, at an elevation of about 16,000' . Although we had seen 23,000' peaks with glaciers, water from the icy creeks warmed up in the lakes before consolidating into the main branch, so the river water was about 60 F, not bad for a put-in at 14,600'! On the 1999 Mekong headwaters expedition, the water was about 50 F at the put-in.

We knew from Russian 1:200,000 and Chinese 1:100,000 scale maps that for fifty to sixty miles the river braided through shallow valleys typical of the headwaters of many streams on the Tibetan Plateau. During the last ice age, the region had been glaciated, leaving rounded hills and broad valleys choked with gravel that the rivers were still trying to carry away. Further downstream, the river enters a series of canyons and the gradient increases. We were putting in at the end of the uppermost road along the river, and thought we had no choice but to float the flat valley stretch above the canyon section.

From the Russian maps, the average gradient was less than 10' per mile in the valley section and about 12' per mile in the canyon section, ending about 15' per mile. The Chinese maps indicated about the same average gradient - overall average about 10' per mile, slightly higher than the Colorado in the Grand Canyon. We'd brought along a GPS and Lisa had an altimeter, so we had a way to check the accuracy of the maps. They all matched pretty well.

Ma Da had sent me info on the average August flow based on the only gauge he could find, about 350 miles downstream from Nagqu, near Bangda. Using this flow and a ratio of drainage area above the put-in to drainage area above the gauge, I figured our put-in flow should be 2,500 to 5,000 cfs in August. When we arrived, it looked like it was in the lower part of this range. Using this same process, I figured the take-out flow to be 10,000 to 15,000 cfs - a dramatic increase, with the potential for Main Salmon to Grand Canyon scale rapids towards

the end of the canyon section. Some big tributaries join the river in the canyon section. We estimated the flow peaked about 20,000 cfs two days before we reached the take-out due to a passing storm, then dropped back to about 15,000 cfs at the take-out, maybe a little higher.

Ma Da had also sent me info on the average August air temp and precipitation. From this it appeared we should expect afternoon thundershowers about three to four times per week, with night time temps above freezing and day time temps from 60-70 F. The rainy season peaks in July and both rain and river flows drop by fifty percent in August. This year was not an average year, however - are there every any? It rained lightly nearly every night - only two nights were perfectly clear, one with the full moon so bright it was hard to sleep, the other with stars so close you wanted to reach out and touch them. We had a few scattered showers in the afternoon, and only one day time storm with lots of wind (of course, this had to happen on the Chalong Reservoir).

Based on the geology, flow and gradient, I expected the valley section to be fast Class II braided stream riffles, increasing to Class III in the canyon section, with the possibility of a portage in a short granite canyon in the canyon section. It's usually possible to float an average of 15 miles per day on most Class II-III rivers. The shortest distance we could float was about 130 to 140 miles, so I figured nine river days plus a put-in day and a day for portaging, or if there was no need to portage, we'd have a layover day near the end of the canyon section.

I mentioned earlier that Steve Currey had canceled a first descent on the Salween Headwaters in 1995 because a dam had closed its gates and there wasn't enough water. I'd also heard from Fan Ting that this dam was on a major side stream, so Steve had just had bad luck with low water in late September. This was one of the reasons for planning an August trip, when the water should be twice as high. Well, we only had one portage: the 100' high Chalong Dam, on our third day, just as we entered the first canyon stretch.

Fortunately, the reservoir behind the dam was only eight miles long. It was much longer in the wind, however - it took us three hours to go the first three miles to the first camp we could find. Some locals told us it was only eight kilometers (five miles) to the dam from camp, so we got going early the next morning to avoid the wind, reached the dam by noon and had lunch while Liu Li went to find the chief engineer to ask for help with the portage. Needless to say, by now Fan Ting was at the top of our shit list. We checked the spillway to see if it could be run (no) and to make sure we had enough water to float below the dam (yes), and Travis did flatwater cartwheels to entertain the workers who came to watch us eat lunch.

Liu Li returned with a jeep to carry bags and coolers, so it went fast. We were even able to leave the boats rigged with their frames and slide them and the kayaks down the back side of the dam to a waiting truck, which hauled them to an eddy a half mile downstream. We only had one moment of panic, when Trav, who was sliding down the back side of the dam with Gordon's kayak, almost went for a bone breaking cartwheel because Gordon's boat was surprisingly heavier than his.

The chief engineer had designed and built the dam, which was completed in summer of 1995 and closed its gates just before Steve Curry got there that September. We reloaded the boats and gave the chief engineer and some of his employees Polaroids of themselves sitting on the boats as a thank you. In the wind the previous afternoon, we had been cursing Fan Ting, but in

retrospect the reservoir and portage were fairly painless and eventually became just another part of the adventure.

I thought the dam had cost us a day, and tried to push the group to make up the time in case we had to portage in the granite canyon. It wasn't easy - we really couldn't get going until 10:30 to 11 am because it didn't stop raining until 8 am and everything was wet. Then for the next two days, we encountered cultural sites we really couldn't pass up - they were one of main reasons we were running a river in Tibet. In spite of these stops, after the dam we floated 46 miles in two days. The flow and gradient were increasing, and although the rapids were still easy, there were lots of places for the kayakers to play. Plus, I later determined that we had averaged 15 miles per day on the two days we spent dealing with the reservoir and dam, just what we should have. So when we reached the granite gorge, we were a day ahead of schedule. Well, the fabled granite gorge was a whitewater disappointment, but the geology and scenery were spectacular. Lack of a need to portage also gave us the opportunity for two layover days.

Part of the deal ESE had with CAS/CISE was to field check Chinese geologic maps in roadless and trailless areas of the river canyons we floated. The Salween Headwaters drain a region underlain by red sandstone and siltstone which are expressed topographically as rolling hills in broad valleys. As the canyon deepens, black metamorphic rocks (schist and phyllite) are exposed along the banks - probably giving the river its name, the Black River. The Chinese geological maps indicated the red sedimentary rocks were older than the black metamorphic rocks. This is only possible if the rocks are in fault contact because the older red sedimentary rocks should also be black metamorphic rocks if they were originally deposited below (ie older than) the black metamorphic rocks. The metamorphic rocks were originally iron bearing sediments which had been deeply buried and heated, causing new minerals to form.

As we floated deeper into the canyons, it was apparent that the red sediments were not in fault contact with the black metamorphic rocks - they had been deposited above them, and thus had to be younger. When we reached the granite gorge, it was also evident the granite had intruded the black metamorphic rocks but the red rocks were not intruded by the granite and thus must also be younger than the granite. The Chinese need to recheck the age of the red rocks. Just below the gorge, the red rocks were faulted down along the yellow granite, making for a beautiful contrast to the black rock canyon before the granite gorge.

As we progressed down river, we passed through stretches of surprisingly high population density. In these areas, yak and sheep dotted the grassy hillsides and it was apparent that the Tibetans needed some education about overgrazing. We saw numerous small landslides, and a few areas where huge sheets of over grazed tundra were sliding down the hills. In relatively unpopulated canyons, yak and sheep were not common, grasses were deep, and we saw numerous eagles hunting abundant picas. Just before the expedition, David had sent me a news article about the formation of a nature preserve near the headwaters of the Mekong and Yangtze, just north of the Salween headwaters. They were going to move out all yaks and sheep from 100 square miles, maintain zero population growth in 10,000 square miles and monitor the health of the tundra over 100,000 square miles to see if they should expand the restricted areas in the future. Hard on the Tibetans who lived there, but perhaps necessary if they're going to avoid large scale desertification like we have in the western US.

Large vultures were also common, usually soaring in groups high along the ridge tops much

like they do in the western US. Just below the granite gorge we saw a dozen or more resting on a grassy bank above the river, not far from a village. Maybe they had just eaten and were too full to fly. Many Tibetans practice sky funerals in which the deceased are cut up and laid out for the vultures to eat. I'm not sure, but I think we're fortunate we weren't invited to one of these.

The Khampas

We quickly learned not to camp near highly populated areas, and once we even stopped on an island for lunch to avoid being overwhelmed by curious Tibetans. Most Tibetans are polite, even shy, but Khampas are quite assertive and have a much different sense of personal space than we are accustomed to. They frequently crowded around our boats, tents and tables, and the lack of personal space was difficult to adjust to. However, with few exceptions, we enjoyed our interactions with them.

The main exception was teenage Khampa boys. As we floated by groups of boys in a couple of spots, they threw rocks at us, hitting Lisa once - fortunately she wasn't injured. They made inappropriate sexual gestures around her a few times, and in one camp harassed our "big nose" teenage boy, Travis. He had set up his tent on some sand near the river, and a group of three boys who had been throwing rocks at Liu Li's tent earlier wouldn't leave Travis or his tent alone. We finally got Da Wa to convince the boy's father to send them away from camp. The father told Da Wa they thought Travis was trying to take something out of the river (but not fish), or maybe to put something into the river (but not rocks) - something spiritual, and the Khampa boys wanted him to move his tent away from the river. We never did get a straight story, but it is clear that they had a serious respect for the river and were possessive of it. Of course, teenage boys in any culture might cause problems (how about ours?).

We had a problem with our permit in our camp above the granite gorge. There was a small monastery with chortans on a low bluff looking across the river, making for a spectacular skyline. After eating a late lunch and setting up camp, most of the group hiked down the river to scout the granite gorge. As they were leaving, a group of Khampas walked into camp and another, much larger group assembled on the far shore. The two groups began yelling back and forth across the river, which at this point was 200 feet wide and running a fast 10,000 cfs. The leader of the group in our camp insisted on seeing our permit, which Liu Li provided but wouldn't give him. The permit was in Chinese, and the Khampas couldn't read it.

After much yelling back and forth across the river, the leader of the group in our camp insisted we take the permit to the other side. We explained that we planned to stop there in the morning before entering the gorge, and would show them the permit then. Again more yelling, then threats. Li finally asked me to take Da Wa across the river with the permit. There was no way to row across the river and back without having a cataraft end up a half mile downstream, so I carried my empty inflatable kayak a quarter mile upstream and took Da Wa across with the permit. Once on shore, we were completely surrounded by two dozen Khampas and a few monks. When Da Wa showed them the permit, they promptly grabbed it and wouldn't give it back. Da Wa was clearly intimidated by these guys who carried foot long knives and were a foot taller than he was. I quickly decided to go back across the river and get Li, thinking he could resolve the situation.

Eventually we learned that we had camped on a county line and after an argument about

jurisdiction the guys across the river had prevailed. We also found out that none of them could read Chinese (so much for the new education system) and couldn't tell if we really had a permit or were just faking it. Apparently, they sent a messenger to find the governor of Datung County (where we were camped). He supposedly could read Chinese, but wouldn't arrive until the next morning. So, they decided to keep our only copy of the permit overnight. I took Li and Da Wa back to our camp just before dark, only to find teenage Khampa boys closely examining our bow lines. After getting the boys out of camp, I decided to sleep in my inflatable kayak on top of the ropes. The only intruder was the full moon, which kept me awake most of the night.

The next morning, the governor of the Caqu county (downstream from our camp) visited and told us to check in at his headquarters about six miles downstream, below the granite gorge. Da Wa had told him our permit said we could float from Nagqu to Biru counties but didn't mention his county specifically. We were supposed to call Lhasa on a radio phone to resolve this problem. We crossed the river, intending to visit the monastery and get our permit, only to find that the Datung governor who could read Chinese hadn't shown up, so they couldn't give us permission to visit. They gave us our permit and told us we had to leave. Go figure. We later decided that if we had stopped to visit the monastery before crossing the river to camp, they would have welcomed us with open arms, showed us around and given us yak butter tea. Plus, we should have brought along several copies of the permit in Tibetan, so we could give them a copy (as a souvenir?). Live and learn.

Enough of the problems. We had a lot of really good encounters with the Khampas. Most are herdsmen and haven't been warriors for decades. For instance, when we stopped at the Caqu County headquarters, they couldn't care less if we called Lhasa. A dozen or more jumped on the boats, nearly sinking them. David and Mike couldn't do anything but sit there and grin. We camped across from a village one night, and Phil K. and Lisa paddled over to visit the folks sitting on the bank waving to us. Before long kids were screaming with delight while Lisa and Phil towed them around in their kayaks in shallow water. It was a relief when they returned - we got some peace and quiet. In another camp, a Khampa horseman let Lisa, Travis and Li ride around on his horse. We took pictures of him and his wife and kids, only to find out the next morning when he showed up with two other women that it wasn't his wife and kids. Either that or he had three wives, though polyandry is more common.



On one layover day we camped near a large Class IV stream. Gordon, David and I helped Travis drag his kayak about a mile up the stream so he could boat it. One the way up, some young Khampa horsemen yelled "Hello" and "OK" in English, then stopped to visit. In another camp, Lisa and Li made friends with an unusually outgoing Tibetan woman. She brought fresh vegies and yak butter which Li used to make a great noodle dish for us. A young Khampa in this camp could read the Tibetan phrases in Lisa's Lonely Planet guidebook, and wanted to hear how the English translation sounded - pretty impressive.

The two highlights of our encounters with Tibetan were visits to a small monastery, Yodou, and a large chortan with a head monk named Renji Dorje. We were the first foreigners to visit either site. Yudou was built 380 years ago and then partially destroyed during the Cultural Revolution. Over the past few years it has been largely rebuilt. The monks were very friendly and opened up the monastery for us. The prayer hall was spectacular, and a new prayer hall was under construction (under the supervision of several eagles and vultures). The chortan had been built a year ago on the site of a 300 year old monastery named after a famous monk, Dalai Gunba. Based on their remoteness, I don't think these sites were rebuilt for tourism. Renji Dorje invited us into his house and gave us tea. He then dressed in formal attire and chanted and played cymbals for us. Phil K got some great video footage. We were really fortunate to have met such an amazing monk.



We also stopped at a couple of monasteries near the end of the road coming up from the take-out at Biru. They were closed to visitation due to an annual training program for new monks - we saw at least two dozen young men in red robes going into the main prayer room. Liu Li made friends with the head monk, and managed to get himself invited to the "skull room." When a Tibetan monk dies, his body is fed to the vultures (a sky burial), then his skull is retrieved and stored. Elliott Pattison's book "Skull Mantra" combines Chinese-Tibetan political intrigue with Tibetan Buddhism and foreign investment, a great read if you're into murder mysteries. The skull room of large, older monasteries like the one we visited can contain hundreds of skulls. They let Li take some pictures, such as this one:



We had our second layover in a canyon with few Tibetans, a day's float from the take-out and out of sight of the road coming up from Biru. While hanging out that afternoon, a man hiked up the river to a point across from us and started yelling. At first we ignored him, but eventually Da Wa told Li to tell me the guy had a message from the governor of Biru County. The river was too fast for us to cross over to get the message, and after our previous permit problem we didn't want it. We had Da Wa yell back that we'd get the message in the morning on our way down river.

Several miles downstream from camp we stopped to get the message - it was from Fan Ting, who was in Biru and was worried when he heard we had not emerged from the canyon. A few miles down river, just as the road from Nagqu reached the river, the gradient increased enough to create a series of Class III rapids with 6-8' waves - a real rush. It wasn't even lunch time yet, so we kept going. Apparently Fan Ting, who was driving up the road from Biru, missed us in a stretch where the river drops into a shallow canyon several hundred feet below the road, so we kept going - the rapids were too fun to pass up. Eventually we stopped, where we were promptly inundated with dozens of visitors who drove us back on the river after a quick lunch.

We stopped again after another few miles to look for Fan Ting, who showed up just as we were about to shove off because of crowding. He had made friends with the Governor, who knew a good spot to take-out another several miles downstream. Da Wa got off David's boat and the Governor's assistant, dressed in a business suit and lifejacket, got on Mike's boat with Li, and we had a roller coaster ride to the take-out. We gave the Governor a tent for his help. Great way to end the trip - happy boaters and a happy Governor.

After our return to Lhasa, things got weird. Fan Ting informed Lisa, who had planned a week long trek after the river expedition, that he couldn't get a permit for her trek and she had to leave with the rest of us. Well, Lisa got a permit on her own and disappeared at 5 am the day we left. As a result, Fan Ting told me it may be very difficult for me to get another rafting permit in Tibet. I really don't believe him, but time will tell. Meantime, the river equipment, including five kayaks, is stored in Lhasa.

On my return I heard from Gordon that the US Ambassador to China had visited Lhasa while Lisa was on her trek - maybe one reason Fan Ting didn't try to get her a permit. Also after returning I heard from David that while Lisa was on her trek the Chinese government had fired about 40 Tibetan trekking guides from Shigatze, a large town west of Lhasa on the Yarlung Tsangpo (Bramaputra headwaters), and replaced them with Chinese guides. Fortunately, none of this affected Lisa. She was far from civilization, trekking over a 17,000' pass, just hitting her stride

Finally, while writing this description of our 2000 Salween Headwaters Expedition, I read in our local newspaper that Kevin Gover, a Pawnee Indian and the head of the US Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA), officially apologized to the American Indians for the BIA's "legacy of racism and inhumanity" that included massacres, forced relocations of tribes and attempts to wipe out Indian languages and cultures. This apology comes after over two centuries of mistreatment by the US government. We live in a glass house and shouldn't throw stones at the Chinese. Hopefully positive cultural interactions will eventually produce positive results.

First Descent of the Nu River in Tibet, August 2000

Text and Photo by Phil Wegener

Reprinted from www.philipwegener.com

The first few days Juanjuan and I were in Beijing, which was as humid and muggy as ever. Getting out of the airport building into Hell, with soaked shirts in ten minutes. This was the first time Juanjuan has been back since leaving Oct. '97. I had anticipated that the transition back would be a slight shock for her and I was correct. It was rather humorous to see her jump at things that she grew up with, but has grown apart from. An example would be the drive from the Beijing airport. She had a friend meet us in his delivery van so we could stash my kayak in some office park - a wasted maneuver considering the airport has storage.

China is typical of places where "it's not the job of the drivers to avoid hitting you, it's your job to avoid getting hit." What I mean is that people and every other manner of transportation slip past each other by mere inches in seemingly chaotic manner. Another example would be the next day when we were in a bookstore near her home and we almost stumbled upon a guy squatting in the aisle eating his bowl of noodles. We both acknowledged that she has become Americanized, and this was a slight shock. When I got back to Beijing after the Tibet part of the trip she was out there in perfect stride. Another big impression was that life is hard there. Now

she can see it from the Western side too like you and I can.

Well back to the trip. After about 5-6 days we flew to Chengdu in Sichuan province to spend the night, then Lhasa the next day. Lhasa sits at about 12,800' (sorry, I forgot the metric). There we had a few days before the rest of the group arrived and we were all together. Those few days were spent wandering the city and shopping. We would devise a method where if I liked something I would stand back a few feet while she dealt with the vender on the street. As long as they didn't associate us as being together the "Big Nose Surcharge" would be avoided and we could save some money. I would also dicker with people on the street, always willing to walk away. This helped me get a few better prices too, but she's the master.

After a few days the rest of the trip arrived and we consolidated in another hotel and started messing with gear. Everything arrived intact and we loaded the trucks for the drive north to Nagqu (or Nagchu in older maps). The drive was brutal, with both shocks on the Toyota Land Cruiser breaking off, thereby giving us a "springier" ride on the washboard road. The main road was being worked on so we had to take a side road that put us over a 16,000'+ pass, spending part of the time making room for military convoys full of gasoline. The area around Lhasa is a bit dry so it's a bit hard to tell for sure when the tree line starts, but that pass was way over the tree line. Both Toyotas stopped at the top to stretch our legs. There were a couple of monks trying to prop up a line of prayer flags, so it was fun helping them. 16,000' doesn't feel bad when you are just sitting around. All you could see for miles were tundra mountains yaks and yak dung. Even though Tibet is sparsely populated there are almost always people.

We would stop every hour or so, either to whiz or to have the driver remove a shock. Gordon livened up things when he professed his conservative feelings. He is an arms negotiator in Vienna and I think he likes to verbally spar with all his river colleagues. A safe bet that river people would be a bit different than him politically. He's a kayaker from the old school, having coached teams before so he spends a lot of time around people more "liberal" than him.

Our Toyota also had Mike, from Pascoe WA, Phil Smith from England, Lisa and me in addition to the driver. Mike is a spirited conversationalist, so political discourse, verging on argument, helped on the drive. I think my rudimentary Chinese helped the driver find something small to respect in us. Of course I couldn't engage him in deep discussions concerning the Tibetan/Chinese relationships (he was Tibetan, speaking Chinese) but it did allow him to learn a bit about us, thereby making us a bit more human. Juanjuan and I had tried to engage Tibetans on the sticky subject of China in Lhasa.

The reluctance on the Tibetan's part to talk was very interesting. This added to the feeling that it is an occupied country. Another thing that added to that feeling was the large military presence. I understand that Chinese people would say that is because Tibet is on the border with India, but one felt that the army was there because of the locals, who did not show warm feeling the Chinese. One day we managed to see more than one fist fight on the streets.

Back to the drive. We made it to Nagqu by evening and found it to be another dusty Chinese town with poor Tibetans roaming the streets. For all the argument that I hear that the Chinese are helping the Tibetans by being there I will always think about places like Nagqu. From what I saw the people from Sichuan who move up to Tibet are the ones who derive the benefit, the Tibetans look like forgotten rejects roaming the streets. To be fair I must admit that when Tibetans learn Mandarin and play the game, then they stand a better chance.

I think Mike will always tease me because when a gaggle of Tibetan boys came up to our Toyota I didn't roll the window up all the way. It wasn't because he was scared of them, he is

6'2" and a big bear of a guy, it's because one of them had snot running down his nose the size of a small stream. I tried to tell him that the window was above the snot line. Besides, I got great footage with the camcorder. I did learn here that the Tibetans are a bit more forward than the Chinese. I had to aggressively hold onto my glasses when the tall one reached in to grab them. I also learned the value of the little TV screen on my camcorder. Letting the locals see themselves on it was battery power well spent in the name of US-Tibetan relations. I'm sure that will remain a large part of the locals' stories when they relate to everyone about those crazy Americans.

We found the only "One Star" hotel, the Hotel Nagqu, with the name even written in English. They said we would have hot water at a certain hour and by golly at that hour we had hot water. So we all enjoyed our last bath and restaurant for the next 11 days. We were in high plateau country at 14,800'. It was a broad valley and there wasn't a cloud in the sky that night. It turned out to be one of our few nights that would be so cloudless.

At breakfast the next morning we learned how close we came to not launching. The truck had just come in at 6 AM. Apparently a bearing went out 30 KM outside of our lunch town. There was cell phone coverage so Fan Ting drove back with one of our drivers. There was a 24-hour truck stop in that town, but it took 3 tries at 30 KM each direction to find the right part. Needless to say they were sleeping it off while we got ready to head out.

The put-in was down the river and we had to find the road that ran along the river. Since our maps were not quite USGS detail it took a few conferences with locals before we found the right way. This was rolling tundra country with mountains off in the distance, a little like Wyoming, only wetter. The big factor at this point was that the weather had definitely changed. As we set up the rafts, a howling wet storm was in full swing. To add interest my digestive system was not quite what you might call "on line". I was trying to keep everything down while pumping and packing the rafts.

Poor Travis was worse than I was. Every few minutes he would calmly walk off with toilet paper into the distance. There were no trees, so one had to walk quite a bit to find any privacy. I have a photo of him lying face down on the inflatable kayak, just hating life. To be fair, he was not the only one, we all suffered from the trots at some point or another, it's just that I photographed him in his misery. We set up lunch in the lee of the truck while the wind howled and we tried to stay warm. Quite the auspicious start to a river trip.

Like I said before, there were no rapids to speak of. The river was moving swiftly though and when we finally launched in the afternoon we made good time. Just a few miles down on river right was a large flat area with mountains rising up a few thousand feet. This area was mountainous, but not much more relief than Colorado. Later the mountains proved to be of Himalayan proportions. Setting up camp in a nasty storm while begging the Gods to rip your innards out to save you from the Hell of the trots is no fun. All I wanted to do at that point was set up my tent and get in, with the occasional foray out to do the "Bronx Cheer". During all this Pete set up the kitchen and most of us did help a bit. I knew we had to eat so I managed to get some food down, but then back in the sleeping bag.

The next morning wasn't too wet and I was in better shape, but still not quite up to snuff. Lisa must have been feeling great because she got up early and climbed the mountain behind camp, which must have been two thousand feet higher, or so. One thing I noticed on this trip was that most mornings and evenings were without the worst weather, which is great because that is when you are the most open to getting wet. But there were still mornings when you would wake up in your bag all warm and comfortable, only to be greeted by the sound of rain pelting your

tent. As you wake up you debate, "Do I go out there in my rain jacket, and put it away later all wet along with all my wet gear, or do I put on my dry suit now and eat breakfast with a tight neck gasket choking me while I drink my coffee?". Luckily I only had to have that internal debate a few times.

We had determined that the river was moving so fast that we had no problem making time down it. This allowed us time in camp to socialize with the locals. That first morning camp our visitors were three boys who were tending the animals on this large flat. They had mostly yaks, with a few goats and sheep too. I started my usual pose the kids in kayaks shots in the hopes of selling them later. They had the usual yak wool slings. Our bend in the river had tons of great river rock, so we were given demonstrations on slinging. The middle aged kid, about ten or so, was better than the older one. They were all better than English Phil, who bought a sling, then proceeded to attempt to send a rock across the river, to little success. The ten yuan he paid was probably a windfall to the kid, especially considering he can make another sling in a short amount of time.

Even though I have enough Chinese to get myself into trouble there was not a single Chinese speaker on the whole river, until near the end. We had our Chinese to English speaker Liu Li and our Chinese to Tibetan speaker, Da Wa. Whenever Pete had something important to relay I always wondered how much his words were being changed in the three step translation process. With our visitors this was no big problem, but later this proved to be just another factor in a difficult situation. For now we just posed the kids on our rafts and gave them Polaroids, which I'm sure they will treasure.

Leaving camp around 11 or so I paddled along the left bank while the kids and half the village, ran along and sang these Tibetan chants that echoed off of the walls. A very nice memory. Like I said, we made good time and just got used to being on a river well over the highest summits in Colorado. I can say that my highest surf was a little ripple at 14,400'. This was around the time that Travis' "Stupid Kayak Trick" became the talk of the town. Having the smallest most maneuverable boat he was the river clown. He was able to whip off spins and cartwheels in flat water, to the never ending amusement of the Tibetans along the shore.

This was an example of how word travels fast in this part of the world. A week later when I was the second kayaker to come round the bend the locals made vertical circles gestures with their fingers, to get me to do a roll for them. The thing is that Travis was still up stream, so how did they know such a thing was possible? To give you perspective you have to realize that no local ever goes into the river. I saw crude yak skin pod type boats with leather straps for oar locks near Lhasa, but nowhere in this area.

Later that day as the weather started its usual howl and rain a strange thing started to happen. Our progress down river ground to a halt. The storm was like in the Western US, always a head wind, but something else was going on. It didn't take long for us to realize that the dam was on the Nu Jiang, not a side stream. We were entering a reservoir and still water. From whipping along at 3-4 miles per hour to struggling to just make any progress. If you ask Mike to this day, I'm sure that his worst memory will be fighting that head wind. As a kayaker I was one of the scouts looking for a good camp. We found a "bay", or old drowned side canyon, to pull over and camp. Since I was one of the first in camp I paddled across our little bay, about 100 meters. Then I got out and climbed up the bank to get a better look down stream for a dam. I walked down for about half an hour but could only see a canyon down stream. It may seem minor, but this was one of the highlights of the trip for me. I had noticed that at almost any time you would be in site of something man made, either a village, of a old stone wall or just yaks grazing.

Now, despite the fact that I was next to a man-made lake all I could see was sky and tundra. You could see brightly colored ground hugging flowers and lichens. They were of the brightest colors, all saturated with rain and the clear light you get in high thin air. I just slowly wandered around until I realized I wouldn't be seeing any dam. As I got back the rest of our crew had floated into camp.



At the head of our side canyon was a village, so after a few minute we noticed the local welcoming committee start to walk down, a group of about 20 people. They were far enough away that we had time to secure all our small personal effects before they showed up. Set up your tent and zip it up, this became our usual ritual on the trip because we almost always had visitors. Perhaps we should remember that we were the visitors. This was one of the better times I had to photograph people. I had to do my usual sneaky shoot because a lot of the women would cover up their faces when I pointed a camera at them. The men would often give me an icy stare when I tried to shoot them. This wouldn't have been too intimidating if it weren't for the fact that they were big guys, sometimes taller than I was, tough as nails with weather-beaten faces and that they carried big ornate knives on their belts. We're talking long, over 8-inch blades. I never really felt threatened, but there were definite moments were I thought I should play it cool.

The women faces showed that they had seen their share of bad winters too. The normal Tibetan dresses are beautiful long robes with detailed embroidered trim. They dress up their belts with long lines of sand dollars, which implies many years of trade with people from coastal regions. But the great compliment they paid us was how they returned in the morning with their finest silk shirts and cleanest robes. The young teenage girls also arrived in camp that morning with large red circles on their cheeks, dressed in the "Sunday" finest. I took this as a compliment, but I also realize that they had our Polaroid camera in mind. These girls would keep a scarf over their faces, occasionally letting it fall to reveal these rouge cheeks and beautiful eyes, a very alluring vision. I managed to get a few portraits off when they were side tracked by all the activity and laughter.

So that night and following morning were spent meeting the locals, trying to pose kids in kayaks and discussing the dam down stream. Liu Li had tried to tell Fan Ting, who as you remember, was not on the river with us, that the dam was on the main river. Fan Ting told Pete

that it was on a side creek. Well, guess what? It was on the main stem of the Nagqu. Soon it became all clear as to why when a certain American outfitter tried to run this river a few years ago he found it dry. He had put on below the dam site. The dam had just been completed and as is typical of the Chinese, they just shut the gates to fill up the reservoir. No such thing as preserving fish habitat in this country.

That morning there was no wind and we floated down the lake, wondering where the dam was. We floated around the corner to a point where the yak scouts could see it, so we pulled over. Peeking over the bend in the bank made us feel like spies. Pete even forbade me from shooting it from behind a rock. We pulled the rafts over to a ramp and Liu Li and Da Wa went off with our permit, in search of officials. It was quite eerie because here we were at the top of a 90-foot dam and there was not a person in site. While waiting we brought out lunch and set up the tables. After a few minutes we were overrun with people, mostly in uniforms. At least they didn't have guns or mean faces. We were worried they might give us a ration of shit, instead they were fascinated by us and very helpful. We gave them lunch and they loaded up our bags on jeeps and trucks. They were mostly Tibetans, but they almost all spoke Chinese, which gave me a chance to yak it up with a few of them. It even got to the point where one guy teased me and a woman for flirting. Luckily I had my wedding ring on and a snapshot of Juanjuan to show that I was off the market. A good thing too because she had a few kilos on me and could have probably pinned me to the ground. Actually, we felt no animosity here, as opposed to in certain villages.



Travis studied the spillway but it was obvious that you couldn't run it - a 90-foot drop with obstructions at the bottom that created rooster tails that shot 20 feet into the air. So we carried the rafts down until they came up with the truck. One thing that helped was that the dam supervisor was from the same village as Lui Li in Sichuan province. When our Chinese ambassadors came into his office he was playing video games. We almost thought we had a chance to check E-mail, but there were no telephones. One thing Lui Li and Da Wa did score was Chinese food! These poor guys had to endure mashed potato flakes and dried noodles, American style. They were in misery over our food. They bought lots of Chinese noodles, bowls and chopsticks. They were in hog heaven. Li even tried to get Pete to stay for dinner, but we had to make time. The portage had taken all day and we didn't know what kind of rapids lay ahead.



That night, our third, we camped river right on a wide shoulder up against a mountain, a typical camp. The villagers on the other side were shouting at us to come over so Lisa and I paddled over to play ambassador. It was the usual interaction (for us, not for them) where they look at our kayaks and us while we try to get them to sit in our boats. I'm not sure who stank more, they in their yak-dung-smoke clothing or us in our wet polyester-nylon paddle gear. It was a trip for all of us. I took a few shots of Lisa on the back of her boat with a young guy sitting in the cockpit. The contrasts between Lisa's bright synthetic suit and the guy's earth-toned overcoat were quite striking. We felt we had done our part to maintain peace by going over there. Later in the trip when we didn't go over we paid the price. More on that later. That night was relatively uneventful. No village nearby meant we only had few visitors. It didn't even rain too much.

Day four we floated down to a large monastery river left. The monks came down to greet us and give us the grand tour. We learned that we were the first foreigners to visit in at least their lifetime. We also learned that it was 300 plus years old and it had been sacked during the Cultural Revolution in '66. They still were not finished fixing the shrine rooms, but they were very beautiful anyway.

These young guys who were the monks here were missing that hard weather-beaten look I told you about in the villagers. Pete told us that they were often the second or third son, sent off to learn. Missing from their faces was that hard creased look. Once again, no one spoke Chinese so we had to do the usual gesture style communication. I got the deluxe tour, including up onto the roof of the main monastery. As we left there were the usual Polaroids on the rafts. I wonder what the next people will think who come down the river and see these soon to be weather-beaten photos tacked up onto some wall in a room?

Since we didn't know what was down stream we had to part company and get going. Pete had researched topo maps all winter, including Russian maps in Cyrillic. He had determined that the gradient was comparable to the Grand Canyon, which is mostly flat, punctuated with large rapids. 90% boredom and 10% Hell. Actually the Grand Canyon is never boring and neither was this river. But we were discovering that the Nu Jiang/Nagqu was devoid of rapids. None-the-less Pete had planned at least one portage around a possible class V rapid. We had already made a portage, around the dam, and still had 6 days of river, so we had to make time each day.

Camp four was in a canyon without any village near by. This meant we had relative privacy, only a few visitors on horse back. We squeezed onto a small side canyon mouth with a running creek. This was a nice evening so we were able to spread out our constantly wet gear and relax a bit in camp. This part of the river felt a bit like a Utah canyon, small juniper type bushes and steep walls. There was none of the usual stresses that night. No prying eyes and hands in your tent and no bad weather to struggle through. The Chinese guys did their laundry and most of us ventured up the side creek to indulge in a cold creek bath, which we were all in desperate need of. It was one of the most social nights with everyone in a great mood.



I pitched my tent close to the creek and when the night rains started up, after most of us went to bed, I couldn't get to sleep. All I could think about was Mike Connally's warning that I was too close to the side creek and that I would probably get flash flooded. So, I jumped out of my warm bag and pulled my whole camp up a few feet away from the creek. It turned out to not be necessary, but it did allow me to get to sleep.



Day five was the same as the others, in the fact that there were no rapids and just beautiful mountains everywhere. The highlight of this day was the stupa river right. It was more than a stupa. It was a whole place of worship, but not quite a monastery. There were several buildings along with the stupa and about 20-30 people living there. As we walked up two people were supplicating as they went around the stupa. Every few steps or so they would drop to a prone position and chant, then get up and continue the process. The stupa was at least 30 feet high and very weather-beaten. You could hear their pilgrims' chants echo off of the walls as they slowly went around and around. Just like the previous day, we were the first "big noses" they had ever seen, so the dorje, or leader of the place invited us up for tea. We were all glad we had time for this, because the room we were lead into was covered with thankas and detailed to an incredible degree. We managed to get tea without all that Tibetan dree ("yak" is a misnomer) butter and salt. After a few niceties the dorje did a five-minute chant for us while the other people tended to our needs, keeping us in tea.

Once he realized how nice it is to get a Polaroid he got out his best red hat. It was a tall wide fan like affair, not the forward horn type you sometimes see in Tibet. One of the greatest shots I got the whole trip was when he got on the raft in all his auspicious regalia. That was one surreal scene. He was a local bigshot and probably has no idea how funny, or unusual, it looked to us Westerners. Very much one of the highlights.

That night things became interesting. Camp five was river left across from a bluff that had stupas and a large grouping of buildings. It was interesting that there was a line of flags running up from the river on river right. We chose this point because this was the head of the dreaded Granite Canyon! Emphasis added by me because this was where we would have the best chance of finding rapids. It was getting late and we didn't want to be trapped in the gorge with no place to camp. I had a bad feeling when we didn't go over to the other side of the river where all the buildings and people were. Remember, Lisa and I played ambassador on the evening camp 3. Well we made camp and Travis, Lisa and I headed down stream to see if we could find rapids. On a trip like this you can't trust the locals when it comes to things like rapids. They don't understand the concept of class I-V. In fact, they don't even know how to swim. The river is not a playground to them. As we went down there were a couple of settlements, so we had to play it cool, walking through people's front yards. Especially when one house had a mean mastiff barking at us and one woman, who had obviously never seen big noses before, picked up a rock when she saw us. She was alone with her child so we just gave her wide berth. All her men were at our camp involved in a dispute, which you'll hear about in a few minutes.

The three of us made it about 2 miles down and when the trail pooped out there were no signs of rapids of note. We did see vultures in a feeding frenzy in an eddy on the other side of the river. I got a video shot, but couldn't be sure if it was a human body or not. As some of you may be aware, that is how poor people's bodies are disposed of in Tibet. As we came back though the settlement the mastiff was luckily tied up, but we still made haste.

Upon our return one of the controversies was in full swing. It seems that the line of flags on the other side was the county line. We were in one county, with the denizens of that county yelling at the other side that we were on their land. The other side yelled back that we had to go over to show them our permit. So Pete ferried Li and Da Wa across with our one copy of our permit, which was in Chinese. They snatched it out of Da Wa's hands and hovered over him. Da Wa is from Lhasa, about 5'7" and very soft-spoken. These guys were tough backcountry Tibetans who saw a chance to lord over the city boys. There was a large crowd on the beach surrounding our two Chinese/Tibetan boys while someone tried to find the one person in the county who could read Chinese to verify our trip. Then I learned that Liu Li had the runs in an extreme way. That's

when I remembered him dunking him an apple in the river to clean it. Most of our bouts with the trots were long gone because we were treating the river water. All we could see was those two guys on the beach, waiting and hunched over.

Meanwhile in camp on our side we had our own little fun. Two teenage boys, who we dubbed Tau Chi 1 and 2 were doing everything in their power to make trouble. Tau Chi means naughty in Chinese. They were snooping in all the tents, tripping over tent ropes and generally make a nuisance of themselves. They also said that they were concerned that Travis, who was camped on the beach, was trying to take some sort of spirit from the river. What kind of spirit, we couldn't determine.

So on river right was our permit and two of our crew, wondering if we could continue or not. On our side two little shits out to get us. It was a bit tense, so I just held my cameras and passport close to myself in my fanny pack, and we went about making dinner. At least it was one of the few rainless nights, so we were physically comfortable. Pete brought Li and Da Wa back at dusk, but the other side still had our permit. Lesson learned, have several copies of your permit and in the local language. As to the lil' shits, Pete negotiated with the father of one of them have an old man of their village sleep with our gear. Pete also slept out, thanks to no rain.

Nothing walked off in the night and that morning we packed up and cross-ferried over to see if they would give us our permit. Directly under the building was a nice surf wave, but I just wanted to get out of there, so we didn't spend too much time on it. As I got up there I learned they had given us back the permit. It seems that most of the time in China things tend to work out if you just wait a bit. Here was a good example. These people had been waiting since yesterday to see us so their curiosity was overflowing. I wanted to check things out, but found myself the last "Big Nose" there and surrounded by 50 to 100 Tibetan men, closing in on me and tugging at everything I had, clothing and camera gear. This made me nervous enough to high tail it out of there for the safety of the river. More than once on the trip we found refuge by being on the water.

The rest of the day was not too eventful, compared to what we had just been through. We had lunch on a gravel bar island with the usual hundreds of locals yelling at us to come over. There were no trees so Lisa's trip to the loo was a show for people with good eyesight.



According to Pete's plan we were allowed to layover for two nights. We pulled over on river right with the usual beautiful mountains everywhere. There was a side canyon where I discovered a small village in during my side hike. The next day I reached my physical high point, on a day hike with Lisa and Phil Smith. Smith had been on previous trips with Pete on the lower Mekong in Yunnan province. That was near my first Nu Jiang trip in '96 in a high subtropical climate. He had also regaled us with stories of his time on the Zambezi in Africa where he had lived and guided. The dominant thought here was warm and comfortable. He was definitely not enjoying the cold and rain, not that any of us loved it. He had not planned for it though, so he was doing his hike in sneakers. It was well above freezing, but the tundra was wet and boggy everywhere. We heard that he was not comfortable but he kept his bitching to a minimum, as the English are good at. I certainly appreciated that. Our camp was at about 13,500 feet and the summit we reached was 16,200'. It didn't feel too much worse than a similar vertical climb in Colorado, even though in CO you would have started at 10,000' and gone to 14,000'. Even at these heights there was yak dung everywhere. The top had a simple cairn with a stick sticking up. We were still below the snow line but we could see a taller mountain off in the distance. There was a large glacier running out of it and the top was lost in the clouds.

Our return was down the side canyon and past the small village. Once again, the men were in our camp so the women at home were nervous when they saw us. Once again there was a big mean sounding dog threatening us. Upon our return the scene was much nicer than the previous night. Our visitors were cool and curious about us. This one guy kept on showing up with different women by his side. I don't know the Buddhist thinking on polygamy, but he was very friendly, so none cared who he brought into camp. He expressed a high interest in our nylon line and plastic water bottles, so Pete gave him some line and a bottle. One ritual of camp he had was to burn trash, plastics, and all. Can you imagine trying to do that in the States? The local governing agency would fine you big time for this. Here it was just part of life. Whenever you would be finished with a bottle or anything else useful you would hand it to the first Tibetan you would see. After a while you begin to see them as having a sustainable lifestyle and getting by with what they have. Then you get small reminders as to how lucky we are. Before Pete would dunk the trash with gas they would jump all over it to pore over every bit. I admit to being taken a bit back by the urgency in which they dove in.

None the less, these people seemed pretty happy. The patriarch dude came down with a pony that we posed Lisa on top of. I suggested that she could become wife number 3 or 4, but she didn't find this appealing. Breaking camp after two nights was once again, non-eventful, but still great to be there. The people had gotten to know us over the past two days, so we had lots of helpers. Pete had planned two layover days because of the possibility of class V rapids that required long portages. Except for the dam these portages didn't materialize, so that night, camp 7 and night 8, was another layover. At our first layover camp there had been a road on the other side. We were getting closer to Biru now and the river was also changing character, faster, big water. This was starting to get interesting, and getting near the end. We were once again in a tight canyon with the river booking through at a high rate. Not defined rapids as much as just constant class II+. We camped at the head of a small side creek. We had to be creative as to where we each pitched our tents. I piled a couple of rocks in a small swale to create a snug little bed for my tent, perched over a ten-foot cliff over the river. I had my own bluff with riverside a view.

Later that evening the usual welcoming committee came into camp. We had become accustomed at this point to people coming into our camp, but this time we had an unusual

visitor. Her name is U Tu Lamo (forgive the terrible spelling). It became obvious that she was the Tibetan version of my wife Juanjuan. She apparently hadn't heard that Tibetan women were supposed to be quiet and demure. She strode into camp bearing gifts of food, obviously in charge. Since Lisa was the only woman on our trip U Tu immediately adopted Lisa as her long lost friend. After a while Lisa felt a bit overwhelmed, but for most of the evening they hung out, sometimes in secret, looking at photos of Lhasa and going through Lisa's stuff, learning as much as she could. She even came back with fresh vegetables, Tibetan style, which at 13,000+ feet consist of mostly wild onions. We did the usual posing them for Polaroids and regular cameras, while she did the usual trick of returning the next morning in her finest silk outfit. U Tu had her village-mates with her, but never backed down when the men exerted dominance. It was unusual and refreshing to see this after all the times we watched women back down and play the subservient role. On the third day when we broke camp and started to surf a wave just below camp the locals sat on the rock overhead to see the crazy big-noses perform for them. U Tu sat back and was very quiet and noticeably sad to see Lisa leaving.

The second day, which was our last layover, I headed up the side canyon alone. The creek was interesting to possibly paddle, but my main goal was simply to see how far I could get up in a couple of hours. By now none of us were feeling the thin air. In fact we all felt great, the sun was out and it was a bit warm. Shorts weather in the sun, it felt like summer. The side creek was like many I had been on, if you could forget that you were in Tibet and above the tree line. Things changed in that respect when I got to a confluence of two creeks and saw a family grazing their sheep. As I approached the old man I made a sound so as to announce my arrival. I assumed they had never seen a white person before, and they certainly acted that way. I sat down next to Grandpa, then a younger man, probably the father, and young girl sat down near me too. I offered an apple and one of my granola bars, which they took, but certainly with trepidation. They kept an eagle eye on me, full of mistrust. When I finally gestured that I was going to leave the father hurried me off with the back of his hand. I had never been treated with such apprehensions in my life. I don't blame them for such mistrust, so I just made my way down. Half way down I ran into one the locals who had been in our camp. He was a happy guy who I noticed was having a good time in camp. I can only hope he gave the family a good report as to us and our strange ways.

We broke camp and headed down for our last day on the river. The usual rain started and by now I was getting nervous about my cameras. Eleven days with rain every day. Equipment just has to suffer. We started to approach civilization in the form of more towns along the river. In an experience similar to my '96 trip lower on this same river, we pulled into a small eddy to see if we could unload. We were surrounded by hundreds of people within a minute. There was no way we were going to unload here and subject our gear to a million prying eyes and hands. We did pick up a local official and gave him a ride down a few miles. This gave him local notoriety because he is now the first person from around here to have even been on their river. This was small consolation to Mike though. Here he was taking down a local official, who of course, can't swim. We are now getting into the largest rapids of the entire trip and this guy has on a business suit and a life jacket. All Mike could think about was not dumping this guy in the river. Well everything turned out OK and we let him off in Biru.

By now we had found Fan Ting, who was a nervous Nelly running all up and down the river looking for us. I'll always remember coming down to an eddy where all the rafts and yakkers are pulled off. Fan Ting yells over to me to tell me that this was the place to get out, as if I couldn't see that for myself. The pull out place was perfect because there was no town, just a wide spot in the road. We loaded up and headed to the local boarding house and the first dinner

under a roof we had had in more than a week. I have to admit civilization has its benefits when you have been living in the rain for a while.

The local governor was very pleased to meet us. It seems that there are only 30 or less foreigners per year in his district. He presented us each with long silk prayer scarves in an elaborate impromptu ceremony in the hall of the boarding house.

The next day was the start of a back breaking two day journey back to Lhasa and the Real World, whatever that is. Considering the state of those soaked roads we didn't check out the lower stretch of river. There is a dam downstream of Biru and Pete has plans to explore the next stretch some day. For now we just have to dream of that stretch and enjoy the memories of the past 12 extraordinary days.

**BY RIVER THROUGH A WOUNDED LAND:
THE FIRST DESCENT OF THE HEADWATERS OF THE SALWEEN**

Gordon Bare



The aged monk tells us that we are the first Westerners to visit his 380-year-old monastery. He and his two colleagues are delighted to show us through the partially restored temple and a new prayer hall. Newly painted Bodhisattvas peer down from several walls; other walls still show the depredations of the Cultural Revolution now a quarter century past. Long-hidden scrolls have been returned to their niches and prayer shawls once more drape icons.

We are at Yudou, not to be found on any map and dozens of miles from a road, on the headwaters of the Salween River in northeastern Tibet. Ours is the first descent by kayak and raft of some 154 miles of this great river of Asia. The Salween drops off the Tibetan Plateau and continues through southwestern China's Yunnan Province and on into Burma. Most of the major rivers of Asia including the Yangtze, Mekong, Indus, and Brahmaputra rise high on the Tibetan Plateau before cascading down to mouths separated by sub-continent and thousands of miles.

Our party consists of seven Americans and one Englishman, together with a representative of the Chinese Academy of Sciences and a Tibetan botanist who serves as our interpreter. We are two rafts and six kayaks, experienced river runners drawn to the lure of a first descent in the most exotic and remote of settings. We've been brought together by Pete Winn, professional geologist and ex-Grand Canyon guide, under the auspices of the non-profit Earth Sciences Expeditions. Pete has been boating the great rivers of Asia and investigating their geology for several years and has several major first descents to his credit. Our oarsmen are Mike Connelly, a geologist from Washington State and Dave Hettig, a Silicon Valley lawyer. Our kayakers are a diverse lot. Pete's son Travis is a nationally ranked junior competitor. The Englishman is Phil Smith, a computer person and ex slalom racer. The only woman is Lisa Newolet, an environmental engineer and a serious climber from Colorado. I am an ex

kayak coach and have pretensions of being an old Asia hand. I traveled the lower Salween in Burma years ago and am interested in seeing where it comes from.

Our group assembles in Lhasa, Tibet's ancient capital, for acclimatization and outfitting. Tibet had long enjoyed loose ties of suzerainty with China or complete independence prior to the Communist victory in 1949. The next year, the Peoples Liberation Army invaded Tibet and Beijing quickly moved to supplant the then youthful Dalai Lama, Tibet's spiritual and temporal leader. Chinese domination became increasingly repressive and attempts to collectivize Tibet's nomads resulted in widespread famine. Mao's Great Leap Forward resulted in some 30 million deaths in China as a whole. In 1959 after a period of increasing tension, it appeared that China was preparing to kidnap the Dalai Lama. Thousands of Tibetans gathered at the Summer Palace to defend their leader. The Dalai Lama slipped away in a two-week overland journey to India. A major uprising in Lhasa resulted in pitched battles with the PLA, shelling and bombing of the Potala and other landmarks, and the death of thousands of Tibetans in Lhasa alone. Estimates of the death toll throughout Tibet from famine and revolt range upward of half a million and another 100,000 fled to India. Beginning in 1966, the Cultural Revolution destroyed many of Tibet's 6000 monasteries in an effort to root out all vestiges of Tibetan culture and religion. The death of Mao and liberalization under Deng Xiaoping beginning in the late 1970s brought gradual easing of collectivization and prohibitions on religion, a pattern that has continued since with intermittent crackdowns and a new threat of immigration by Han Chinese.

Lhasa is now an ethnically mixed city with probably a majority of Han, who have been encouraged to move there by tax breaks, subsidized housing, and relief from Beijing's one child per family policy. China has not released population data in an effort to disguise its policy of ethnic inundation. Chinese characters adorn road signs. The Potala, begun in 1645 by the fifth Dalai Lama, retains its awesome grandeur dominating the skyline but is something of a mausoleum. Once the winter palace of the Dalai Lama, it now has a museum quality. Chinese tourists vastly outnumber Tibetans who seem to be conducting an informal boycott. It overlooks a large square bulldozed from an old Tibetan quarter. A Mig fighter sits incongruously in the middle, a not-so-subtle of China's military muscle.

Our official Chinese minder is uncomfortable around Tibetans and tells us it is not safe in Tibetan parts of town. Perhaps so for him but we feel entirely welcome at the Jokhang, Tibet's holiest temple in the heart of the town's old quarter. There an endless stream of Tibetan pilgrims, usually in traditional garb, circumambulate the compound pausing to spin prayer wheels that send their devotions on their way. Others prostrate themselves at the entrance before visiting shrines to various deities lit only by hundreds of butter lamps which are continually replenished by the faithful. The manifest intensity of the religiosity far surpasses that usually evident in Judeo-Christian settings.

We also visit the great monasteries of Drepung and Sera, both located just outside of town. Both suffered during the Cultural Revolution's war on all things traditional and both are experiencing major reconstruction. The population of the monasteries is back up to several hundred monks each, down from thousands before China's invasion. The monasteries are organized around specialized colleges including ones for Tantric studies, for logic, and for the education of itinerant monks from outside Tibet. Self contained worlds in their time, the great monasteries dominated political and economic life as well as providing the locus of education. Literacy in Tibet has plummeted to 30 percent as secular education has not adequately replaced the monasteries' role, particularly in rural areas.

In the late afternoon at Drepung, monks pair off to practice a ritualized debate and take turns expounding points of doctrine to each other. Though unable to understand the language, the ebb and flow are readily apparent as emphatic gestures, looks of triumph, pointed rejoinders, and occasional

rueful surrender to an irrefutable argument cross lingual boundaries.

Our put-in near the Sinified town of Naqu is a hard days drive from Lhasa on the main road north to Qinghai. Trucks and Chinese military convoys dominate traffic. The drive is a bone jolting and mildly terrifying experience which makes us look forward to the river. The first couple of hours take us through the relatively populated and fertile Lhasa valley before rising to the first of several 15,000 foot plus passes. Vegetation save grass disappears and the big-sky vistas of the high plateau are interrupted only by herds of yaks, cattle, sheep, and goats and occasional black yak-hair tent encampments. This part of the country is little visited by the few Westerners who reach Tibet.

At the river we find a smallish stream of swiftly flowing flatwater in a broad glacially carved valley. The altitude is 14,600 which makes rigging rafts and loading gear a slow motion activity as not even the fittest of us have the wind to hustle about. The absolute headwaters are perhaps 50 miles further up in a series of marshes and lakes at close to 16,000 feet. Temperature hovers in the 50s and 60s and showers regularly blow through but rarely last. This is the weather we are to become accustomed to for the next ten days. Water temperature is a relatively balmy 55. The rafts carry the food and gear giving those in kayaks the luxury of paddling empty boats. Pete's research has yielded flow and gradient data from which we can make an educated guess on the difficulty of the whitewater we will face. Averaging some 12 feet per mile drop, the river should be mild in its upper reaches where volume remains small but could become quite challenging when swollen to perhaps ten times the flow further downstream.

A handful of local herders, some on horseback, gather to watch our strange doings as we spin off into the current. At no point on the river are we in unpopulated territory as the search for pasture has created a highly dispersed population. Some quarter of Tibet's two and a half million people are nomads who have returned to herding after the forced collectivization ended. We are in the territory of the Khampas, a traditional warrior tribe in spite of their strong Buddhism. The Khampas bore the brunt of collectivization and famine and held out longest against China. Men wear long plaited hair interwoven with red cloth and wound around their heads. Both men and women carry long curved knives in their belts. Shy local women are initially reluctant to come close or have their pictures taken. But with some encouragement from Lisa, they soon clamber aboard our raft and happily pose for the Polaroids we hand out. Some ask discretely for pictures of the Dalai Lama, which are once again prohibited.

Visitors quickly appear at even our most remote seeming stops. Three youths with perhaps 100 sheep visit us the next morning as we cook oatmeal over a camp stove,. They are armed with homemade yak hair slings of a type probably not out of place in a biblical setting with which they demonstrate substantial accuracy. Our attempts with the devices result in misfires which pose as much risk to those standing behind the shooter as to anyone in front. The shepherds report that there are no longer wolves in the vicinity as there were in their parents' day.

On the water that afternoon, the river broadens and slows. We initially suspect that we are in the pool created by some natural obstruction and that a major rapid lies ahead. But the river widens still further and the current ceases completely. We realize to our chagrin and annoyance that we can only be in the lake created by a dam-- one which the Chinese Academy of Sciences had assured us was located on a tributary and not on the stretch we would run. The 100-foot Chalong Dam may well be the highest major dam on the planet. We are somewhat concerned since Chinese authorities tend to view dams as militarily sensitive installations. Our permit, of course, says nothing about transiting a dam. We wonder if gun-toting soldiers will order us off the river. In the event, a cheerful crew of workers helps us with the laborious task of portaging our boats and gear to the tailrace. China is busily engaged in

dam construction on many of its major rivers and is pursuing an extensive range of economic development projects in Tibet. There is also planning underway for a headwaters nature preserve in the area where the Salween, Mekong, and Yangtze rise, a first cautious first step toward alleviating some of the serious damage to this fragile high altitude environment. Whether this protection will affect further dam construction and the degree to which development will benefit the Tibetan population are open questions.



The next day we stop at a stupa or chorten, a dome-shaped structure capped by a tower on which is painted the all-seeing eye of Buddhist theology. It was built only last year on the site of a 300 year old monastery named after a famous holy man, Dalai Gunba. A shaved-headed nun greets us with palms pressed together in the Indian but not the Tibetan fashion. She has recently returned from an arduous and illegal trip to Dharmasala, the residence in exile of the Dalai Lama in northern India. Rinji Dorje, the monk attending the chorten, invites us to his home for tea. He dons vestments and conducts a prayer ceremony for our benefit, chanting from ancient texts to the accompaniment of cymbals and incense.



The river continues at a good clip. We drop into intermittent stretches of canyon-- Pete identifies the rock as metamorphosed schist-- where the river necks and the whitewater action picks up to a Class III level. The kayaks enjoy playing at surfing waves and eddylines. The rafts need only row enough to stay in the main current. We make speedy progress and cover 20 miles or more in four or five hours with little effort. We had allowed time for scouting, and if necessary portaging, dangerous drops but the rapids are wide open and bouncy without being threatening. We are able to take layover days and explore side canyons.

As we drop in altitude, planted fields of barley appear. What had been scattered tents of summer herders gives way to small villages of adobe-like construction and larger crowds line the bank and gather whenever we pull over. A road appears along the river and as we approach the administrative center of Biru we begin to look for our pick up vehicles. But the river is not quite through with us and the gradient picks up as we once more enter a mini-canyon. By now the volume is that of the Colorado through the Grand Canyon and moving at a breathtaking pace. Waves to six or eight feet slap us around and boils appear under our kayaks to throw us off line. But no really serious rapids lurk behind horizon lines and we are able to read and run on the fly. Several miles of this continuous big bouncy water make a perfect end for the river. We locate our vehicles and pull off tired and exhilarated but anticipating the relative luxury of a bed and food a notch or two up from our pasta and oatmeal.



River exploration provides perhaps a unique insight into a land and people. One travels through backyards, as it were. I think back to our stop at the Yudou Monastery. In spite of our gracious welcome and the obvious dedication of its three guardians, there is an incompleteness, a certain emptiness, to the place which once boasted dozens of monks and a functioning school. A visit is both a cultural highlight and a sad reminder of the uncertainty hanging over this traditional society and its harsh interaction with modernity and authoritarian power. I come to the sad conclusion that there is little hope for the people of Tibet to chart their own path. China's regime is too insecure, its people too numerous, and the outside world too disengaged. This conclusion is strengthened two days after returning home. A two-inch Associated Press story reports a crackdown in Lhasa and the arrest of monks at the Drepung monastery, which we had visited scarcely a week before.



Perhaps a democratic China will one day have the self-confidence to grant Tibet real autonomy but present trends in Beijing's policies are not at all encouraging. The Tibetan people have shown remarkable courage and resilience and in the Dalai Lama they have a leader with the stature of a Mandela or a John Paul II. But the tidal wave of Han immigration may render these factors mute, even if Beijing moves toward democracy, itself a highly uncertain prospect. The renewed worship, education and construction at the monasteries, albeit limited, and the renewal of traditional village and pastoral life gives ground for a certain hope that the culture can survive if only as a minority in its own land. We count ourselves fortunate to have traveled through country restored to even a pale semblance of its past.

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