

FIELD REPORT

China Exploration & Research Society

FR17.29 by Wong How Man (Irrawaddy Source, Zayu, Tibet – October 3, 2017)

RETURN TO THE SOURCE OF THE IRRAWADDY (PART II)

Just for 1.4 kilometers of additional length

Coordinates: 28.7340°N 97.8725°E (28°44'04"N 97°52'35"E)

Altitude: 4,821 meters (15,909 feet) Time: 10:38 Date: 2017-10-03

My hands are frozen and numb. My camera has gone wild, taking photos in delayed mode a few seconds after I push the shutter. Then it momentarily dies and I have to reboot it. The wind is blowing and the temperature must be below zero as rain turns to hail. It must be the altitude, 4821 meters in elevation. Otherwise it has to be the river god, as my team and I reach the watershed and source of the Irrawaddy River.

“This is it,” I gave out the order, marking a small drop-off where two tiny streams trickle downward joining each other. Beyond and above are marshes with water holes, merging to become the source stream. My iPad has been on all morning, with my special App tracking our route, time, distance and several other crucial data from our basecamp to here.

“Let’s mark the spot with the prayer flag,” I give out another order to my team. Soon three poles are stuck in the ground and a string of colorful flags span the source of the Irrawaddy. My next move is almost like clockwork, something I had dreamed of, as well as performed, several times before, each time when I reached the source of a great river; the Yangtze, Mekong, Yellow River, or Salween. I kneel down striding the creek, and with my two hands I bring the water to my mouth. Drinking from the source is always a very sacred moment, especially for an explorer.

I make several screen-shots on my iPad satellite image to record the necessary data, most importantly, the coordinates of this spot – 28°44'04"N 97°52'35"E. Time of arrival is of course noted. My Omega says 10:38. It’s been almost three hours of continuous riding on horseback since we left basecamp at 7:48 this morning. Next my team passes me three Aluminum water bottles which I use to collect the source water for later analysis back home. Our caravan helpers are watching with amazement. Why do these people make such a big deal about a tiny stream?

Despite high wind at the watershed pass, Xavier launches the drone and takes an aerial view of the source just as each of us lets off into thin air a stack of *Lungda*, or paper Wind Horse, which are sacred offerings to the gods. As the Wind Horse take to flight, our horses on the ground got into frenzy and almost went into a stampede, stirred on by the drone. Fortunately our caravan helpers quickly held them down as commotion gradually subsided. Several members of the team are searching the ground, looking for special rocks as memorabilia to take home. I get a bit greedy and take in a few more sip of the source water, until my hands are too numb to continue.

Before we turn to mount our horses on the return journey, we take out the CERS flag and make our group photo, all nine of us from the CERS team. Everyone has a smile of contentment on his or her face. I, too, feel another mission accomplished. The fifth river source that I have had the good fortune to reach and define; not a small geographic feat.

The less than six hours roundtrip on horseback from basecamp to the source, covering 15.5 kilometers, seems little compared to my first journey to the Yangtze source in 1985. That roundtrip took me nine days on horseback. But the Irrawaddy source is no less important in my mind. It’s like having five children, each important and unique in his or her own way.

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FR17.29/2

It may seem obsessive to return to the river source of a great river of Asia within slightly over four short months. But in the past, I have returned to the Yangtze source three times, 1985, 1995 and 2005, just to verify and correct our own work results. For the Irrawaddy, it had to be done, the sooner the better, given my gradually waning energy. High elevation work is not compatible with someone soon to reach seven decades in life. But for now, I still have a bit of mileage remaining.

Upon returning from the Irrawaddy source in late May, our long-time friend Martin Ruzek, formerly a NASA scientist, revealed to me that beyond the source lake, Jingla Co, there was a feeder stream under the snow that stretched another 1.4 kilometers further up the watershed. When the snow melted during the summer, satellite images would show clearly this feeder stream. We must return to mark this definitive source of the Irrawaddy.

From our Zhongdian Center we headed for Zayu County in southeastern Tibet. Along the way, three rockslides, products of tail end of the raining season, deterred our progress. One took six hours to clear, the other two, one half day and a full day. Other unexpected deterrents were the result of recent border tension between India and China, making security check points more frequent and thorough. This wasn't the case back in May. The upcoming 19th Party Congress added another layer of security as government and police do not want to see any disruptive incidents during that time.

Due to such measures, negotiating for horses took longer than usual as the villagers needed to get permission from above to rent us their horses. We needed a total of 15 horses and six caravan helpers. True to form of the old commune tradition of fairness, the villagers made a draw on whose horses would get rented, as well as which individual would become a helper. During the day and a half in waiting, I had the opportunity to visit and interview the first herding family tending to their livestock near our basecamp; literally the first family at the source of the Irrawaddy.

The river we followed to Jingla Co (the source lake) and onwards to the 1.4 kilometer feeder stream source is called Jiutong (or Dutong depending on pronunciation). Two ridges away is another stream, the Yepo, which is only 40 meters shorter in length from its source to its confluence with the Jiutong. This created a dilemma in my mind.

For a river as great as the Irrawaddy, which flows for over 2200 kilometers before reaching the sea, what is 40 meters in difference? Let alone that the two sources are so very close to each other. This seems a perfect case to make a call that the Irrawaddy River has a twin source, no different from two twin siblings, one having a bit more hair than the other.

The world is full of contention among people or countries wanting to be the greatest, strongest and most powerful. With greatness and power, there should also come more responsibilities and obligations. But we can also live alongside each other peacefully, each serving its purpose towards a greater world. The two twin streams of Jiutong and Yepo are a perfect metaphor; together with hundreds and thousands of streams, they make up the great Irrawaddy River.

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