

六十九

There, a ceramic basin
reflected no crowds
just a river, a tiger
an ocean of clouds
I saw snow on green jade
and a dragon above
Joseph Rock's photographs
geographical love



Chapter 69– Joseph Rock - National Geographic's "Man in China"

“Before leaving for China, he purchased tents, a folding canvas bathtub, aneroid barometers, cameras, guns and ammunitions. Other items essential to his expedition were furs, warm bedding, trunks, photographic supplies, paper made from bamboo for drying specimens, medicines and for transportation, mules and, sometimes, yaks. He revealed a distinct preference for such luxuries as canned foods and collapsible bathtubs.” Edgar Snow, who travelled with him a time or two, wrote, ‘During the march, his tribal retainers divided into a vanguard and a rearguard. The advance party, led by a cook, an assistant cook, and a butler would spot a sheltered place with a good view, unfold table and chairs on a leopard-skin rug and lay out a clean linen cloth, silver and napkins. By the time we arrived our meal would be almost ready. At night, it was several courses ending with tea and liqueurs.’ Rock kept the same cooks with him on most of his expeditions and even taught them Austrian recipes.” (from: *THE STORY OF JOSEPH ROCK* by Gwen Bell, Seattle, WA – presentation at the National Rhododendron Convention in Portland, OR.)



Joseph Rock was an Austrian born American and largely self-taught botanist, explorer, author and photographer, who was, quite literally, National Geographic's "man in China" during the 1920's and 30's. A product of his times, like so many of the characters I've discovered in my Chinese Odyssey, Rock was eccentric. Joseph Rock spoke Chinese fluently and loved living in China, but he was often critical of Chinese people and Chinese culture. That said, he did appear to have a deep love and respect for Naxi people, a minority group descended from the ancient Qiang people who resided in Yunnan and who he regarded as unique from Chinese. When I visited the small Joseph Rock museum, a two story modest home outside of Lijiang near the town of 白沙村 Báishā cūn, where Joseph Rock lived for 27 years and where he did much of his writing and botanical research, I recalled when I first "met" Joseph Rock. It was in the old copies of National Geographic that my grandparents used to keep on the side table next to the bed where my uncle slept growing up on a farm called "Black Acre" up the Rattlesnake in Missoula, Montana during the 30's and 40's. Somehow, they had never been thrown out. To leaf through an old copy of National Geographic was to stroll through a time of Ethyl gasoline, Chris-Craft boat builders, Great Northern Railroads – *The Empire Builders*, Chrysler sedans, Campbells Soup, Whitman's Chocolate, the new World Book Encyclopedia, American Express Travelers Cheques; and to see risqué photographs of scantily clad native people from all over the world. I loved National Geographic and I managed to scavenge a couple of a National Geographics from that night table which remain with me to this day. I remember laughing at pictures of early 20th century western explorers like Joseph Rock in Asia, Africa, and South America all decked out in their tropical tweeds, starched white shirts, ties, thick woollen knee-high stockings with leather garters, and pith helmets.

It was also at "Black Acre" that I picked up James Hilton's Lost Horizon for the first time. To say I was intrigued would have been an understatement! Was Shangri-la real? After my initial read, I found other stories which supported that possibility. The lost kingdom of Shambala has existed in esoteric Tibetan Buddhist doctrines for centuries. In the Nyingma tradition, there existed hidden treasures and teachings which could only be discovered by Tertons (people who had the powers or ability to discover Terma - religious texts and treasures.) There are also hidden places called Beyul which serve as refuges to the blessed ones. Beyul are "secret lands" that somehow transcend physical and conceptual boundaries. Even though they may have specific geographic coordinates, that in no way guarantees that you will be able to find them. They are hidden, and only those who seek them with the proper spiritual keys will be allowed entrance. According to the stories, the physical beauty of these beyuls is stunning. Rivers,

valleys, and hills shrouded in clouds, and flowers and huge biodiversity - and their spiritual quiet can most easily be described as harmonious and peaceful.

Here is a short retelling of one of Rock's quests from National Geographic which occurred at 阿尼瑪卿山 Ānīmǎqīng Shān, which is the name of both a mountain range and the highest peak of that range at 6,282 m (20,610 ft), located in the province of Qinghai in central China. Getting there was fraught with peril.

"My own visit, what from extraordinary hardship and the perils of bandits, was so brief that I could make only limited observations. So as yet, the world knows only from the hearsay of all the Amnyi Machen's mysterious valleys, its lawless Ngokok tribes, and the queen who was supposed to ride over them." (from Joseph Rock in the February, 1930 National Geographic article "Seeking the Mountains of Mystery.") The article continues ...

"The nearby Hetso (合作 Hézuò) monastery was plundered and a Living Buddha was slain."

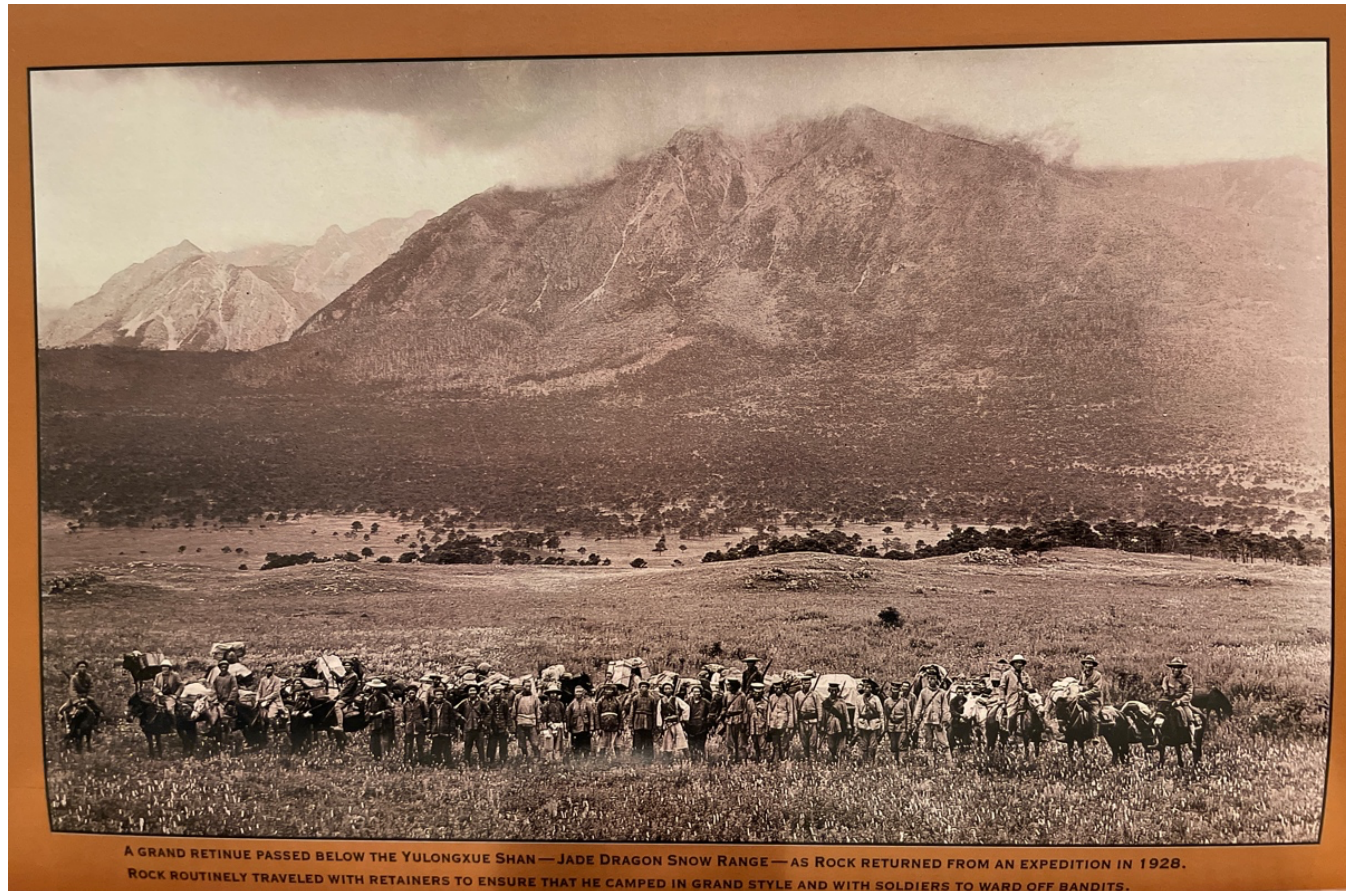
"One hundred fifty-four Tibetan heads were strung about the walls of the Moslem garrison like a garland of flowers. Heads of young girls and children decorated the posts in front of the barracks." "Among this carnage," Rock concludes, "we were forced to give up, for the time being, any hopes of marching on to our difficult goal."

A year later, Rock tried again - after spending some time in Labrang (in present day Gansu), in fascinating conversations with the Abbot of Labrang who believed that the Earth was flat and assured Joseph Rock that there were people in the world "with heads of dogs, sheep, and cattle." Rock continued with his mile-long entourage, comprised of 60 yaks, 34 mules, and 20 armed and mounted men of the nomad Sokwu Arik tribe of Mongol origin. Rock had also engaged American missionary, William Ekvall Simpson as a Tibetan interpreter, but Rock came to dislike Simpson because he felt that he was too much of a "do-gooder" who "lacked firmness with the natives." As they travelled, Rock and company were constantly being watched by robber tribes who were somehow kept at bay by his Sokwu Arik protectors.

"Uphill and down, through canyons and over passes with odd, gurgling names, we pushed our toiling way through an empty world. Not a human being appeared anywhere in that forsaken region." As they approached the Gur Zhung Valley, Rock was told "You had better not go, for all the Ngoloks are aroused and are awaiting to rob and perhaps murder you." Rock persevered.

Until finally "I shouted for joy as I beheld the majestic peaks of one of the grandest mountain ranges of all Asia. . ." Rock stood atop the Mokhur Nira (Pass), at an elevation of 12,800 feet. "With difficulty, I tore myself from that sublime view – a view of the

eastern massif of the mountain from west of the Yellow River which no other foreigners had ever had. I remained for some time on that isolated summit, lost in reverie and easily comprehending why the Tibetans should worship these snowy peaks as emblems of purity.”



This photo is copied from an amazing blog by Australian journalist Michael Woodhead – who not only researched Rock, but physically traversed “In the Footsteps of Joseph Rock” (the name of his blog) which had extensive links to both Rock’s photos and his journeys. It can be found at <https://www.josephrock.net>