



THE SACRED MOUNTAINS OF TIBET

By Alister Benn & Juanli Sun

THE SACRED MOUNTAINS OF TIBET

*To those who feel
though may never see*



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AVAILABLE **Light** images 

Our mothers gave us life
but the mountains are
the home of our spirit

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About the Authors

Alister Benn and Juanli Sun met in Beijing in 2000 and have been making images around the world ever since.

In 2005 they moved to live in the mountain town of Lijiang, a UNESCO world heritage site in the shadow of the 5500m/18000ft Yulong Xue Shan - Jade Dragon Snow Mountain - in Yunnan Province China.

Since then, they have spent the majority of their time among the high mountains of Shangri La, Tibet and Nepal, in particular photographing the beautiful peaks at night by moonlight.

Their love for the high mountains of Tibet is their primary passion, but this appreciation extends to all the wild places in the world.

The simple idea that through the conservation of habitat we have the surest chances of success in preserving the multitude of wildlife that abounds there, and sustain the lives of the millions of people who have lived in harmony with these wilderness areas for thousands of years.

This book contains 34 images taken since 2005, and its purpose is to share our inspiration and emotions from our journeys to these Sacred Mountains of Tibet with those who also feel a special connection to this remarkable area.

Introduction

High on a desolate slope, wind-scarred and barren, a small spring gushes forth from the semi-frozen ground. It leaps merrily downhill; fresh, clean and pure, like a new born infant as yet untarnished by bitterness or circumstance. Our river battles on relentlessly, for thousands of miles, unstopped by mountains of rock or the dams of man – in human terms, it has always been, and will always be.

This is the Yangtze River, from its birth beneath a glacier on the Tibetan Plateau, 3988 miles through the heart of China to its exit into the Yellow Sea near the megalopolis of Shanghai. It has been estimated that a population roughly that of the United States lives alongside the river, reaping a living from the fertile soil it deposits and the energy it produces by its thunderous passage.

And what exactly does this have to do with the Sacred Mountains of Tibet? Well, the birth of the Yangtse is tied forever to the mountains in which it rises: The water cycle depositing snow on the high peaks that compacts to form glaciers, which shape the landscape for thousands of years. These melt, and the water, aided by gravity, falls forever towards the sea, where it ebbs and flows for hundreds more years before evaporation takes the vapour airborne and forms clouds; the same clouds that will eventually dump a new layer of snow onto the world's mightiest peaks.

The water cycle *is* life – a never-ending ballet of birth and rebirth.

This is a somewhat contemporary view of what makes the worlds highest places special and worthy of awe, the mountains sustain life, not necessarily on their hostile slopes, but thousands of miles away in the lowlands and estuaries where their rivers broaden and meander. All over the world, our ancient ancestors knew well the life-giving nature of floods and the necessity of the rivers for their survival.

But, what of the people that live in the shadows of the Himalaya? What of them, who know little of the gigantic conurbations in foreign lands?

It is impossible for us to truly understand the depth of emotion and faith that the Tibetans feel for their mountains; Juanli and I can only speak from our own experiences in Tibet and our encounters with Tibetans who have journeyed on foot for years to reach a viewpoint from which to gaze, tears stinging their eyes, upon the slopes of Meili Xue Shan, Mt Kailash or one of the many other mountains that they believe to be Holy beyond Holy.

Juanli Sun was born in a small backwater town in Hubei Province; a stone throw from the Yangtse River, the lifeblood of China. As a child, she played with her two sisters in the muddy and polluted streams that flowed through her valley, the slopes above swathed in bamboo and bubbling with the songs of Laughingthrushes.

She knew little of the birth of rivers or the Tibetan Plateau, but as an adult, she has slowly but surely journeyed far from her home town, surging relentlessly upstream against the flow of convention, doctrine or logic – like a mighty fish returning to its birthplace to repeat the ritual of life .

She is incapable of reason or explanation for this, but truly believes that her spirit lies in the high places of Tibet. Her poetry speak of love and loss, warm greetings and bitter partings; to sustain hardship and suffering with acceptance and a heart felt longing to find peace in this world.

For myself, as I stand under the moonlight looking up at a glowing temple of ice and rock high above me, I feel the rhythms of the eons pulsating through my chest – I regress to a very basic state of mind, a simple balance point between life and death. In the thin air, that razors edge of existence is palpable – life never felt more special and precious, yet the creeping fingers of cold and death are only the thickness of a down jacket away. Through hardship and suffering the spirit soars and bears fruit – the memories and experiences consolidating to allow a gradual and profound evolution in ones perspective of place and purpose.

And surely, this is the metaphor of our lives – it's not always a walk in the park; maturity, respect and morality come at a price. Buddhists believe that life is suffering, and only through Karma and practice comes an acceptance of death and the subsequent rebirth.

There are people on the other side of the world who will read these words and feel them resonating inside themselves – and although they may never stand before a Tibetan Sacred Mountain, they feel, they understand. They can believe that although the world around us is shaped and molested by progress and development, there will always be the high places on earth, the sacred peaks, places for the contemplation of the soul.

Qomolangma, “Holy Mother” by the Tibetans, Mt Everest to most of the world, may now have been climbed by thousands of people, but human existence there is transient, fragile and tenuous – the peak does not change. In the geological heartbeat of a mountains growth and death, what are a few decades of man?

This book is a celebration of these immense mountains, the subjects of prayer, love, devotion and emotion. Whether driven there by faith or some other reason, anyone who visits the region is sure to be touched deeply by the experience. And for those who cannot make the journey, the Sacred Mountains of Tibet are still there for you – they represent the cycle of life, the slow pendulum between life and death, suffering and exaltation. Let this metaphor enhance your life wherever you are, allow your breath to caress your body and feel the rhythms beneath your feet.

Alister Benn
Shangri La
Dec 2012

Shangri La Region

Yading National Park is a mountain sanctuary in the far south west of Sichuan Province, and a very important pilgrimage site comprising three peaks sanctified as emanations of the three buddhisatvas by the 5th Dalai Lama.

The south peak Jambeyang (or Jampelyang, Yangmaiyong) at 5958m is the avatar of Manjushri, the Bodhisattva of Wisdom.

The east peak Chanadorje (or Xianuoduoji) of the same height represents Vajrapani, the Bodhisattva of Wrath.

Finally, the north peak, Chenresig (or Chenrezig, Xiannairi) at 6032m, the highest of the trio, symbolizes Avalokiteshvara, the Bodhisattva of Mercy.

These three sacred mountains in Yading National Park were first viewed by a westerner, Austrian-American explorer, linguist, geographer and botanist, Joseph Rock in 1928.

Meili Xue Shan (Meili Snow Mountain), lies north west of Shangri-la town, and is bounded by the Salween River on the west and the Mekong on the east.

The highest peak Kawagebo, “God of Snow Mountain” in Tibetan, which rises to 6740m is considered the most sacred by Tibetan Buddhists, and even holds an almost equal status with Mt Kailash, and remain as one of the “virgin” peaks to climbers.

Mianzimu peak rises to 6509m and is a striking part of the whole Meili Massif, being truly outstanding; one of the most graceful mountains in the world.

Namcha Barwa rises to 7782m and is located in an isolated part of southeastern Tibet rarely visited by outsiders. It stands inside the Great Bend of the Yarlung Tsangpo River as the river enters its notable gorge across the Himalaya, emerging as the Dihang and becoming the Brahmaputra.

Invisible through her veil of cloud
I wait, but she reveals nothing to me
Even as I am blind I can see
The end of my loneliness in her silent glory

Then, in the moment of her birth
Through the fire light of sunset
My existence is neither real nor illusion
Her birth is mine

Time steals this precious miracle
At the very edge of my solitude
In the darkness that follows I beg
For my soul to attain her unchanging perfection



























No women can speak of a decade of grace
under the shadow of her purist perfection

No hero can be proud with a lifetime of glory
in front of her heavenly power

Qomolangma Region

This region lies on the border between Tibet and Nepal and is the highest region on Earth. More peaks over 8000m can be seen here than anywhere else, and at every turn you are surrounded by total majesty.

Journey to the Rombuk Valley, which is the usual launching point for expeditions to climb Mt Everest from the north, and you are truly gazing across the roof of the world. From the Pang La, five of the 8000m peaks can be seen.

Qomolangma – 8848 m (29029 ft) – 1st

Lhotse – 8516 m (27940 ft) – 4th

Makalu – 8485 m (27838 ft) – 5th

Cho Oyo – 8201 m (26906 ft) – 6th

Shishapangma – 8027 m (26335 ft) – 14th

If Shangri-la is magnificently beautiful, then the Karta valley that flanks the eastern side of Qomolangma could be likened

to heaven on earth. The glacial valley floor is littered with crystal lakes, reflected in which are the worlds greatest peaks. This remote and rarely visited valley is simply stunning, and as one climbs to nearly 5700m the views unfold forever.

In summer the area is carpeted in wild flowers, while in autumn the colours blaze beneath the constant icy wilderness above.

There is no denying that it takes a certain effort to be there - thin air, basic camp accommodation and lean food rations, but to be among these valleys and peaks is simply purification for the soul.

The mixture of fear, humility, euphoria and love is an elixir which gives strength, resolve and determination to live ones life to the best and to share that mantra and understanding. We do not go there to conquer or win some victory - we go there to be, and to be blessed with the memory.

I approach as a friend under the shadow of your grace
The sunset reveals an intricate charm
By moonlight I edge ever closer
Even the wind is silent tonight

No words by the Rombuk River
As the moment becomes complete
Your rumours appear before my eyes
And the stars reveal your eternal life

Outside, in the unreal world
Flaws expand and multiply
But none will withstand the storm
when the blizzards and wind return

As my body weakens in the thin air
Your transcendence fades before dawn
I leave you now, for now
But the romance of our embrace
Remains in my heart
Forever





















Mt Kailash Region

Mt Kailash, 6638 m (21778 ft) also known as Mount Kailas, or Kangrinboqê, lies in the Gangdisê Mountains, which are part of the Transhimalaya in Tibet.

Here are the sources of some of the longest rivers in Asia: the Indus, the Sutlej, the Brahmaputra, and the Karnali (a tributary of the Ganges).

It is considered a sacred place to four religions: Bön, Buddhism, Hinduism and Jainism.

Every year, thousands make a pilgrimage to Kailash, following a tradition going back thousands of years. It is believed that circumambulating Mount Kailash on foot is a holy ritual that purifies the spirit. The peregrinations are made in a clockwise direction by Hindus and Buddhists. Followers of the Jain and Bön religions circumambulate the mountain in a counterclockwise direction.

This is undoubtedly one of most sacred place on earth, as beside the Kailas range is Lake Manasarovar (Mapam Yumco), alternatively Mapam Yum Co, Mapham Yu Tso), or Manasa Sarovar/Lake Manasis near the source of the Sutlej River.

The word “Manasarovara” originates from Sanskrit, which is a combination of the words “Manas” - meaning mind and “sarovara” - meaning lake. According to the Hindu religion, the lake was first created in the mind of the Lord Brahma.

The sacred lake is over-shadowed by Namunani, 7728m, also named by Tibetans as “Peak of Sacred Mother”.

Mt Kailash and Namunani face each other across the Lake Manasarovar and compliment each other; Kailash is masculine and craggy, while Namunani is graceful and feminine.

So long ago
Beneath her magnificent beauty
Below the endless blue sky
My mind felt innermost peace for the first time
And I left with a new understanding of love

So I returned again
Under the same endless blue sky
Her magnificent beauty overcast by the suppressed sadness
My heart felt an indiscribable lost
And I left with a new understanding of sorrow

Never can speak of love or express the pain
So I never returned
Maybe a truly enlightened mind
Can take me back beyond the time and oneself

















Above the cloud
Under the dark night
I returned on her summons
To speak of love and sorrow

In the sunshine
Under the moonlight
To depart needs more courage than ever
I left with a new understanding of freedom



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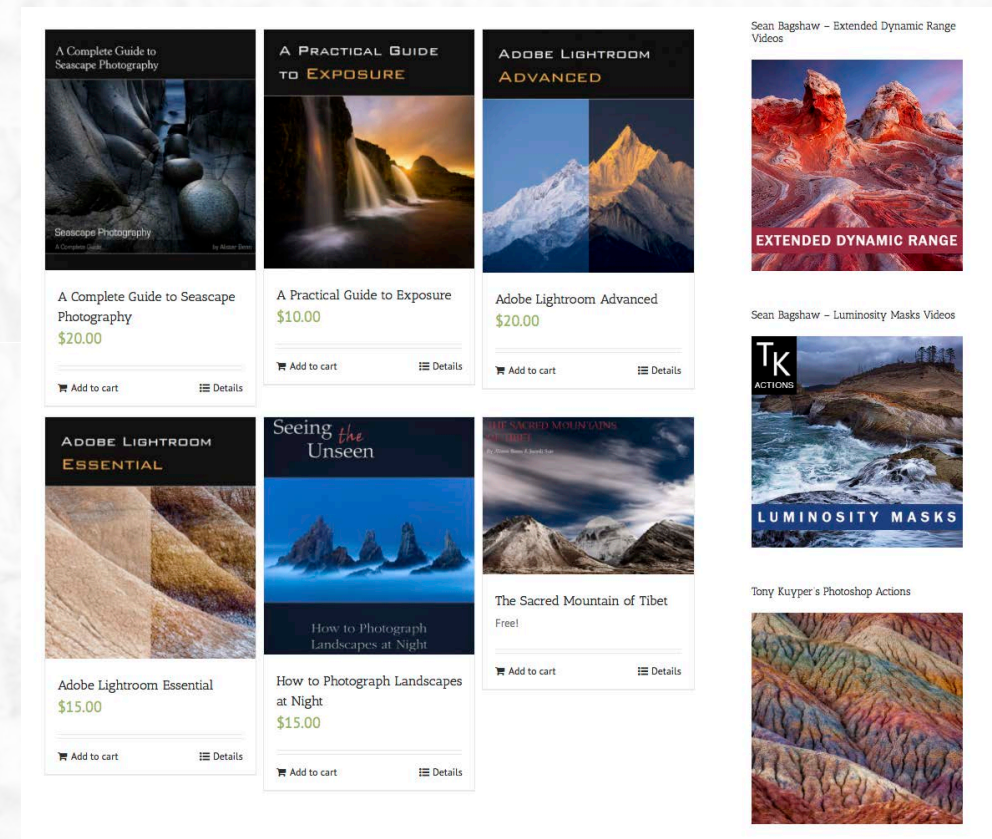
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