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# CHINA INSIGHT

## THE AMAZING DR JOSEPH ROCK

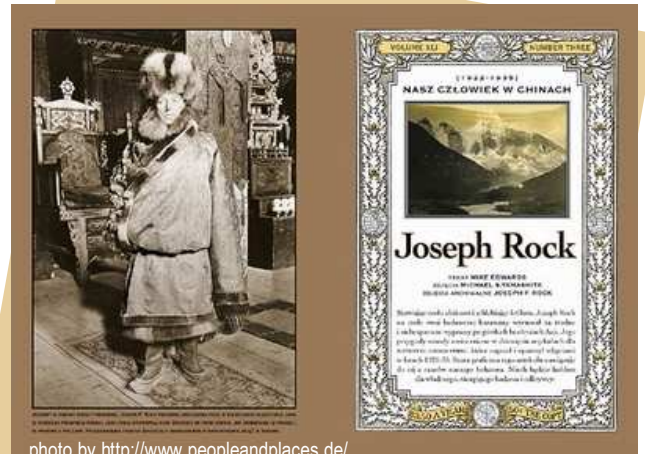
By Tony Lambert

When subscribers opened their magazine *National Geographic* in July 1931 they could feast their eyes on 24 unique color photographs of an obscure but beautiful part of south-west China. 'Nashi sorcerers perform a mystic ceremony'... 'Lamas make the demons of hell very real'.....' Youngning lamas don weird masks for a religious dance'...

They were also introduced to the 'King of Muli' who 'holds spiritual and temporal sway over 22,000 subjects in a territory the size of Massachusetts'. The king gazes out at us enthroned high on cushions, clothed in saffron and blood-red robes against a background of Tibetan lama Buddhist paintings.

All these color photos were the work of the amazing Dr Joseph Rock, explorer, journalist, adventurer, botanist and photographer who penetrated the unknown corners of south-west China for *National Geographic* in a colorful career spanning three decades (1922- 1949).

Born in Vienna in 1884, the son of a nobleman's servant, Rock moved to the USA in 1905 at the age of 21 and became an American citizen in 1913. The first record of Rock in the *National Geographic* was a memo written in 1921. It said: "Mr Joseph F. Rock called here today regarding an

photo by <http://www.peopleandplaces.de/>....

article in 'Hunting the Chalmoogra Plant'." Rock had taken up botany in Hawaii and although he never had university education became an expert. In 1920 the US Department of Agriculture sent him to Siam and Burma to search for the chalmoogra which, it was hoped, might be a cure for leprosy. Rock brought back some seeds, and showed he could survive in the wildest corners of Asia. *The Geographic* were eager to employ him, and between 1924 and 1935 no less than nine of his detailed articles – all lavishly illustrated - were published in the magazine bringing the exotic kingdoms and snow-mantled peaks of south-west China to his readers for the very first time.



In 1923-24 he led the National Geographic Society's 'Yunnan Province Expedition', a title renewed in 1927 for three years. From Yunnan he worked his way almost 1,000 miles north, almost as far as the Gobi. "No white man, since time began, ever stood here", he boasted as he overlooked the gorges of the Yellow River in Qinghai province. In August 1926 he described how he slid across the foaming Mekong River on a rope of twisted bamboo. In October 1930 he traveled to some of China's highest peaks, including Minya Konka, braving blizzards. He camped above 10,000 feet exchanging mules for yaks which were better suited to the harsh conditions. He suffered bandit attacks and dysentery while staying in filthy villages.

In 1928 *Geographic* readers were treated to a new spectacle – high quality color photos of the remote corners of Lijiang and Muli. In fact, Rock's color photos were among the first to be published on a large scale in a popular magazine anywhere in the world. [See Note 1] The odds against obtaining color photos in SW China were formidable. To make the colors, the large 5 by 7 inch glass plates bore a coating of potato-starch grains dyed orange, green and violet. Even in bright sunlight, Rock had to expose the plate for a whole second. Few of Rock's Naxi and Tibetan subjects had ever seen a camera, so his achievement was considerable. He usually processed the plates while traveling, filtering water through cotton, and lighting yak dung fires to warm the chemical baths needed. It was almost a

miracle that nearly 600 of the developed glass plates reached Washington D.C. intact. Rock's photos of subjects both sublime and bizarre – glacier-topped peaks, temple rituals performed by lama devil dancers – gave a unique glimpse of the peoples of SW China.

Rock had been drawn to China as a boy, learning to read a bit of Chinese in a Vienna museum. As an adventurer he was fascinated by the cultures of China's minority peoples. Repelled by the chaos and corruption of a China beset by warlords he nevertheless always was drawn back, as he was also repelled by 'automobile-mad America' and the 'so-called civilized world'.

Rock made his home in the Naxi village of Nguloko (now known as Yuhu) just north of Lijiang, now well-visited as a U.N. recognized centre of Naxi culture. He resided there on and off until 1949 when like other Westerners he was forced to leave – much against his own desires. Rock called the village 'charmingly situated', in the shadow of the spectacular Jade Dragon Snow mountains, 'if not overclean'.(!) From this HQ Rock sallied forth to collect plant specimens and sent 60,000 specimens pressed between paper to the Smithsonian, as well as seeds packed in charcoal to the Dept of Agriculture. Some of his rhododendrons are still growing today in San Francisco and the U.K.!



Rock traveled in style to impress the local people. His typical caravan had 26 mules & 17 men accompanied by 190 armed soldiers to frighten off bandits. Rock himself was imperious, dressed in boots, riding breeches and a pith helmet, although on occasions he donned the garb of a Tibetan nobleman with long silk sleeves and upturned boots and fur hat. His baggage included tents, a folding bed, chairs, a table and even a phonograph with which he astonished local nomads and monks with performances of La Boheme!

Rock enjoyed being treated as an important personage. His editors described him as ‘cantankerous’. A life-long bachelor he was the classic loner, exactly suited to pioneer exploration. Sometimes he took a missionary or other Westerner on his travels, but usually found fault and parted company. He was not a Christian as far as we know.

However, despite his faults Rock first drew attention to the ancient Naxi culture more than 50 years before Lijiang became a World Heritage site and a tourist-trap. His first article as *National Geographic* expedition leader was all about the Naxi ‘dongba’ or shamans and their fantastic rituals,

dancing, leaping into bonfires and dipping hands into burning oil, to drive out evil spirits from the sick. He translated the unique ancient pictographs that recounted Naxi history and religion, deeply rooted in the animistic and demonic Bon religion of Tibet. Only the dongba were able to read these manuscripts.

He eventually wrote two mammoth histories of the Naxi and a 1,000-page Naxi dictionary. These works have recently been republished in Chinese inside China. “What Rock did was very important”, stated a Naxi specialist at the Yunnan Academy of Social Sciences in Kunming recently. “Today we can’t get the information like he got from those passed-away shamans”.

Today the Naxi people remain largely unreached with the Gospel. A small Pentecostal work was established in Lijiang in the 1930s or 40s but left hardly a trace. Sadly, the darker sides of the Naxi dongba religion are often encouraged by local government to attract more tourists. But in the providence of God Joseph Rock provided a unique insight into Naxi culture which will prove invaluable to pioneers of the Gospel, both Chinese and Western, to this beautiful but spiritually dark region.

## NOTES AND SOURCES

NOTE 1: Color photography had been invented two decades before Rock. As early as 1907 autochrome photos had been demonstrated publicly in Paris. In 1908 the millionaire banker and philanthropist Albert Kahn began a spectacular project to photograph the entire world in color. This lasted until 1930, but until recently Kahn's massive photographic archive, now housed in La Musee Albert Kahn in Boulogne-Billancourt, France, was largely unknown. (A superb collection of Kahn's rare images including many from the Far East was published by BBC

Books in 2008.) But Rock's color photos were probably among the first to reach a wide popular audience.

The information on Rock's life has been drawn from the article published in *National Geographic*, January 1997. For those interested in tracking down his original articles, these may still be found in old copies of the *National Geographic* in second-hand bookstores in the United States and the U.K. The relevant issues are: August 1926, October 1930, July 1931 etc between 1922 and 1935.