

Kunlun Mountains

Kūnlún Shān 昆仑山

The Kunlun Mountains are a sparsely populated 2,500-kilometer-long mountain range that constitutes the physical border between Tibet and the Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region in Western China. It is crossed by the Qinghai-Tibet railway, the highest in the world.

The Kunlun mountain range is about 2,500 kilometers long and runs southeast to northwest on the northwestern border of the Tibetan Plateau. The mountain range stretches from the Pamir Highlands in central Asia to central China, where it forks out into three ranges: the Altun Shan range, the Arkatag range, and the Hoh Xil (Kekexili) range. The Kunlun range constitutes a physical border between Tibet and the Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region and extends into Qinghai Province. The width of the range varies but seldom exceeds 200 kilometers. The height of the mountains varies between 4,000 and 7,000 meters, and in the higher western part, where the range is composed of three parallel ridges, peaks such as Kongur and Muztagata reach more than 7,500 meters. The southern slopes fade into the 1,500-meter lower Tibetan Plateau, while the northern slopes are extremely steep. On the Tibetan-Xinjiang border, the Kunlun range has a glaciated area of about 4,000 square kilometers, and the glacial streams of the northern slopes are important for the oases in the Taklimakan Desert.

Above 3,500 meters the Kunlun range has annual average temperatures below zero, and highs and lows may reach 24° C and -45° C, respectively. The climate is dry, with an average precipitation of less than 300 millimeters annually. The mountains consist mostly of snow-covered peaks and areas, with no or sparse vegetation interspersed with marsh and wetland formed by melting ice and overflowing rivers. In spite of the extreme climatic conditions, the region has a prolific wildlife population, with more than two hundred species, including a population of about four thousand antelopes that migrates from the southern Tibetan plateau during the summer to give birth. These are under state protection along with the wild donkey, the wild yak, the brown bear, the snow leopard, and several other species.

The range is thinly populated by pastoral nomads whose economy is based on yak, sheep, goats, and, to a lesser extent, cattle. People do little farming in the region. Gold deposits have been discovered at Kaihungbei in the southeastern part of the Kunlun range. The Golmud-Lhasa section of the Qinghai-Tibet railway, which opened 1 July 2006, passes the eastern section of the Kunlun range through the Tanggula Pass 5,231 meters above sea level. The highest situated railway station in the world is located nearby at 5,072 meters. Active fault zones are located along the central Kunlun mountain area, which experienced an earthquake measuring 7.8 on the Richter scale on 14 November 2001.

Since at least the third century BCE the Kunlun Mountains have been known in Chinese literature as a mythical realm, a paradise in which the legendary Queen Mother

Kunlun

A poem written in 1935 about Min Mountain, part of the Kunlun Mountain range, by China political leader Mao Zedong.

Above the earth and across the blue,
The vast Kunlun,
You have gone over all the world's vernal views.
Up soar three million jade dragons,
Stirring and chilling through the entire
heavens.
In summer days you thaw,
And rivers overflow,
Men may become fishes and turtles.
To you merits and crimes throughout the ages,
Who has done justice?

Now I bid Kunlun:
You needn't be so high,
Nor need you so many snows.
Could I but lean against the sky and unsheathe
my sword
To cleave you into three pieces?
One be sent to Europe,
One be presented to America,
And here in the Orient one remains.
A peaceful world,
And in the whole globe it would be as cold or
warm as this is.

Source: Chunhou Zhang & Vaughan, E. C. (2002). *Mao Zedong as poet and revolutionary leader: Social and historical perspectives*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 48.

of the West (Xiwangmu) resided. This realm was the far west where the sun sets but also the place where the Earth meets the sky and thus the axis mundi (turning point of the world) and the place from which people were thought to ascend to immortality. In later Daoist religion the legend of the Queen Mother and her court of immortals in the Western Paradise was greatly expanded.

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Further Reading

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- Zhu, Z. & Jäkel, D. (1991). *Reports on the 1986 Sino-German Kunlun Shan Taklimakan-Expedition*. Berlin: Gesellschaft für Erdkunde zu Berlin.

