

Winter alpinism in Sichuan

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WINTER ALPINISM IN SICHUAN

In 1981, the AACZ staged one of the most ambitious and successful expeditions in its history, travelling to the remote Minya Konka Range in Sichuan province in southwestern China. Armed with no information more recent than sketches drawn by biologist Eduard Imhof in 1936, the team of Roman Boutellier (leader), Gregor Benisowitsch, Gregor Dürrenberger, Georg Furger, Franz Häfliger, Jürg Hochstrasser, Felix Müller, Robi Spoerry and Gery Styger approached the eastern side of Minya Konka via the Hailuogou Glacier. After driving many muddy, winding roads through remote foothills to the low-lying farming village of Moxi and hacking through impenetrable jungle in equally impenetrable spring fog, they were able to establish a rather low base camp on the glacier and climb a number of untouched 5000m and 6000m peaks. Although Minya Konka itself was inaccessible in any sort of safety, the team's major triumphs included the first ascents of Zhongshan (Sun Yat-Sen Peak, 6886m) and Tai Shan (6410m).

In the brave new China of the 21st Century, Moxi is a city of hotels and restaurants providing services to the busloads of tourists visiting the 5-star attraction of the Hailuogou Glacier, where they can ride several cable cars to viewpoints almost as high as the AACZ base camp. All the roads are paved (albeit frequently badly) and all the farmers own small vans to move their produce to the towns. Visiting foreigners can fly to Chengdu, rent a two-wheel-drive car and drive to Moxi, to 2700m on the approach to the Minya Konka temple at the southwest side of the range, and to 3900m on a pass at its northeast end. The same visitors can also call up trekking maps and photos of the range on the in-

ternet and look at Google Earth to examine the topography of the individual peaks. Starting in late January 2014, I went to Sichuan for a high-speed month of winter alpinism. I was accompanied by Marcos Costa, a Brazilian and fellow China resident who manages to spend much of his year on the road, developing different climbing areas. For acclimatisation purposes, we began in Shuangqiaogou (Twin Bridge Valley), the ice-climbing capital of China, located in a 3000-4000m valley to the west of the famous Siguniang (Fourth Sister) peak. Along with regular ice classics such as Dragon's Breath (WI5) and the compete Stairway to Heaven (WI5), on January 23rd we also made the first ascent of the mixed line "How to Train your Dragon" (M7, WI5+), previously scouted by Marcos. On January 25th we acclimatised further by tackling an unclimbed peak of 5420m located on the ridge between Shuangqiaogou and the parallel Changpinggou (Long Meadow Valley), much of it a straightforward if tedious shale hike. However, 100 vertical metres from the summit, the ridge sharpened and steepened to a loose, vertical wall with no meaningful protection, where some abseil slings around a boulder indicated we were not the first to discover this showstopper. We contented ourselves with the beautiful views of Siguniang and the pyramidal Pomiu on a perfect day. On January 27th we drove west to Yala (5820m), accompanied by Garrett Bradley (USA), to attempt a route on the west face also previously scouted by Marcos. We hiked in at night on the 27th to a base camp at some excellent hot springs beneath the face and rested for a day while scoping the new-route potential of the area. On the 29th we started climbing at 5am and made

rapid progress up the central snow gully. Garrett was not feeling well acclimatised and bivouacked at the top of this gully (c. 5400m). At this point we climbed mixed and snow terrain for 200m to gain a rocky ridge that connected to the snow/ice summit ridge at 5700m, reaching the summit at 5pm in excellent but windy weather conditions. This new route is the third ascent of Yala after a 2006 climb of the north face by a UK/New Zealand team and another in 2006 by Americans Christine Boskoff and Charlie Fowler, who died afterwards on a nearby peak. Having brought a tent in order to sleep high on the mountain, we chose a bivouac site beneath the ridge at 5750m and descended the route the following day.

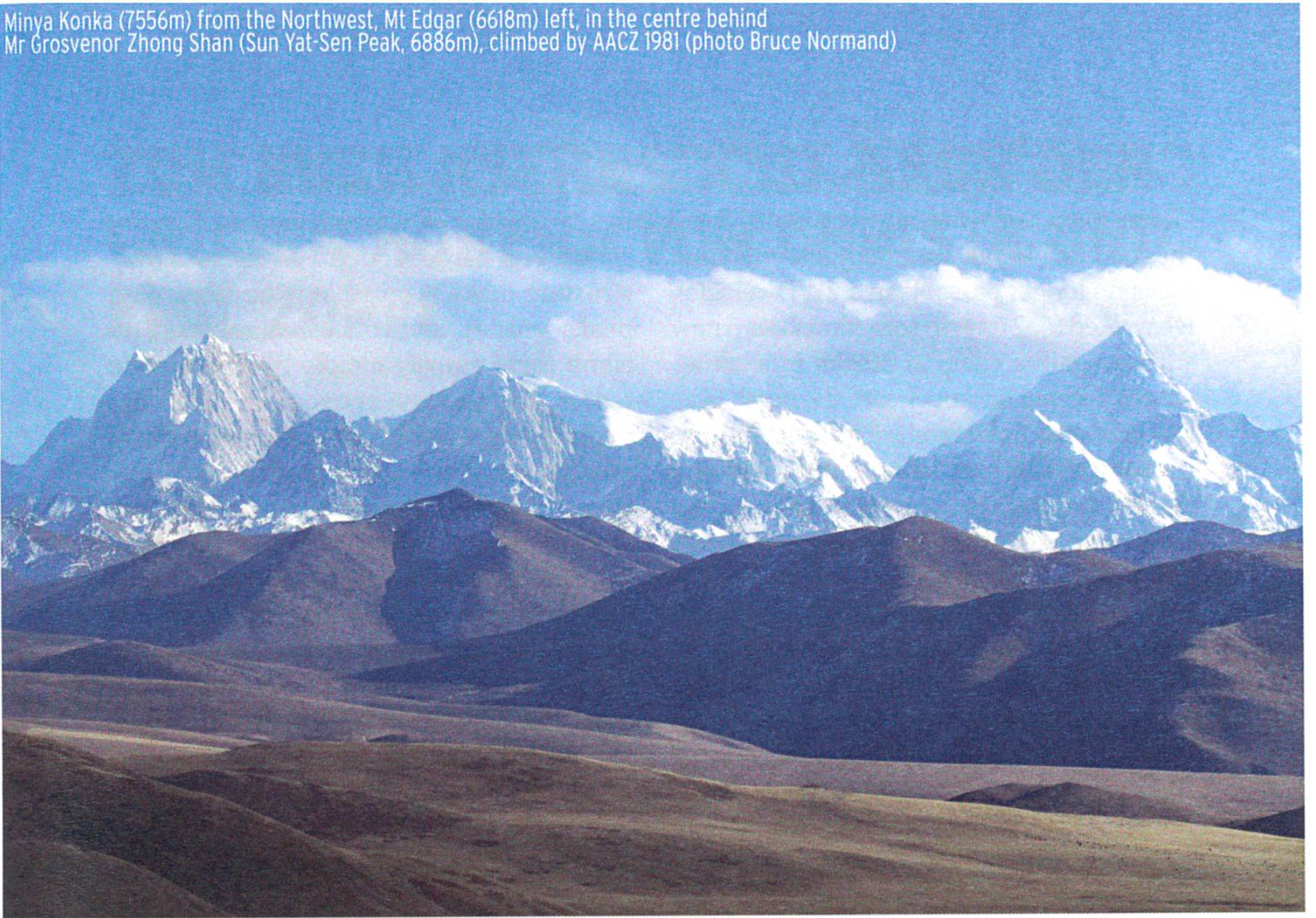
After a brief rest in Kangding, we continued as a team of three to the southwest side of the Minya Konka range, where a number of the southern outliers of the main (7556m) summit remain unclimbed. This required driving over the 3900m pass mentioned above, down to Moxi and back up to the road end at 2700m, all accomplished in this century in half a day of driving. From this southern side, the peaks south of Minya Konka are approached not by a huge and active glacier like the Hailuogou but by steep and mostly trail-free hiking up riverbeds and old moraines, to reach remnant glaciers (doubtless much smaller now than in 1981) at an altitude of 5000m. The modern convenience mentioned above has also brought a dose of confusion, because recent maps identify Tai Shan (6410m) as Jinyin Shan (Gold-Silver Peak) and use the name Tai Shan for an unclimbed 6468m peak located between Long Shan (6684m, unclimbed) and P6410; they also label a further summit, Sanlian Feng (6368m), on this ridge between P6468 and P6410, and this is believed to be Chu Shan as named by Heim and Imhof. In this report the peaks will be labelled by their heights, which are

consistent among all sources.

Our initial view of the P6684-P6468-P6368-P6410 cirque from the mouth of the valley suggested that we should aim for the northwestern end of the ridge for the most promising climbing terrain. After hiking all day on February 2nd and 3rd to gain the foot of a small glacier spilling off the south face of P6468, we camped below a large boulder for protection from the near-constant rockfall we witnessed during our approach. On the 4th, the weather was good but the wind strong. We climbed the south-southwest ridge on blue ice up to 55 degrees, followed by a lower angle snow ridge, but a summit attempt was aborted at 6200m due to the unrelenting high winds. On the 5th we recuperated by moving the camp up to a higher and safer glacier location to the west of P6468. On the 6th, the winds had calmed substantially in the morning and so we climbed again, following the same ridge all the way to the summit but encountering significant clouds and only partial views. We were able to verify that our peak, which is the point marked on maps as P6468, actually has two summits, the east one marginally (5-10m) higher than, and 500-700m distant from, the west one which we climbed. However, for want of an unambiguous name, the summit whose first ascent we made will remain known as P6468 for the time being. The descent proved challenging as the winds picked up and we had to brace ourselves many times against gusts exceeding 80km/h. On the 7th and 8th we made the 2-day descent to the road.

At this point, Garrett left and we spent some time on reconnaissance in far northwestern Yunnan (the Meili Range). We chose to finish our Sichuan journey in the Garze Tibetan Autonomous Region in the north of the province, attracted there by Tamotsu Nakamura's map of "Sichuan's Most Out-

Minya Konka (7556m) from the Northwest, Mt Edgar (6618m) left, in the centre behind
Mr Grosvenor Zhong Shan (Sun Yat-Sen Peak, 6886m), climbed by AACZ 1981 (photo Bruce Normand)



Tai Shan (6410m). Ascent AACZ 1981 (photo Bruce Normand)



standing Unclimbed Peaks.” Among these is Kawarani I, 5992m, and the access from Garze town is to the northern side. From the road end (more accurately, the mud and rocks no longer passable in a 2WD vehicle), we walked for 2 days in sometimes deep new snow to gain a camp at 5000m in a somewhat sheltered basin beneath the north face. On February 20th we climbed from here to the summit and back in a single day, soloing up and down on 45-50-degree snow for the entire way. Wispy clouds restricted the summit views, except down the heavily glaciated south side of the peak, but the winds remained low.

The mountains of Sichuan form a region with essentially only two seasons, the winter and the monsoon. Winters are sun-

ny and dry, but also cold and windy, and thus present good climbing opportunities to suitably equipped parties. The dry conditions and modern Chinese infrastructure make it possible to approach the peaks quickly and, once acclimatized, to climb them equally rapidly by alpine-style tactics. The contrast between the 1981 expedition and our 2014 journey provides another excellent mirror in which to view the remarkable changes achieved by China within one generation – not merely a modernization of some showcase cities, but a profound transformation reaching to the most basic infrastructure in the remotest mountain villages.

Bruce Normand, Beijing, January 2015

The author with Minya Konka (left) and Long Shan (right) behind (photo Bruce Normand)

