

Exploration in the Chinese Tien Shan

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Objektyp: **Article**

Zeitschrift: **Jahresbericht / Akademischer Alpen-Club Zürich**

Band (Jahr): **113 (2008)**

PDF erstellt am: **28.06.2024**

Persistenter Link: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-554155>

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EXPLORATION IN THE CHINESE TIEN SHAN

(CHINA: TIEN SHAN EXPEDITION 2008)

In August 2008, I led an exploratory climbing expedition on the Xinjiang side of the Tien Shan. While the Kirghiz/Kazakh side is well known due to the Soviet mountaineering focus on Pik Pobeba and Khan Tengri, the Chinese part is not. This half of the range is in essence a single, east-west chain of 6000m peaks, over 50km in length and split in half by the imposing Muzart Gorge, with few high outliers. Only four routes have ever been climbed here, and three are on or near Tomur Feng (Pik Pobeda). Thus the only mountaineering activity anywhere in the 50km chain was the 1990 Japanese ascent, on their fourth attempt, of Xuelian Feng (6628m).

For the modern climber, this chain has remained an enigma because of access problems: the Muzart River has destroyed the historical trade route from the south and ethnic riots have closed the regions to the north. However, the Xiate Trail has recently been reopened as an adventurous trekking route, and by using it we became the first team of climbers ever to approach from the northern side.

APPROACHING THE XINJIANG TIEN SHAN

I came overland from the Hunza in Pakistan, the journey past Muztagh Ata and Kongur to Kashgar now taking one long day. Entering China – a week before the Olympics would open – required intensive checks and baggage searches. In Kashgar I dealt with the agent and picked up our translator, Ye Bing, who had chosen the Western name David. He and I quickly hit the (remarkably smooth) road for the 24-hour (1600km) haul to Urumqi in an air-conditioned sleeper bus.

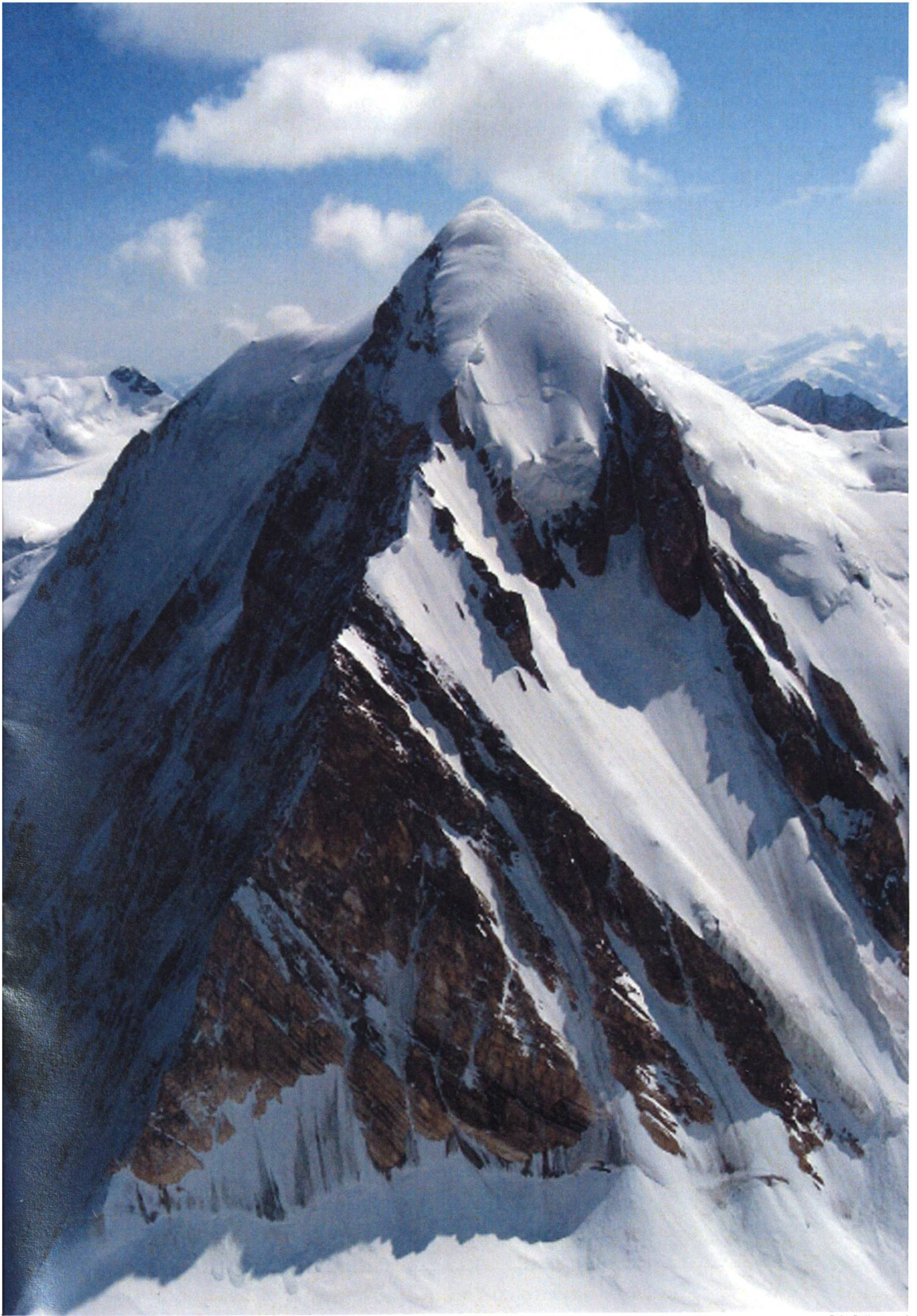
In Urumqi we met the other team members, New Zealanders Paul Knott and Guy

McKinnon. The local Carrefour supermarket provided staples for the entire trip. David showed that he was no ordinary translator, first producing canisters of good Korean butane and then taking us to a market where 50kg of expedition vegetables cost 20CHF, and an entire kitchen and BC tent (a gigantic tarpaulin) 60CHF. With a few calls to family friends, he found us a car and a pickup for the journey to Ili. The friends wanted to leave the moment our last team member, trekking guide Li, had arrived, and soon we were cruising into the night, down a motorway in the padded luxury of a four-door saloon.

At dawn we passed Lake Sayram, an inland sea between the Tien Shan foothills and the endless steppes. The motorway ended and we lurched down into the huge valley of Ili, passing fields of wheat, corn and sunflowers, and mounds of amazing melons. We fortified ourselves with a Uighur breakfast and went to the PSB (foreigner police). A habit started, to be repeated at every checkpoint: "we cannot guarantee your security in this special Olympic time and you will have to go back." Equally reliably, David would talk us through and off we would go. By nightfall we had reached the last big town, Zhaosu, located in another wide, fertile valley between east-west chains of foothills. Five minutes after our arrival at a grand but surprisingly cheap hotel, the local constabulary came rushing in - about 10 men in full uniform required to carry away our passports.

THROUGH THE FOOTHILLS TO BASE CAMP

In the morning, a line of gigantic white peaks formed the southern horizon, with Khan Tengri clearly recognizable at its wes-



Khanjaylak I (5420m) viewed from Khanjaylak II

Foto B. Normand

tern end. We bought the expedition egg supply while business was transacted at the police station, and then were waved away. Still on a paved road, through green fields and with wooded foothills and white mountains rising ahead, we could have been somewhere north of Thun. We had to leave our passports at the final police post in Xiante village, then drove 22km of smooth gravel track and unloaded by a yurt in a classic alpine landscape: forests, snowy peaks, horses in the pastures and hay being gathered in the fields. We spent the afternoon eating local (Kazakh) bread, butter and cream cheese while David and Li rounded up a horseman.

We'd been told a horse carries 60kg and promised five for the agreed price. The sorrowful character who had made the deal arrived with three, threw 100kg on each and then proceeded to ride one. After a forced river-crossing with the overloaded horses, we staged a strike until he found another. He also knew nothing at all about horsepacking, and loads, bridles or saddles would fall off regularly. The day turned grey as we approached the mountains through broad meadows and forests, past wooden shacks in Russian style.

The next morning we came to the last summer pasture, occupied by two huts, five dogs, 200 sheep and at least 50 head of horses. The patriarch of the pasture accompanied our weak-kneed horseman to base camp (BC), which involved a final climb to a grassy pass at 3500m, still on a gentle path through old moraines. Two kilometers later, we were cut off 200m from BC by a lake and a steep moraine the horses could not cross. Strong wind gusts carried showers through the pass. Li and David dismissed the incompetent horseman with due invective, then crossed to BC to set up the tarp over the biggest rock. Paul and Guy both seemed to be ill, leaving me to shuttle most of the 300kg by myself.

EXPLORATION

A clear morning gave excellent views from our grassy, alpine balcony onto the convoluted, Karakoram-scale wastes of the Muzart Glacier. Straight ahead was the magnificent N Face of Xuelian West (6422m). Leaving Guy and Paul to rest, I shouldered a load of gear and headed up-glacier. Crossing the moraines into the centre was quite straightforward, and then a vein of white ice led all the way to the upper cirque. I trekked past Xuelian West, North (6450m) and Northeast (6189m), all unclimbed bastions of steep granite and serac-threatened slopes, with long ridges and broken access glaciers. The 5000m peaks to my left (north) became progressively more interesting. I dropped the load at a large rock 13.2km from BC and walked back, noting the afternoon weather pattern: rain in BC, on gusting winds through our pass, but dry everywhere else.

Another pattern started: the next day was sunny and dry, so we all took heavy packs up to camp at my rock, now officially Advanced BC (ABC, 3950m). The next morning it was snowing heavily, and we slept all day. The following morning found the snow still falling, so we gave up and went back to BC with nothing gained. Then it cleared, and the following day we were back at ABC. We made a reconnaissance mission to the very back of the Muzart Glacier, in knee-deep snow over open crevasses, to a 4700m pass, finding a near-vertical 300m drop beyond it. We had good views of the 5000 m peaks to the north, of all sides of Xuelian NE (none objectively safe), of the very challenging but aesthetic Xuelian East, and of the buttresses guarding Yanamax (6332m) to our east. With clouds blowing in, we returned to ABC. The next morning it was snowing again. I gave up immediately and returned to BC, while Guy and Paul paid for their optimism with a wetter hike back the next day. This time it also snowed heavily in BC for a further 24



Bild oben: Tien Shan range from Zhaosu

Bild unten: Base Camp, Muzart Glacier and Northface of Xuelian West behind



Foto B. Normand

hours: the atypically poor August weather was changing from an inconvenience to a serious threat.

CLIMBING: KHANJAYLAK I AND KHANJAYLAK II

The next day was clear and windy. Li had left after guiding us to BC, while David had fallen ill and returned to Xiata for medicine. He came back in the snow with Keli, a young man from the upper pasture. We set out again, aiming for some real acclimatization on the 5000m peaks. The same evening we carried a minimum of equipment from ABC to an AABC at 4300m on one of the side-glaciers, which was a somewhat involved hike, and were in bed well after dark.

The weather was holding. A few hours later we were making steps up the S Ridge of one of the 5000m peaks. With little deep snow and no need to belay (maximum 45-degree firn), we were on top soon after sunrise. The measured height was 5422m and we named the peak Khanjaylak I, after the meadow area below its north side, through which we had trekked on the first day from Xiata. We had a complete view not only over all the Xuelian peaks, but also of the entire ridge stretching from the Muzart Gorge to Khan Tengri: high, rounded summits with steep north and south walls, all unclimbed, and indeed untouched. Also spectacular were the peaks and glacier basins east of Yanamax: elegant sub-6000m summits in another tract of completely unknown alpine terrain. We spent two hours on top, then left before the snow could soften, returning to AABC by 1pm.

The next day's plan was Khanjaylak II, the rather more impressive neighbouring peak. This is the mountain visible directly from the road end at Xiata Hot Springs, whose image is beamed all over China both to promote tourism and in general advertising. A few hundred meters from AABC, Paul fell into a crevasse. He was in the

middle, and Guy and I levered him out with the non-textbook straight haul, but he was a little shaken and wanted to go back to camp. Setting out again, Guy and I navigated a different course up the glacier and soon gained a short, icy face which put us on the NE shoulder. To our surprise, the dawn clouds dispersed as we climbed, in deep snow and sometimes under mildly disconcerting seracs. Below the summit we took an icy, east-facing slope, then cut back through a serac line to the N Ridge and up curious snow to the top. The altimeter read 5380m and the view was good, especially to the west. The descent was rapid, and at AABC we packed up to retrace our steps to ABC, arriving before the afternoon storm.

YANAMAX

The next day was sunny with little new snow. Guy and I decided to try Yanamax, but Paul preferred not to. This rest day ended like most others, but at 3am it was fairly clear. We packed and left. Under the imposing W Face of Yanamax is a small hanging glacier, beside which a north-facing snow slope leads to a bench which curves around to the upper south side of the mountain. Remaining in deep shadow as the day began, we crossed under the hanging glacier and continued steadily up the snow. Suddenly it turned waist-deep and bottomless under a crust. To avoid serious avalanche risk, we trenched our way between outcrops of rock for two nightmarish hours. We came out just above the bench and, as I led across the short but steep and icy slope, a 5cm snow slab came off. I pulled us both into a 30m slide, which luckily claimed no casualties. We walked up the bench and, still in partly sunny weather, dug in a camp (C1, 5150m).

A windstorm blew for half the night, but it was calm and clear as we set out. The rising bench led us into a short, 50-degree ice face and onto the S Buttress at day-

reak. From there we found good snow up to the long, low-angle shoulder leading to the summit. Clouds from the southwest rose steadily as we climbed through alternately wind-pressed snow and knee-deep powder, and closed in as we topped out on the most significant summit of Guy's career. For me it was also no small achievement: Yanamax is long, steep on all sides, and at the outset was truly terra incognita. The descent was straightforward and we were back at the tent at 2pm, electing to stay and face the unstable snow slopes at dawn.

Again it stormed for much of the night, but the morning was relatively clear. It was a long, unsteady descent beside the hanging glacier. By the time we emerged onto the glacier below, the day had become sunny and warm. After a few kilometers in new snow, we were back on ice and moving rapidly towards ABC. We were tired, and very tired of wallowing in unstable snow. Paul was planning to join us for another climb, but we had to tell him we were definitively finished with north-facing slopes for the year. With that, there was nothing left to do from ABC, so we returned to BC.

The next day was clear and sunny. I crossed straight over the Muzart Glacier into the basin beneath the ramparts of Xuelian West. This side-glacier has many more, large crevasses than the main glacier. Access to the W Ridge remained questionable, and the N Face as imposing as ever. From here Xuelian Main is protected by icefalls, but Xuelian N is feasible. To try it, we would need perfect weather for the last four days of our expedition. As I crossed back to BC, high clouds were blowing in, and by morning the barometer had dropped again. The climbing component of the expedition was over.

RETURN

Keli's father had ridden over to ask if we wanted horses to take us back to Xiata.

With the weather deteriorating, we agreed. We spent the afternoon packing, and in the morning Keli's brother appeared with 3 horses. After more packing incompetence, we were back in the pasture by early afternoon, where the father retied the loads properly. The day's clouds gathered strength and delivered a serious deluge as we passed through Khanjaylak. In Xiata Hot Springs, we took refuge in a tawdry bunkhouse as the rain set in for the night, and consecrated our completed mission with a sauna in the Springs.

The morning was sunny again, with snow down to 3000m. The Khanjaylak peaks looked very wintry, dispelling any regrets about our early departure. The bunkhouse owner drove us back to Xiata village for the passports. Now it was day 31 of my 30-day visa, which somehow had not been extended by Li. With David saying all the right things, the Zhaosu police filled in some forms and said we should get to the PSB in Ili by closing time. They produced a man with a van, who put his foot to the floor. He took us over, not around, the 3000m hills between Zhaosu and Ili, and some very interesting limestone was visible. We made it with 30 minutes to spare, and the visa was extended completely officially for 30CHF. The only hotel in town licensed for foreigners was the Gostinitza Ili, where a bust of Lenin decorated the gateway.

With this the expedition was at an end. We took a bus the next afternoon, enjoyed our last view of the Tien Shan at Lake Sayram at sunset, and were back in Urumqi before dawn. The conclusion was clear: even in the days of Google Earth and saturation media and internet coverage of the high mountains, there is still no shortage of new climbing challenges for the people prepared to seek them out.

By Bruce Normand

