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British Siguniang Expedition 2002

Supported by:

Finance:

**British Mountaineering Council
Mount Everest Foundation**

Equipment:

**The North Face
Black Diamond
Scarpa**



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**BRITISH
SIGUNANG
EXPEDITION
2002**

**SICHUAN
CHINA**

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AIMS OF THE EXPEDITION

- 1 To make the first ascent of the North Face of Mt Siguniang (6250m) in the Qionglai range, Sichuan, China.
- 2 To undertake the first British exploration of the Qionglai range and report back on the potential.

THE TEAM

Mick Fowler (45) Civil Servant Leader

Regular climber in the greater ranges. First 'Alpine Style' ascents of Taulliraju South Buttress (Peru 1982), West Face of Ushba North (Caucasus 1986), Spantik North West Pillar (Pakistan 1987), Aksu North Face (Kyrgystan 1990), Hunza Peak (Pakistan 1991), Cerro Kishtwar North West Face (India 1993), Taweche North West Pillar (Nepal 1995), Arwa Tower North West Face (India 1999), Mt Kennedy North Buttress (Yukon 2000) etc.

Paul Ramsden (32) Health & Safety Advisor

Extensive rock climbing and mountaineering experience in Europe, Middle East, Africa, North America, South America, Asia and the Antarctic.

First winter ascents of Cerro Poincenot and Aig Guillaumet. Winter ascent of Supercouloir (Patagonia 1999). First ascent of new routes on East Face of Jebel Misht (Oman 1999), South Face of Thunder Mountain (Alaska 1997), Mt Providence (Alaska 1997), South Ridge of Mt Crosson (Alaska 1996) etc.

Mike Morrison (44) Contracts Manager

25 years of European alpine and rock climbing. Numerous new routes in summer and winter in the UK. North Face of Matterhorn, North Face of Eiger etc.

Greater range climber for 20 years having been a member of successful expeditions to Peru, Pakistan, India and Nepal.

Roger Gibbs (32) Cake Salesman

12 years rock climbing experience leading up to E4 (Skull/Great Wall etc.). Scottish
Ice climbing up to grade V (Point V etc.)

Seven alpine/Yosemite seasons. (North Face, Cima Grande, North West Face Half
Dome etc.) 1995 trip to Nepal (Island Peak)

PREPARATION

This is a very straightforward area to climb in as restrictions are minimal and
communications good. The area is now a National Park and a small fee is payable to
enter and camp in the Park.

Language is a problem. Outside Chengdu no-one speaks any English and unless you
have a Chinese speaker in the party we would recommend that you employ an
interpreter.

There is no need to take any food etc. from the UK as (within reason) everything can
be purchased in Chengdu.

If you use gas stoves, screw-in cylinders can be purchased at the outdoor shop next to
the Traffic Hotel in Chengdu.

We would recommend taking the absolute minimum amount of equipment from the UK as internal Chinese airlines are clued up as to the benefits of charging 'excess baggage.' If caught argue very hard – it worked for us.

TRAVEL TO THE ROADHEAD

From Beijing or Hong Kong the first step is to get to Chengdu. This is a major town of c8million people which is served by approximately 10 flights a day each from Beijing and Hong Kong. Check prices but it worked out cheaper for us to travel via Beijing.

We arrived in Beijing at about 8.30am and bought our tickets to Chengdu at the airport. It is worth noting that credit cards are not accepted. Payment had to be made in Chinese cash which we were easily able to change from sterling at the airport. We were in Chengdu, after a 2.5 hour flight, by mid afternoon.

In Chengdu we would recommend staying at the Traffic Hotel (see map at Appendix 1) which is cheap (about £5 per head) and much favoured by foreign adventure tourists. The gear shop just next to the hotel sells a surprisingly extensive selection of specialised mountaineering equipment. Supermarkets for buying a wide range of foods are reasonably nearby although an interpreter will be useful for working out what you are buying. As a cheap and light mountain food Chinese noodles are excellent.

‘Carol’s by the River’ is a popular bar a few hundred metres from the Traffic Hotel. Beer prices are considerably cheaper than the UK.

From the bus station (a taxi ride from the Traffic Hotel – see map at Appendix 1) it is usually a 6 hour bus ride to the rapidly expanding village of Rilong. The buses all leave very early in the morning so expect to arrive in Rilong by early afternoon. The Chinese government is in the process of turning the Siguniang area into a tourist resort. The spectacular approach road passes through deep wooded valleys in the Wolong Panda reserve and then rises to cross a 4500m col. It is now surfaced all the way. A tremendous amount of building work is underway to transform the sleepy Tibetan village of Rilong into a luxury resort capable of handling a million tourists a year!

Amidst the frantic building work Mr Ma, a local Tibetan, runs a small traditional lodge right opposite the point where the walk into the Changping Valley leaves the road. We highly recommend staying at his place as he understands the needs of climbers, is an expert on the local terrain and hires his horses out at a reasonable rate. His food tastes excellent but it is worth taking care. On the way back two of our party went down with seriously nasty stomach complaints.

ROADHEAD TO BASE CAMP

We hired five horses and Mr Ma to accompany us up the Changping valley which runs past the West side of Signuiang. The cost was about £90 each way which compared very favourably with the prices paid by horse riding tourists.

The park authorities have an unavoidable check point 100m along the track. Our (Tibetan) hosts seemed overly keen to minimise the cost of our stay and initially paid for just one day in the Park. This led to some confusion and park officials arriving at our base camp to demand more money. The total charge was about £60 and we would recommend minimising hassle by simply paying in full up front.

In April 2002 the first part of the walk in was on an unmetalled road which, after an hour or so, gave way to duckboards laid through the woods. The limit of these duckboards (about 2 hours from the road) marked the furthest point reached by most tourists.

After about 6 hours the track emerged from idyllic woods onto the Changping Flats - a large grazing area well populated with yaks. Very few people seem to come up this far. Our intended base camp was 700m or so up steep slopes to the East but Mr Ma was not keen to take his horses on steep ground and so would not go any further. Porters were a possibility but horses are very much the norm and we opted to spend a day ferrying our gear from here to base camp at c4000m about 2 hours higher.

WEATHER

The weather was mixed. We were at base camp from 6th – 25th April. In that time there were three days when it rained/snowed all day, three when there wasn't a cloud in the sky and the rest were varied but involved some sun and some precipitation on most days.

We found an information leaflet which gave the following weather information.

Average monthly temperature and rainfall in Siguniang Mountain

Month	Jan.	Feb.	Mar.	Apr.	May	June	July	Aug.	Sept.	Oct.	Nov.	Dec.
Rainfall (mm)	5	8	18	60	140.2	170	160	120	115.3	80.2	19.2	8.5
Temperature	-2	1	4	6.5	9.8	11	13	12.6	11.2	6.3	2	-1.8

Basically it is cold/clear in the winter and wet/warm in the summer.

CLIMBING POTENTIAL

In April icefalls are thawing but still in place and it is obvious that there is great potential for frozen waterfall climbing in the winter. Craig Luebbens, the American

ice climber, has been here and climbed a few spectacular routes – but there are plenty of unclimbed challenges left.

The scope for major mixed mountaineering lines appears largely confined to Siguniang which towers 500m above all the other peaks in the range. The North East face is still unclimbed and looks a particularly good mixed objective.

A major attraction of the range is numerous spectacular unclimbed peaks in the 5200m – 5700m range. These compare favourably with the Alps and Caucasus but very little has been done and the majority of the peaks are easily accessible but have never been attempted. Most of them are probably climbable at Alpine AD standard but there are numerous harder, mainly rocky, challenges. The maps and photographs at Appendix 2 should give a good idea of the type of terrain and the climbing potential.

Pure rock climbing is also available on the numerous granite walls, some of which would make big wall climbers salivate.

ACHIEVEMENTS OF THE EXPEDITION

Mick Fowler and Paul Ramsden made the first ascent of the North Face of Siguniang.

The following article about the ascent was written by Mick Fowler.

Mike Morrison and Roger Gibbs explored the upper Changping valley and made several ascents including a new line on pt 5484. Roger's diary extracts follow Mick's article on the Siguniang climb.

SIGUNIANG: Sharp and Pointed in Inner China

I felt a sense of rising panic. It was early in the morning and dark. The others had successfully crossed the road and disappeared into the seething depths of the packed bus station. Meanwhile I lay prostrate in the busy road having collapsed under the weight of my enormously heavy bags. Curiously though none of the drivers seemed in any way annoyed at the problems I was causing. In England I could have expected blaring horns, verbal abuse and probably more. But things are different in China. In Chengdu (I subsequently discovered) it is illegal to use the horn. Also the drivers are apparently so used to controlled chaos on the road that my behaviour was accepted as (reasonably) normal. I crawled frantically to the side, dragging the bags behind me whilst trying unsuccessfully to achieve the impossible and watch out for the traffic whilst searching for the others in our group. Adrenaline flowed freely – and we hadn't even set foot on the mountain yet!

The mountain in question was Mount Siguniang, at 6250 metres the highest peak in the Qionglai Shan Range in Sichuan Province. I had first been drawn to it by one of Tamotsu Nakamura's spectacular photographs in the 2001 American Alpine Journal. Closer research revealed that the north face was unclimbed and the mountain had been climbed only 3 times, twice by Japanese sieged ascents and once by the globe trotting American Charlie Fowler who made a remarkable solo ascent from the south in 1992. Amazingly it appeared not to have been attempted by the Chinese whose mountaineering culture is very different from the West and focuses almost exclusively on 8000 metre peaks. Also it appeared that no British climbers had ever visited the area. All the necessary criteria were present to give me a big urge. I had to go.

And so came April 2002 – Paul Ramsden, Mike Morrison, Roger Gibbs and I arrived in the village of Rilong, the closest settlement to Siguniang. We were greeted by a huge blue motorway style sign saying "Siguniang" complete with a large arrow pointing up the Changping valley towards the mountain. At least there was no doubt that we had come to the right place!

Up until about three years ago it was a challenging journey on unmetalled roads to reach this point but in China Government backed projects can change things remarkably quickly. In the late 1990s the Siguniang area was designated a AAAA rated tourist attraction. Whether they liked it or not Chinese holiday makers were to be directed here. Prisoners were brought in to concrete the road and projections drawn up advising startled locals to expect 1,000,000 visitors a year by 2005. The scheme is now in full flow with several enormous neon light flashing hotels under construction. There are also plans for a road up the Changping valley and a chairlift up a nearby mountain. All this where, just five years ago, there was nothing but a small Tibetan village. Unsurprisingly relations between the locals and the Government are not exactly very good.

Having examined the various tourist souvenirs on display we resisted any temptation to buy offerings such as gem studded human skull tops or human leg bone flutes and set about heading off into the mountains. An imposing entrance check point, complete with roof observation platform, barred the way. I was glad that we had brought along our star interpreter 'Mr Lion' from Chengdu. He had been recommended by Craig Luebbens, the American ice fall climber, and turned out to be absolutely invaluable. A modest payment to the park officials and we were off, firstly along a dirt track past a burnt out monastery and then onto an amazing duckboard track through the forest. It soon became clear that the Chinese authorities like duckboards; little side spurs shot off in various directions leading to viewing platforms and picnic areas. After an hour or so the duck boards ended and a shiny sign indicated that we had arrived at "Withered Trees Beach", a shingly riverside beach with, unsurprisingly, some rather withered trees. This point seemed to mark the end of the road for the average Chinese tourist so, to add interest, a couple of camels had been brought in. Their exact significance was mystifying but they were very friendly and one put it's tongue in my ear as I posed for 'look at me on holiday' shots.

Difficult as it was to leave such attractions behind we splashed bravely onwards up muddy tracks through the dense forest. Clearly we had past the furthest point reached by all but the most adventurous tourists.

After several hours of squelching through mud and squeezing between trees the track emerged suddenly into flat open pastures where a mottly selection of Yaks showed absolutely no interest whatsoever in us. Paul though was gesticulating wildly up to our right. It appeared that our intended objective could be glimpsed for the first time. And despite the clouds, it could be seen to be disturbingly steep.

“Looks exciting”, was the general thrust of his exclamations. I had to agree.

The horses left promptly for Rilong and suddenly we had to fend for ourselves. First task was to ferry loads up the debris of an enormous avalanche to an idyllic base camp at just under 4,000 metres. Then the least popular part of any high altitude trip – acclimatizing. True to form the weather was indifferent but after four days lying down at up to 5,100 metres listening to snow drum against the tent we pronounced ourselves ready for action.

In fact though breaks in the cloud on our acclimatisation jaunts had provided us with superb views of Siguniang’s north face. We had been a bit concerned that conditions might have changed since our research photographs were taken and all important ice streaks might not be present. Without them the face would consist of very smooth granite walls which we were not equipped for. But we need not have feared. Closer inspection revealed that not only did the summit seracs look relatively benign but the huge granite walls of the North face were split by an ice-choked basalt dyke, invisible from below. This looked to provide an orgasmic line which we spent endless hours staring at through Paul’s binoculars.

“Ice or powder snow?” It was impossible to tell but it would make a big difference. In at least one place the ground was overhanging. Overhanging ice would require big arms (over to Paul!) Whereas overhanging powder snow would be....er... interesting. We would have to wait and see.

Deciding what to take on a climb is never easy, particularly in the line of food and gas. Working on the basis that we always carry a bit of extra flab I tend to veer in favour of using reserves and minimizing on the food. But this can have a startling effect on body shape! Paul, who is a good culinary type chap, likes his food so it was only natural for him to take the lead in sorting such things. After half an hour or so I was called to inspect the end product.

“What do you think?”

I am usually the one arguing to cut down but this time such thoughts were clearly unnecessary. With a cereal bar for breakfast, two boiled sweets each per day and a small packet of 3 minute noodles for the evening we were not exactly going to get fat. “It’s very light” Paul enthused. It struck me seemed that our bodies might well be too by the time we’d finished. I checked my blubber layer....all OK; I could afford to use up some reserves.

We strained awkwardly up the small glacier beneath the face. However much you cut down sacks somehow never feel light when starting out. Jack Tackle, the renowned American climber, had been here in 1981 and had recalled that the approach to the ‘meat’ of the route looked dead easy. Things seemed to have changed somewhat.

“Perhaps he is just very good” I gibbered whilst teetering insecurely up smooth rock slabs.

The slabs gave way to an ice slope and suddenly it was time to find somewhere to spend the night. Comfortable options were not immediately obvious. In fact they seemed non-existent. Paul looked forlornly at the steepness surrounding us. Nothing was less than 50°.

“Well? This is your department.”

Reputations are funny things. We had done most of our climbing together in the English Peak District and had never actually climbed a multi-day route together. Paul had clearly formed the view that I was an expert at miraculously unearthing luxury

ledges in inhospitable terrain. In fact though I am not. I just have a lot of experience of spending the night in uncomfortable positions.

There was nothing for it but to snuggle up to the base of a rock buttress and start cutting a ledge of some sort. Paul looked shocked at my inability to come up with a better solution. The end result was a snaking 12' long, 10" wide ledge that we tried our best to lie nose to tail on. By dint of pushing balled socks into the bivi bag fabric and larks footing them into ice screws we did manage to secure ourselves in a vaguely comfortable manner. But the endless tide of spindrift somehow found its way into my sleeping bag and by morning uncomfortable balls of ice had begun to form within the insulation. But bivouacs could be a lot worse and we were at last underway.

The first ice dyke pitch was mine. After an hour or so I realised that Paul was shouting up to me.

"Think you can do it? It looks even steeper above."

He was obviously not impressed with my efforts. To be honest neither was I. Initially it had seemed as if the ice would be soft and twangy – ideal for secure placements. Gradually though it thinned and became brittle. Large plates broke away and the angle increased. Projecting bits of rock, which looked potentially helpful from below, turned out to be rotten basalt which did not take protection well. I gibbered. Suddenly my rucksack seemed ludicrously heavy. Placing a dodgy ice screw I extricated myself from the straps, hung it from a screw for Paul to sort out later, and applied myself to the problem. Paul's comments were unsurprising. I was very slow – and I knew it.

"Ice might be better higher up."

I did my best to sound positive whilst feeling anything but.

From the belay things looked slightly better. For a start I wasn't breathing so heavily and could assess the situation more rationally. Secondly it did seem that the next section, although at least as steep did actually have thicker ice which might well take decent screws.

Firstly though Paul had to get himself and two sacks up to the stance. This required a phenomenal effort and led to the unusual sight of the Ramsden body breathing so heavily that it was decided that I should lead on whilst he recovered. Starting fresh with no sack made a big difference. It almost felt a bit unethical really. But by late afternoon (amazing where the time goes when you're 'enjoying' yourself) the first really steep section was behind us and it was time to start thinking about where to spend the night.

From a distance it had looked as if there should be reasonable ledges at convenient intervals on the left side. Close up though things didn't look so encouraging. All ledge lines on the left sloped outwards at 50° or so and had a thin covering of powder snow. It was difficult enough to find a place to stand comfortably let alone spend the night. The smooth monolithic granite on the right offered even less in the way of luxurious opportunities.

Eventually I found a vertical corner where I was able to place a good nut and stand in balance. By now a storm had developed, spindrift obscured everything and Paul was obliged to take my word about the belay being good. We stood there for a few minutes waiting for a break in the weather. I was tired and cold and slumped regularly onto the nut.

"Tent over the head?"

It took me a moment to register what Paul was suggesting. I had been optimistically waiting for a lull that would enable us to use the tent as a double bivouac sack. I had never before used it as a large bag over the head although I had read about Joe Tasker and Dick Renshaw spending a night like this on the North face of the Dente

Blanche back in the 1970's. It all sounded very unpleasant and I was not keen to emulate their experiences. But it had to be admitted that the weather was particularly grim and any attempt to get into the tent fabric from the top was inevitably destined to end with the tent and everything else full of spindrift.

"Could be as unpleasant as your Taweche Bivouac".

It was nice of Paul to remind me of the most uncomfortable night of my life. There Pat Littlejohn and I had squeezed claustrophobically into a narrow icy wind tunnel 6000 metres up the North East buttress of Taweche (6542 metres) in Nepal. Spindrift had poured into the tunnel all night, we never managed to get into our sleeping bags and the "one on top of the other" position was not exactly very comfortable. Surely this couldn't be that bad?or perhaps it could.

I stood there miserably, making negative noises about the difficulties of belaying securely with a bag over one's head. But I knew that I was tired and cooling down rapidly. We had to do something quickly and in the conditions I was bleakly aware that I couldn't offer a better suggestion.

Wrapping a large nut in the tent fabric Paul larks footed it into our solitary belay and clipped himself into the sling on the inside of the tent.

"Different world in here" he announced cheerfully.

I looked dubiously through the gloom at the tent fabric wondering why I apparently enjoy mountaineering so much. The tent was well used and I feared that any serious strain on the already experienced fabric could have unfortunate results.

"Are you getting in or what?" came from somewhere deep in the fabric.

It was dark outside now and the urgency in Paul's voice brought home to me the fact that I was moving lethargically. It was time to double check the safety of the arrangement and made a move.

He was right. It was a different world inside. A world where we hung like a bunch of bananas from a single sling whilst the fabric flapped against our faces and the

entrance zips flailed disconcerting around our ankles. Extreme care was required as anything we dropped would disappear straight out the bottom of the tent. As if to prove the point my sleeping mat had miraculously disappeared by the time I came to search for it.

Conversation drifted as we intermittently dozed. We had been unable to get our sleeping bags out and had opted for hanging/standing in our climbing clothes supplemented by down jackets. Nevertheless, despite -20°C or so outside, we did not feel worryingly cold. What I mean of course is that it was bloody freezing – but, remarkably, frostbite was not a major concern. Good stuff this modern gear.

So much in Alpine Style mountaineering is down to the mental side of things. It is so easy to get demoralised when the weather is nasty and retreat comes easily to those whose will to continue is not strong. In comfortable surroundings my view is clear cut – it's obvious isn't it ?– you just carry on up unless there are good reasons to go down. In the thick of foul conditions it is sometimes more difficult to think so clearly. Frankly though it is clearly unrealistic to expect to climb non-stop for a week or so and not suffer any bad weather at all. The key to success is balancing the pros and cons of staying put (bad news unless the bivi is comfortable and you have plenty of food), pushing on (could be rash if there's nothing welcoming to aim for) and retreating (may be sensible but certainly won't get you up).

Here our situation was unpleasant and uncomfortable but our gear was (relatively) dry, we were safe and we had plenty of food and gas. There was no real reason to go down. Nevertheless the night was excruciatingly uncomfortable, the ground ahead looked distinctly uncompromising and the regular roaring sound of spindrift avalanches was a constant reminder that our nice ice line was not a good place to be in bad weather. How was Paul feeling I wondered? We had climbed quite a lot together in Britain and failed without even getting started in Nepal. This was our first multi-day route together and our first really nasty bivouac. I thought back to the tone of his comments as I dithered on the first ice streak pitch. Had he underestimated the difficulty of the pitch? Was my slowness such that he was close to suggesting retreat? Most importantly what did he think now we had passed the thin section and were faced with steeper, albeit thicker ice?

We exchanged the usual “hope it looks a bit better in the morning” type comments and prepared for a long night. My throat rasped for it was impossible to light the stove and melt snow in the confines of the flapping fabric.

At some point I suddenly became aware that it was getting light outside and Paul was lifting the zip section to peer out the bottom. The steady swish of spindrift on fabric gave me a good idea of what it was like. He made no comment. I lifted my side and we peered around together. It was a grey, bleak and uninspiring day with very little in the way of visibility. Perhaps there was slightly less spindrift than the night before but there wasn't much else to comment positively about. Paul was the first to speak. It was exactly the sort of moment when the morale of the party hangs in the balance.

“How about we move up a few pitches and see how it goes? We might at least find a better bivi site.”

Bliss! Paul was of course completely right and I was on board immediately. Somehow I found him making positive noises and me agreeing much more of a boost than the other way round. There is something wonderfully refreshing about a realisation that two minds are working as one. Suddenly the day seemed much brighter. Onwards and upwards it was. Actually it wasn't upwards because the day had to start with an abseil to get back on line but you know what I mean.

The weather in this part of the world is nothing if not varied. After a couple of hours of ‘full’ conditions the sky brightened, the sun came out (everywhere except in the deep frozen confines of our chosen line!) and thoughts of simply moving up to a better bivi spot were abandoned.

The parting clouds revealed spectacular scenery. We were in a sort of mega version of the Dru Couloir with Yosemite style granite walls on either side. Above us the ice steepened to vertical capped by an apparently overhanging mixed section. It all

looked very disturbing. And, although we didn't need one now, I noted a total absence of good bivouac sites.

Back down in base camp it had seemed a good idea to cut down the weight and bring only 6 ice screws. Now, faced with using two at each belay, that only left two for each 60m pitch. Somehow that didn't seem very many - but Mr Ramsden was to come into his own.

"Abalakovs" he announced.

Somewhat to my embarrassment I was fully aware of the test reports showing how strong Abalokov threads were but I had never actually used one. This despite promises to myself after descending a mountain in the Nepal Himalaya entirely by using a (very memorable) retrievable ice screw technique. Abalakov was a Russian climber who came up with the bright idea of using two ice screw holes to make his eponymous thread. They are used mainly for abseil anchors but Paul's plan was to use them as runners to supplement our meagre collection of ice screws. And he was a star at it. I hung back on the belays and marvelled as he progressed steadily up the near vertical ice which choked this section of the fault line.

Time passed quickly. A challenging mixed pitch (much more my cup of tea) followed and then it was already time to search for a bivi site again. 'Searching' is, of course, a relative term. Altitude and difficult ground resulted in such slow progress that we could only sensibly 'search' the immediate area we happened to be in when dusk was upon us. And there was little on offer.

"More steep ice today Michael."

Another night of sitting/hanging had passed uneventfully but wearily.

It was morning again and Paul was indeed correct. There was yet more steep ice ahead. Usually I like ice climbing but the repetitive and exhausting movements at this altitude were beginning to take their toll. It was all becoming a bit like hard work. The steepest pitch, late in the afternoon, was perhaps the last straw. The weather, which had been threatening for some time, turned to snow and Paul was forced to thrash purposefully upwards through a shielding curtain of heavy spindrift. The main force of this was behind him - which was helpful in a way but also served to emphasise the size of the ice cornice that crowned the pitch. I huddled inside my goretex jacket whilst the occasional exertion packed grunt filtered down from above. Suddenly the rope went so tight I sensed he might be off. The visibility was such that I couldn't see if he was hanging anywherebut there was no sound of cursing so there seemed nothing for it but to start climbing.

The technique that we had settled into over the previous three days involved the leader climbing the steepest pitches without his pack whilst the second followed wearing his and manhandling the leader's if it had jammed anywhere. Leading was more mentally wearing but seconding involved greater exertion, especially when the going got really steep. And so when I reached the overhang it was little surprise to find myself gasping uncontrollably and gulping in huge lungfulls of spindrift. With strength failing I clipped into a less than perfect placement. Twice the ice failed and twice I dangled free marvelling that my heart could beat so fast. It was a superb lead by Paul and a vital one which pulled us out of the main dyke section and put us in sight of the summit seracs.

Here the ground beside the dyke was more broken and there was at last a chance of getting the poles in our little tent - not that this should be read as implying any degree of comfort. We attempted to build up a platform of sorts with loose blocks. To begin with this looked to be working well with a good 2/3 of the tent floor on the ledge. Once we were inside though Paul's end collapsed which meant that his head was some two feet lower than his feet. As I was the other way round this made things more comfortable for me but apparently not so for him. Fortunately my end was so narrow that his turning round wasn't really an option so to ease his predicament I promised to stretch my legs (and kick him in the face) no more than 20 times in the night.

"Can you get a brew on?" This muffled request came from somewhere below me and seemed not unreasonable. One of the difficulties with the bivis we had experienced so far was that we had not managed to use the stove anywhere near as much as we would have liked. The end result was severe dehydration and all our snack type foods, that didn't need cooking, consumed already. Only noodles remained the prospect of which did not exactly cause the taste buds to over salivate.

Usually we hang the stove from the centre point of the tent. Here though the angle was such that it hung dangerously against the side wall. Deciding to opt for an easy solution to the problem ('typical' I hear my wife say) I lit the stove, wedged my cup between the windshield and the fabric, and settled back to focus on my Harry Potter book.

Before long disgruntled noises coming from the other end suggested that the undisputed stove and cooking expert of the team was less than impressed with my efforts. It was the globules of molten plastic landing on his sleeping bag that caused him most grief but the tent filling with foul, acrid smoke didn't go down well either. I had to admit that all was not quite as one might expect at home but, as I pointed out, the end result was (remarkably) no holes in his sleeping bag, the tent fabric intact and the snow melted. With the only serious casualty being my mug I argued that the main aim of the exercise had been achieved and the effort should be judged a success. But I was dismissed and amidst much squirming, Paul took over stage two of the evening activity - noodle production. Meanwhile I returned to the delights of magical happenings at Hogwarts, content that my children would be pleased that I had, at least, gone some way towards familiarizing myself with Harry's adventures.

Our inability to understand a word of written Chinese prompted a few surprises on the food front. Much as Paul applied himself magnificently, vindaloo noodles are not to be recommended as high altitude bivouac food. Maybe it was his inverted position that caused the problems but he seemed to have some difficulty digesting these and complained of his worst night yet. He did though manage an 850ml pee in our calibrated pee bottle - a trip record which he assured me was easier to achieve whilst semi-inverted. For my part, I felt relatively comfortable but flapping tent fabric, swishing spindrift and a partner who kept moaning about me kicking him in the face, were not exactly conducive to a good nights sleep. I could only manage 650ml.

Only one more pitch of ice streak remained, a fact that I felt grateful for as I struggled to overcome ring sting and early morning lethargy. Above us now was the line of ice cliffs marking the lower edge of the summit ice fields. Back down in base camp the binoculars had revealed an easy looking line of weakness but now, as so often happens, things didn't look quite so easy. Firstly the line of weakness turned out to be a slanting vertical section on a series of overhanging ice walls. (The fact that it caught the sun when the rest of the wall was in shade had given us a completely false impression). And secondly the serac ice itself was truly awful, dinner plating in large uncontrollable sections. Paul set off with gusto but soon ground to a halt.

"Nightmare! You going to have a look?"

I wasn't, I had great faith in his ability and the problems were all too apparent. Outflanking the ice cliffs on the right was quickly agreed as the best option. But all this was taking time. After abseiling out of the seracs and traversing laboriously rightwards it was dark again by the time we were struggling up the easier angled, but iron-hard, serac ice bounding the right edge of the cliffs.

Paul is an Alaskan veteran who has partaken in the currently fashionable idea of climbing non-stop until you either drop or reach the top. Being a bold young man he suggested surging on into the night. But I was feeling middle aged, cold and tired. In true traditionalist form I lectured forth on the dangers of combining exhaustion, darkness and nowhere particular to head for. I won – not so much by reasoned argument but by the fact that the brewing storm suddenly broke with a vengeance, the shallow couloir we had to cross became a roaring torrent and further progress was clearly impossible.

The problems with bum ledge sitting bivouacs in bad weather are numerous, a notable one being that, however careful you are, spindrift rapidly accumulates

between the bivi bag and the slope and pushes your bum off the ledge. Those bits and pieces that inevitably end up at the bottom of the bag then pull the fabric tight against the head for maximum discomfort. The higher the head the greater the pressure on it. A helmet is invaluable in such situations. Here though, it was not just the discomfort that was a problem. We were getting increasingly worried about the strength of the tent seams and daren't let anything drop down into the bottom. To ease the pressure our boots ending up hanging inside at face level - a face full of snow packed cleats for a pillow adding memorably to the discomfort level. Despite the fact that we managed to get into our sleeping bags I voted this as our worst night yet. Paul though felt that having molten plastic dripped on him, vindaloo noodles to eat and sleeping half inverted hanging off a ledge was slightly worse. Either way the weather was such that using the stove was out of the question which meant nothing to eat or drink. The night's pee record was only 300ml.

But we were only 50m from easy ground. And dawn brought shards of blue sky and no precipitation. The way across the couloir was open again and we kicked hard to bash blunt crampons into hard ice and make toe screaming progress.

And then suddenly it all changed; the angle kicked back and our concern changed from the force of the spindrift to the stability of the slope. But luck was with us. Ice cliffs provided secure belays and the cloud was burnt off to reveal a glorious day. A lot of panting, a short corniced ridge and then there we were! The culmination of all that planning and effort. Siguniang is more than 500m higher than any other peak in the immediate area. The sky was clear and the view vast. Range upon range of apparently untouched snow covered mountains stretched into the distance. Potential unlimited. I sat down, suddenly feeling very tired.

The plan now was to descend the unclimbed North ridge. Thankfully the clear weather at least allowed us to locate the top of it. If it had been misty I fear that much summit snowfield wandering would have occurred. As it was we were soon engrossed in a very different sort of terrain to that we had become used to. The ridge clearly caught the prevailing wind and was decorated with spectacular fragile snow

formations. Fortunately much of it was very steep with the result that we could abseil right through these formations rather than having to try and traverse over them. This had been our reserve objective if the ice streak had gone all wrong, but it would have been a nightmare to ascend. On the bright side it was easy to cut into and fashion a reasonable platform for the tent.

Somehow though our little tent was not providing quite the degree of protection that I liked. Closer inspection revealed that the fabric around the floor seams was now so thin that the wind was blowing straight through! Even I had to agree with Paul's increasingly persistent comments that it was past its best. I think it fair to say that we too were feeling past ours. Eight days of noodles and not much else made for a lethargic final day of abseiling and a slow return to base camp. It also led to a record weight loss and the Ramsden body breaking a personal best by not defecating for 12 days.

Such are the immediate pleasures of Alpine Style mountaineering. The real lasting enjoyment is, of course, retrospective – and lasts a lifetime.

With thanks to the British Mountaineering Council, The Mount Everest Foundation, The North Face, Black Diamond and Scarpa.

Exploration

Extracts from Roger Gibbs' diary

Sunday 14th April

Set off for Sanjiaw Peak (peak to the left of the col between Siguniang and the left hand ridge that encircled base camp – it had a perfect triangle of snow on top of rock ridges) at the same time as the others headed off for the North Face. Flogged up to a moraine ridge at 4800m with both Mike and I puffing a bit! A chilled afternoon in the sun.

Monday 15th April

Heavy snow overnight, which was mostly cleared by the winds. The weather cleared by early afternoon but we decided to sit it out until tomorrow. A day that kind of vanished like they do!

Tuesday 16th April

Away early on good snow and up to the left hand side of the couloir under Sanjiaw Peak. Bivvy tent up and relaxing before 10.00am at 5250m. I was keen to bash on since the snow was still in good nick but Mike was struggling with the squits. A bit of a wild night with Mike convinced that the tent was going to split (but I wasn't worried – this North Face gear is very reliable – sponsors plug!) and dump us over the east face of the col.

Wednesday 17th April

Up for 6.00am but the weather hadn't completely cleared although the route looked fine with the neve looking wind scoured. I was gagging to go but Mike was as grim as hell with the runs so with much reluctance we baled out abbing the rock buttress to avoid any exciting soft snow and managing to avoid falling down any slots. Spotted the North Face team setting up a bivi to the left of the North Face couloir.

Thursday 18th April

Ptarmigan Peak

A 5.30am kick off and up to the base of this rocky peak about mid way along the left hand ridge which encircled base camp. An exciting scramble over some loose rocks led to a perfect grassy bay where we geared up and put on rock shoes. The original plan had been to climb a long crack system at the western end, traverse the summit and descend the eastern end, but with the weather threatening we headed up in the middle of the peak. It also looked as if we could ab back down to our boots here! I led off up straightforward ground up a corner crack Mike came up and told me to bash on. I veered left heading for the east ridge, dodging snow patches to a rib, and then a slab with a fist width crack on one side. The slab was covered in snow, so smearing became a mite demanding in our expensive rock boots! (Scottish 3-4?) Belayed perched on a razor edge in a tiny niche and brought Mike up. A fantastic traverse started pitch 3 and then it featured lots of smearing on snow patches (is this a good idea?) Mike led through over easier, blocky ground and then one more long pitch brought us to the summit at 4730m. It had started to snow by now so after hurried summit photos and gazing out at the fantastic views down the north end of the Changping valley, we headed down. Two abs and a traverse on wet grass (always a bonus in rock boots). Back to base camp for tea and medals with glimpses of the others in the north face couloir.

Friday 19th April

Feeling the effects of the last couple of days but still keen to explore and so packed up and headed off to explore the north end of the Changping valley. Beautiful walking by the meandering river with the odd Dzo, but cloud and rain (and tired legs) so we got the tent up and

got a brew on! An inch of snow fell overnight, even down here at 3700m! We saw two herders late in the evening – first time we had seen people close up since we left Rilong.

Saturday 20th April

Mike still feeling very weak with the runs but he battled bravely up a superb yak track up towards the snowy peak, third from the left, when looking north up the valley. The sun soon appeared and the snow thawed very quickly. It was warm enough by 11am to strip off and dry soggy kit. A noodle break and then we bashed on across moraine and up above the snow line to a luxurious bivi at 4650m. Mike suffering big time today and was very skeptical about doing anything tomorrow. I had spotted a brilliant line up a snowy couloir on "my peak" which looked very accessible and very good.

Sunday 21st April

South(ish) Face of Snowy Peak – pt 5484m – at head of Changping valley.

Mike too ill to climb so I headed off up perfectly crunchy snow, skirting a rock buttress. I legged it across (well frozen) avalanche debris into the right hand of two huge couloirs. I kept to the rocks at the side of the gully to avoid soft snow and bashed on until the gully ran out into the summit ridge with about 50m to go. There didn't seem to be an easy way up onto the ridge and so I traversed left across mixed ground until below the summit and tried to find a way up onto the summit block. At one point, both axes torqued into a crack, I was about to pull through a rock band when I thought "Would Mike approve of this manoeuvre?" "Would Kate approve?" I stepped down and found an easier way! Third attempt saw me through that rocky band, one more step and up into a shallow corner saw me onto a shelf six feet below the top. There was a terrifying looking off-width on the right – no chance! I walked and then crawled on all fours round to the left. I peered around the corner – blank rock slabs plunged down the north side – this would be the top then! A couple of photos and I baled. About six abs on a single rope got me down onto reasonable ground. On closer inspection the left hand couloir had avalanched leaving a hard scoured surface so I dropped down into it and raced down it before the sun appeared. (With hindsight this would have been a much quicker way to the summit.) A few careful moves down thick ice at the bottom dropped me back at the base of the two gullies. I raced back across the avalanche track and stumbled down very soft snow, through the rocks back to our camp. It was 1.30pm. I'd been out for 6 1/2 hours. I was a bit pooped and Mike had worn a groove in the snow walking across to peer up at the face – he'd been worried sick poor lad! I snoozed in the sun and reflected on a top day and a new route.

Monday 22nd April

Up and away early cramponing down crisp snow to the yak track. Two hours saw us down in the valley and another three hours back at the south end. A noodle stop and we cruised up Somme gully back to base camp. Mick and Paul arrived down that evening.

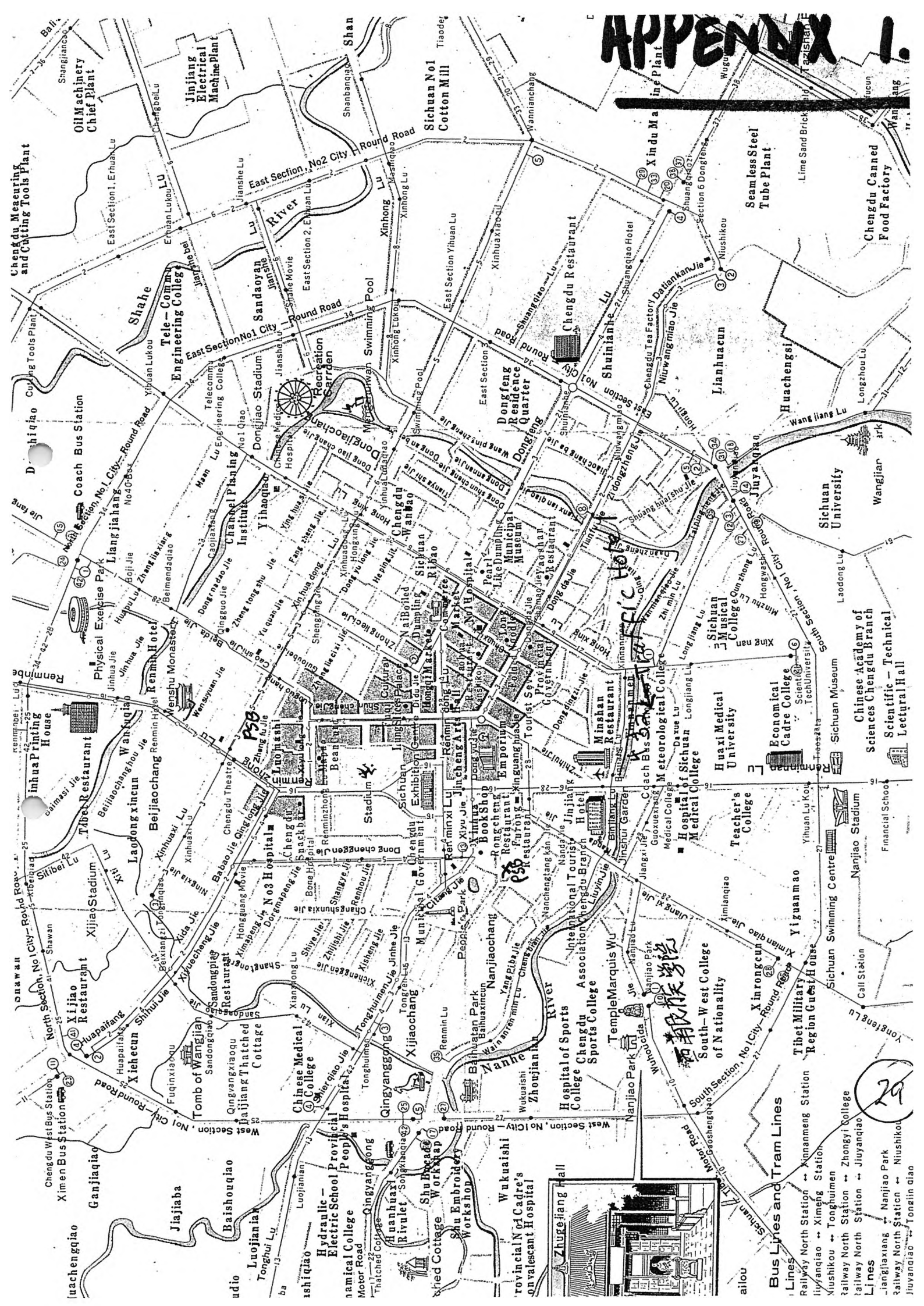
ACCOUNTS

<i>Income</i>	£
British Mountaineering Council	2,700
Mount Everest Foundation	850
Personal Contributions	1211 (4 x 303)
Total	4761

Expenditure

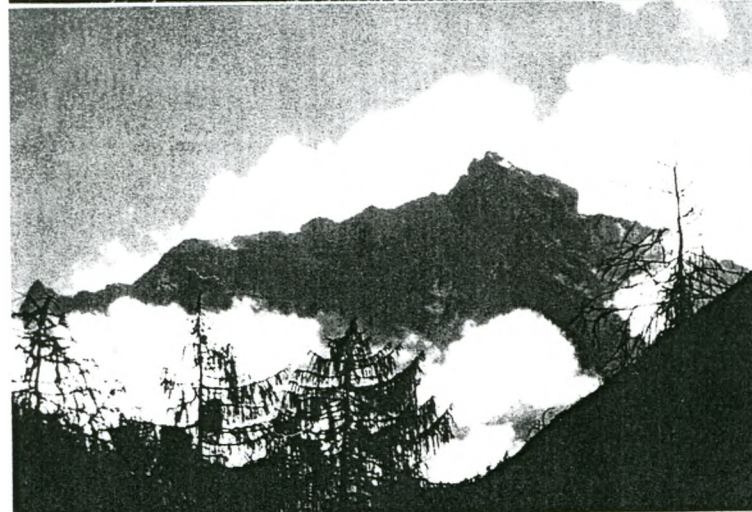
Flights to Beijing	1796
Visas	184
Beijing to Chengdu	853
Chengdu to Rilong	40
Insurance (BMC)	500
Payment to Interpreter/Agent	350
Park Fees	60
Fuel/Food for Base Camp	250
Epigas x 35	140
Horses to & from Base Camp	182
Accommodation	156
Taxis/Misc. Items	250
Total	4761

APPENDIX I.



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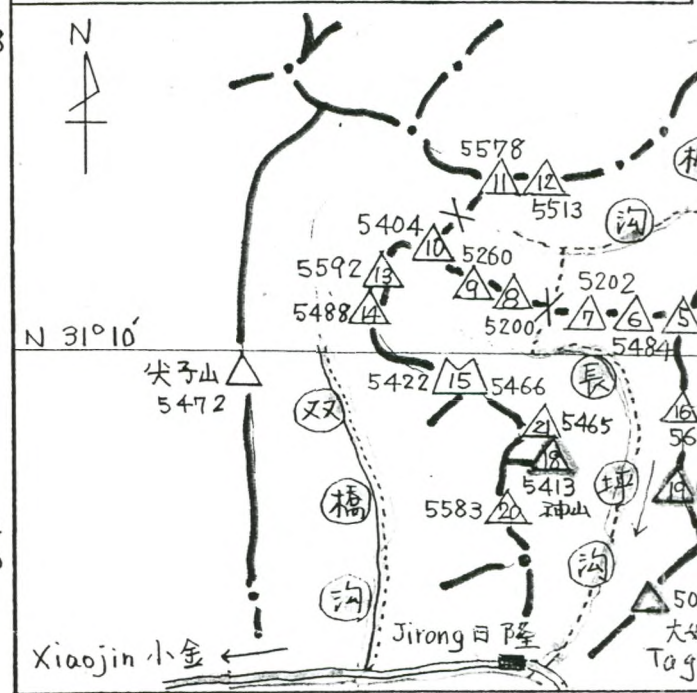
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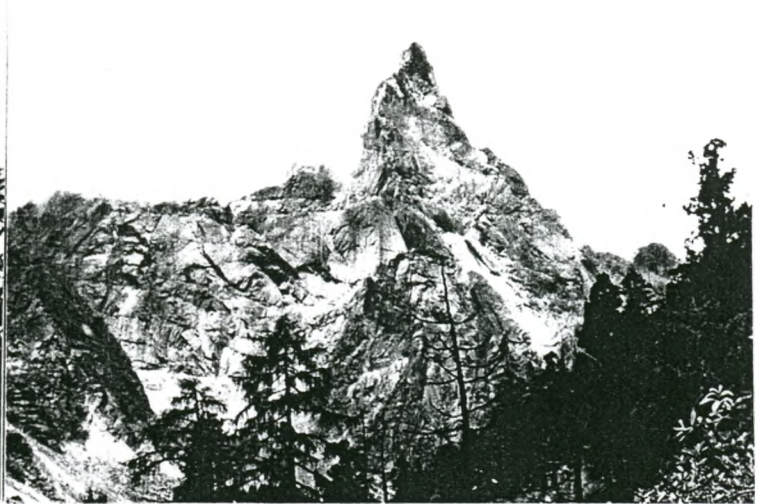
中国・四川省-邛崃山系の末踏の岩峰群
UNTRODDEN ROCK PEAKS, SICHUAN, CHINA

Jul. 25~Aug. 9, '98 T. Nakamura 中村 保

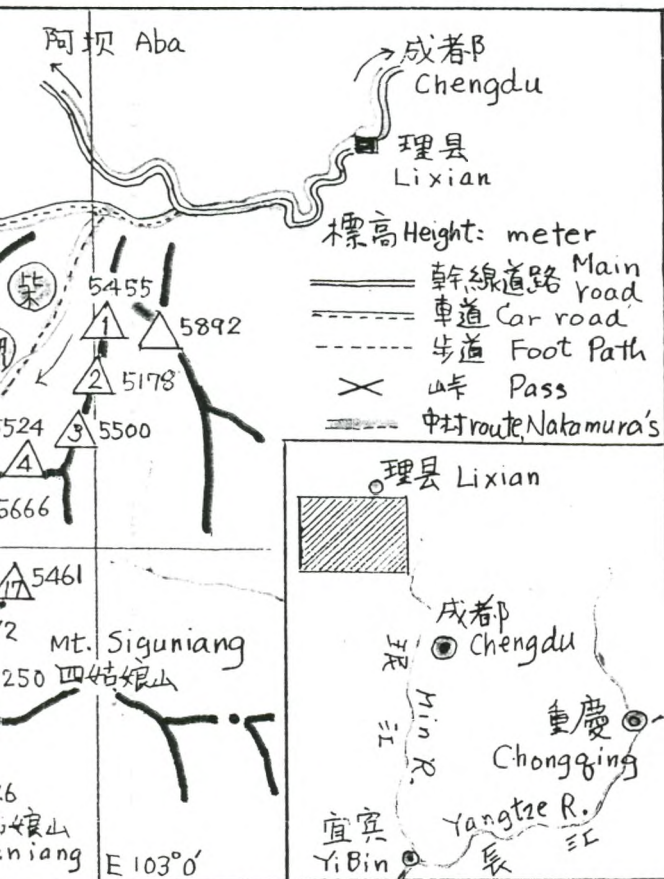




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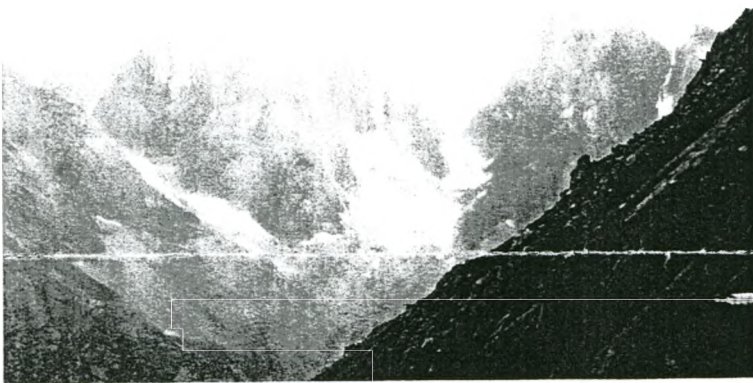
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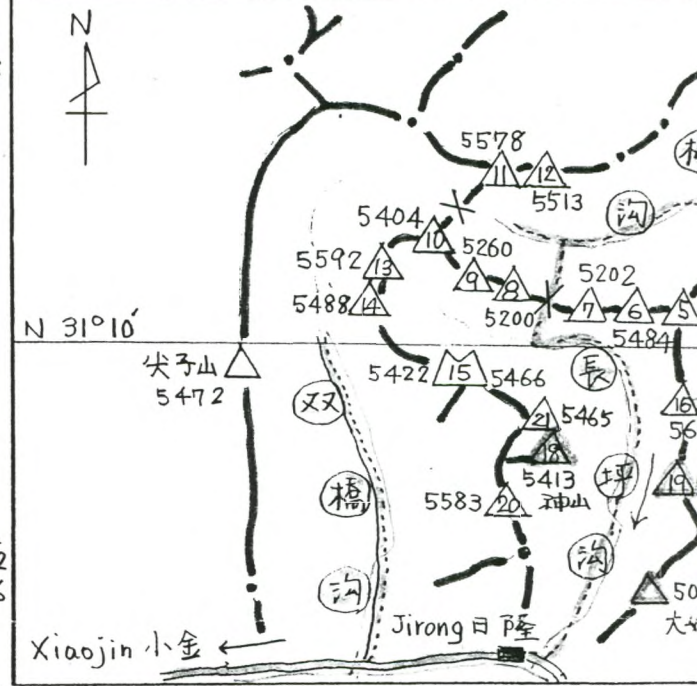
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UNTRODDEN ROCK PEAKS, SICHUAN, CHINA

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