

BRITISH GONGKALA EXPEDITION 2005

MEF Reference 05/04

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Introduction

In spring 2004 I was a member of a 4 man party which attempted Haizi Shan (5833m) in the Daxue Shan mountains of Western Sichuan. At the end of our trip we traveled north as far as Garze, and my attention was caught by the twin peaks of the Gongkala group (5992 and 5928m) to the east of the town. Enquiries seemed to show that there had been only one reconnaissance of these mountains, by a Japanese group in the 1990s, and no real climbing attempts. The only photos we could obtain (from Tom Nakamura) were all taken from on or close to the Sichuan Tibet Highway, which crossed a pass just north of the peaks.

It seemed almost too good to be true that here were two good looking unattempted peaks with a base camp within a day's journey of the road. I had no trouble recruiting three companions. Toto Gronlund and Dave Wynne-Jones had been with me on Pokharkan in Nepal in 2002 while Peter Rowat and I had a climbing association going back to an ascent of Cenotaph Corner in 1965. Peter's wife, Nona, accompanied us to our base camps and also acted as trip doctor.

Narrative

We arrived in Chengdu by air on September 18th 2005, and left for the mountains the following day. Logistic arrangements as far as our base camp were handled by Sichuan Adventure Travel (atravel@mail.sc.cninfo.net) while we brought our own high altitude gear and food. We had no problem buying food and fuel (gas canisters) in Chengdu.

In two days we reached Garze and spent three days reconnoitering the north and south sides of the Gongkala peaks (see map). There were possible but not easy routes from the north, including a 1000m "grand course" direct to the summit of Kawarani I, but we decided the south side offered better prospects for us.

A good grazing trail led from the village of Khur Chong, in the gorge of the Yalung Jiang River, around the hillside to a hanging valley directly below the southern glaciers of Kawarani I and II. From this it appeared possible to reach the col between Kawarani I and II, at about 5500m, whence there seemed to be routes to both summits.

Below the village were two or three apparently rather inactive monasteries. We stopped at the principal one but found no one to talk to, so continued to the village where we found the people very friendly and cooperative. We explained our plans and they were very happy to assist us by making horses available to carry to the base camp. On the

afternoon of our first visit there was a thunderstorm with lots of large hail ; this was not unusual as it seemed that the monsoon was not yet over.

Two days later we returned with all gear and had an uneventful journey to a base camp at 4200m. The monastery showed its goodwill by providing a monk leading a large white yak at the head of our column. We were told he had been sent to bless our climb. There was no evidence that any climbers had been in this area before. We could hardly have got off to a more auspicious start.

Four days later we had just completed carrying to a second camp at 4800m when a delegation of around 40 monks came up the hillside and insisted we leave at once. They were from the same monastery which had assisted and blessed us earlier. They simply said that they had changed their minds as a result of two thunderstorms which they believed we caused. They had no respect at all for our permit from the Sichuan Mountaineering Association . They were very confrontational and thoroughly unpleasant to deal with. We were clearly outnumbered and after a long and unproductive discussion, during which distinctly unapacifist attitudes were repeatedly displayed, we decided we had no alternative but to go down.

We spent part of the following day retrieving our gear from the depths of the monastery where it had arrived in the dark. Nothing went missing but money had to change hands to get it all back.

A protest by Sichuan Adventure Travel to the civil administrator of the Garze Tibetan Ethnic Group Autonomous Prefecture, which governs this area from Kangding, drew only the comment that these monasteries can be difficult to deal with. (This gentleman himself is a reincarnate Lama.)

We considered going back to the north side of the mountains (where there was also a helpful village and an apparently somnolent monastery) but bad news travels fast and with no better official support than this, and a week long national holiday starting, we thought it best to leave the Gongkala area altogether.

We were able to get our permit switched to Haizi Shan (5833m) and spent our last ten days attempting to complete the route which Geoff Cohen, Martin Scot, Bill Thurston and I had tried on the North Face in spring 2004 (British West Sichuan Expedition 2004). Unfortunately the weather was poor and we retreated from the bottom of the northern glaciers at 4800m in a foot of new snow on 10th October. This peak, we believe, is still unclimbed despite several attempts.

Dave and Peter climbed a consolation peak of around 4800m and we left for home on 13th October.

Comments

We are not the only party to have encountered these problems in Western China. See, for instance, the American Alpine Journal, 2001, p 408, and 2003, p 410. Part of the problem may be the relative independence of the Garze Tibetan Prefecture from central control.

The monastery's stated reasons for their actions have little credibility as thunderstorms and hail were regular events in the area. Possibly the simple fact that we were the first outsiders to go onto the mountains was enough to spook them, but it seems more likely that we got into the middle of a feud between monastery and village, which we could hardly have foreseen. (There was some fragmentary evidence for this).

There is also, as ever, the question of money. It is possible that a sufficiently large donation to the monastery up front might have averted what happened, but there seemed to be no one suitable to give it to, even if we had thought it necessary. Certainly a number of previously hostile monks became remarkably friendly once we had paid \$250 for the return of our gear.

Weather

On Haizi Shan in May 2004 we encountered deep soft snow from 4000m which made progress very laborious. For this reason we decided the post – monsoon season was a better bet although we knew that many parties had experienced unsettled weather. We certainly did also. When we arrived, on both mountains, the snow line was well above 5000m but afternoon thunderstorms and snowfall were frequent. A good spell of weather did begin on 11th October but only after we had abandoned our attempt on Haizi Shan.

Accounts (Pounds sterling)

<u>Income</u>		<u>Expenditure</u>	
MEF Grant	600	Air Fares	2793
BMC Grant	1300	Local Transport)
		Hire of Labour, Horses, etc)	5124
Personal Contributions	6917	Base Camp Food)
		Climbing Food and Fuel	200
		Peak Fee	280
		Payment to Monastery	140
		Visas	280
<u>Total</u>	<u>8817</u>	<u>Total</u>	<u>8817</u>

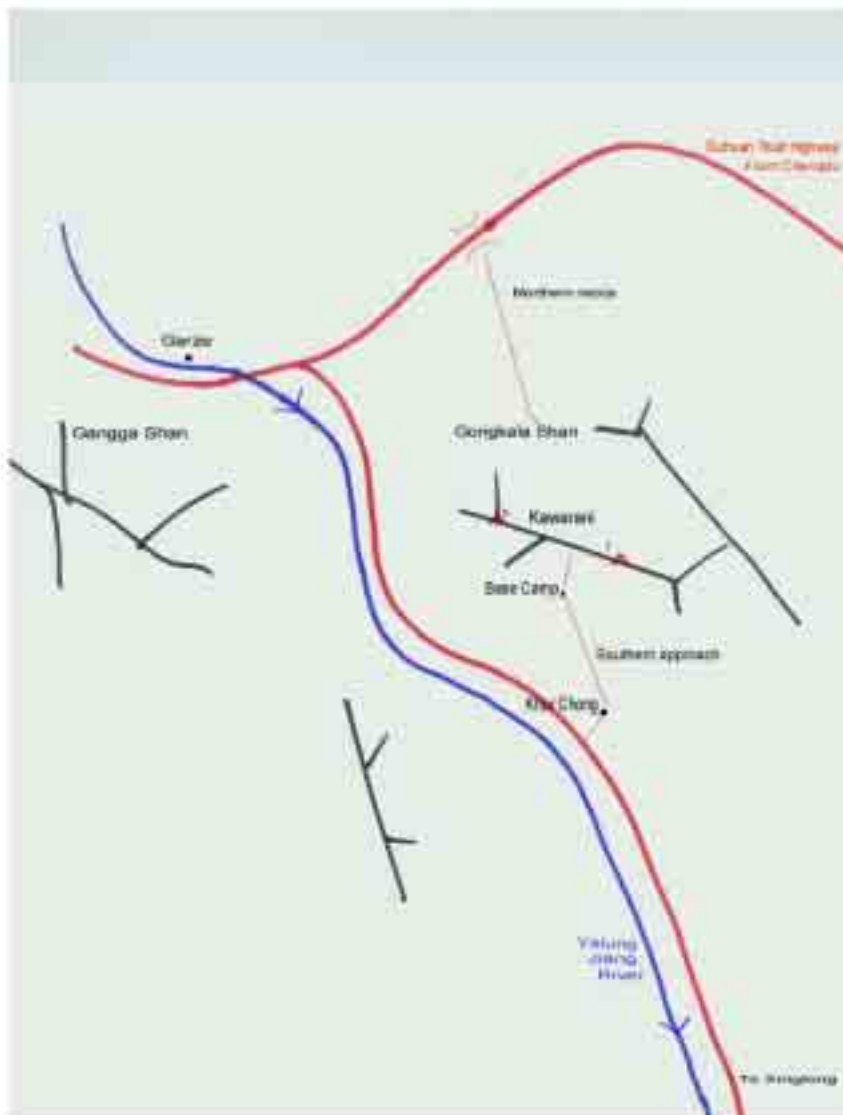
Acknowledgements

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Approach to Gongkala Shan



The North side of the Gongkala peaks – Kawarani I (left) and II (right)



The South side of the Gongkala peaks. The summit of Kawarani I is off the picture on the right side. Our proposed route was left of center to the saddle between the two peaks.



