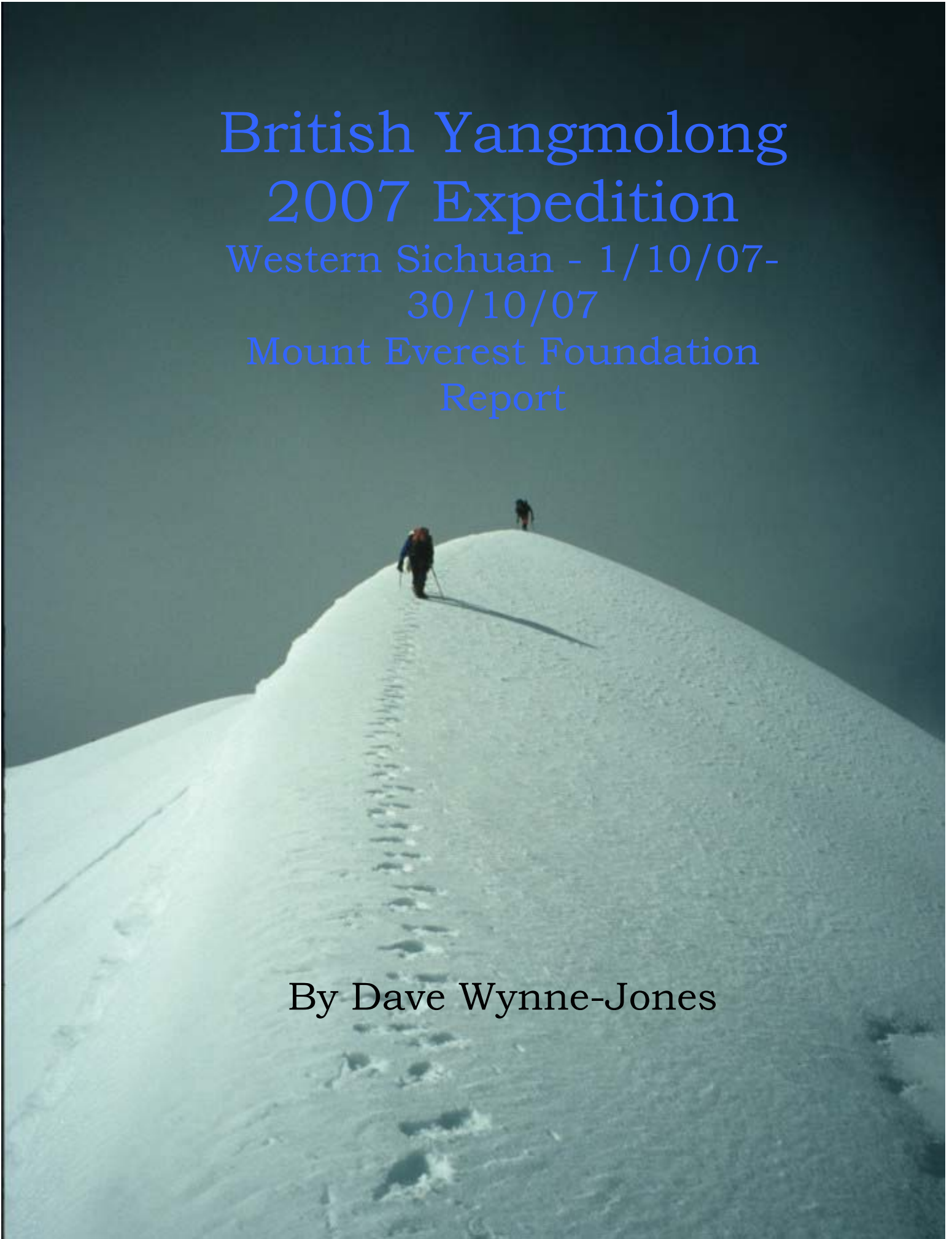


British Yangmolong 2007 Expedition

Western Sichuan - 1/10/07-
30/10/07

Mount Everest Foundation
Report

By Dave Wynne-Jones



Aims of the Expedition.

To make an ascent of the unclimbed Yangmolong main peak plus others in the chain if possible.

Acknowledgements

We acknowledge the generous financial support of the Mount Everest Foundation, and the BMC.

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Introduction.

While China remained essentially closed during the period following the victory of the Peoples Liberation Army over the Kuomintang, largely as a result of American international pressure to isolate the Communist government, there was little chance of exploring China's mountains.

With Nixon's overtures to the Chinese and the subsequent thawing of international relations, the recognition of China's huge presence both physically and economically on the world's stage has led to an openness that has included mountain tourism. A key figure in this opening up of access to Chinese mountains has been Tamotsu Nakamura. The special edition of the JAC East of the Himalayas, the Alps of Tibet was a landmark publication. His research, exploratory travels and careful collation of maps and pictures has provided climbers with the information to mount expeditions to mountain ranges hitherto unknown to us.

Dick Isherwood had made a very creditable attempt on Haizi Shan in 2004; with Geoff Cohen reaching a point within 300m of the summit but running out of time. Dick led three of the present team on another visit to Western Sichuan in September & October 2005 but we were denied success on our chosen mountain by a nearby monastery that seemed to maintain a feudal relationship with its local villagers. Sensing that relationship might be threatened by the presence of foreigners, those in power mobilised their novice monks to throw us off the mountain. These young thugs would not have been out of place in an inner city gang and their threats of violence were sufficient for us to give up any thought of climbing Gongkala. Racing back to have a chance at climbing Haizi Shan we were then stymied by bad weather and lack of time.

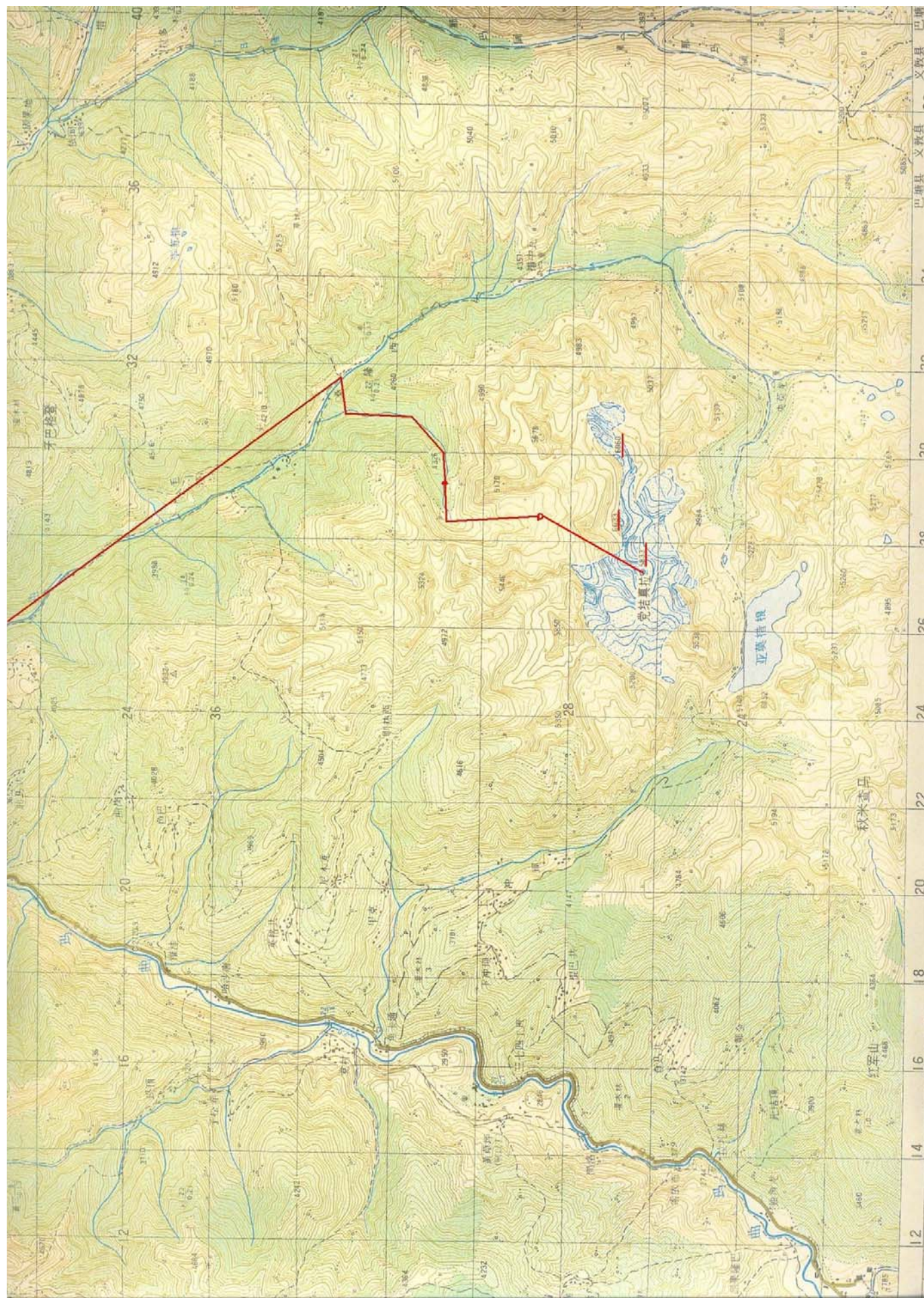
Nonetheless our interest in the area and its mountains was not lost and subsequent research turned that interest in the direction of Yangmolong, one of only 3 unclimbed 6000m peaks in the region.

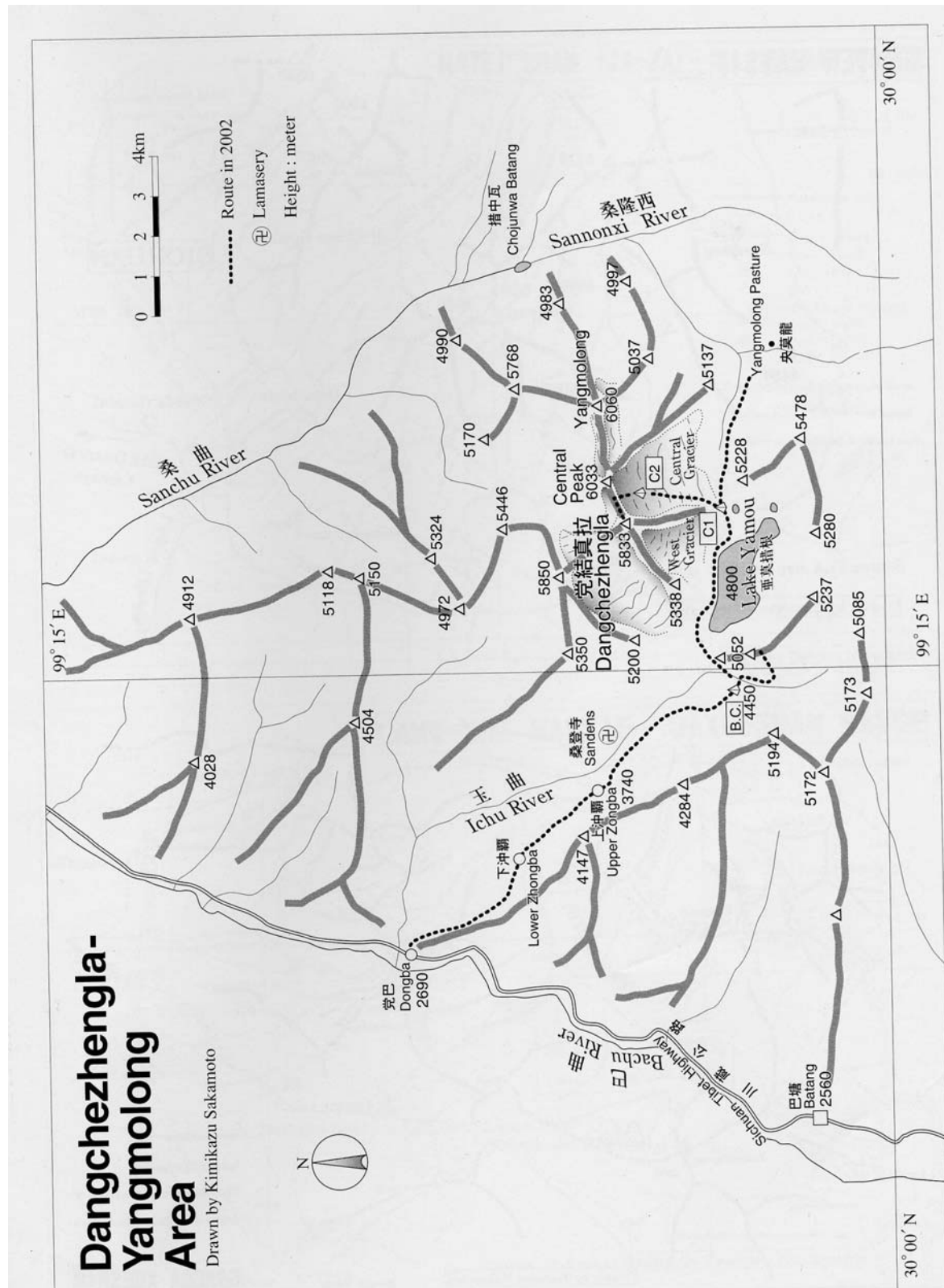
The Area

Western Sichuan has 2 independent adventure tourist agencies that can provide trekking and climbing holidays with a set itinerary or "tailor-made" packages of transport and accommodation to support exploratory expeditions, including the provision of permits via the Sichuan Mountaineering Association. Costs are reasonable, given that the infrastructure of the province is still under rapid development, and a welcome contrast to the high prices of Tibet.

The northern & western areas of the province have a culture very like that of Tibet and the local people speak a Tibetan dialect. There is plenty of evidence of the encouragement of that culture, in the rebuilding of roadside stupas for example, and the countryside is dominated by prosperous farms. The towns are being rapidly developed with shops, services, and community areas often run by Han Chinese settlers.

An indication of the developing prosperity was the almost complete replacement of the horse by the motorcycle in inter-village and inter-valley communication!





The Team

Dave Wynne Jones, leader, 55, British, semi-retired

27 year Alpine experience including ascents of all of the 4000m peaks & routes such as the Frendo Spur; expeditions to Alaska, Ecuador, Kyrgyzstan, Peru, Pakistan, Nepal, China; 1st ascents of Nevado Padrecaca, S. Face of Pokharkan; 1st British ascent of Punta Bareita, 2nd British ascents of Quepala & Ticlla in Cordillera Central of Peru (all over 5000m); ascents of Denali, Illiniza, Cotopaxi, Cayambe, Pik Lenin, Pisco, Huascaran Norte,; Attempts on Gongkala (5992m) and Haizi Shan (5833m) in Western Sichuan in 2005. Ski expeditions to Mt. Logan, Caucasus, Damavand, Mustagh Ata (7546m. solo ascent), Ak-Shirak 2003 ,2006 (7 first ascents of peaks inc. Kyrgysia 4964m), 2007 (4 first ascents)

Dick Isherwood, 63, British,retired

Many Himalayan trips, starting in 1964. 14 summits over 20,000 ft, including first ascents of Lamjung Himal (6983m), Dorje Lakpa (6989m) and South Parbati (6127m) and second ascents of Kanjiroba (6882m) and Drifika (6447m). New routes on Piz Badile ENE Face (Via delle Inglese, in 1968) and Carstenz Pyramid (3rd ascent in 1972). Attempt on Haizi Shan in 2004 reached 200m below the summit. Attempts on Gongkala and Haizi Shan with DWJ in 2005.

Peter Rowat, 64, British, neurobiologist.

Extensive Alpine climbing in winter and summer, including the North faces of the Monch and Jungfrau, Route Major on Mont Blanc, and a ski traverse of the Bernese Oberland (possibly first British) in 1968. Several first ascents in the Stauning Alps of East Greenland in 1963. Extensive climbing in the Coast Range of British Columbia, including a first ascent on Mt Waddington, and in the Canadian Rockies, including an early ascent of the North Face of Mount Robson. Attempts on Gongkala Shan and Haizi Shan with RJI and DWJ in 2005.

Steve Hunt, 43, British, part-time teacher;

24 Alpine Seasons; trekking trips to Pakistan, Nepal, India and China; rock climbing trips to Algeria, Jordan, and Morocco; Expeditions to Mt Kenya, Kilimanjaro, Ecuador; Aconcagua, followed by 8 weeks trekking in Nepal climbing Chukhung Tse, Pokalde, Lobuche East reaching the main ridge at 5960m and Yala Peak in the Langtang Valley in 2000;

In 2001 reached 7600m on Cho Oyu; 2002 returned to Kenya climbing Pt Peter (S Ridge III+), Pt Dutton (E Ridge IV), Pt Lenana (N Ridge I) and Batian 5199m (N Face Standard Route IV+); 2003, reached the plateau at Camp 5 (5560m), on Mt Logan. Then went to New Zealand climbing the Footstool (2764m 2+), Mt Dixon (3004m South Ridge 3-), Mt Cook (3754m via the Linda Glacier 3), and several failed attempts on Mt Aspiring; 2005, Peru - Yanapacca (5460m W Face (Normal) Route), Tocllaraju (6032m - NWRidge) and Quitaraju (6040m N Face). 2006 Alpine Club expedition to Shakh dara Range in Tajikistan - 4 First British Ascents including Karl Marx Peak (6723m) and Nikoladsye (6340m)



Logistics

Travel

1. Flights

KLM flies direct to Chengdu from Amsterdam with cityhopper links to most major cities of the UK. Other airlines fly to Beijing and internal flights have to be arranged.

2. Road travel.

It saves hassle to arrange transport in advance with an agency.

Permits.

A visa obtainable from the Chinese embassy is necessary to enter the country. There are embassies in London & Manchester with fast turnaround times and no extra charge for another 30 days if required.

Communications.

Western mobile phones were not reliable: some worked, others didn't. Our translator/liaison person, Gary had a Chinese phone that worked fine although reception was limited as we entered more remote country.

Food.

It is difficult to obtain lightweight dehydrated food in China unless you are addicted to noodles so we brought our own supplied by www.expeditionfoods.com

Most other food needs were met by the big supermarkets in Chengdu, although instant soup was not found.

Medical arrangements.

Peter Rowat brought a pack of medical supplies donated by his doctor wife. The rest of us brought mini-kits of what we'd found useful on previous expeditions. It was essentially a sophisticated first aid package. Little was used other than basic antibiotics, and low dosage painkillers to deal with stomach upsets and aches and pains en route.

Insurance

Medical and rescue insurance was provided by the Austrian Alpine Club Weltweit scheme.

Maps

Digital maps of the area are available from East View Cartographic – www.cartographic.com

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Expedition Log.

3/10/07

The team was united in Chengdu after various flights & overland travel. We spent the day shopping for expedition food & any gaps that had emerged in the equipment we had brought.

4/10

We drove to Yajang in 11.5 hours from Chengdu.

5/10

The drive continued to Batang via Litang, crossing some high passes up to 4700m on very bumpy roads. Near Batang we took some time to work out which was our northern approach valley. Several new tunnels had been driven through the spurs around which the river meanders on its descent to Batang: very impressive engineering but confusing for navigation. Arriving at 6pm, we spent the night at a hotel in Batang.

6/10

Transport had been arranged up the valley from the drop-off point on the main road, but Gary, our liaison person, was clearly non-plussed when, instead of tractors with trailers, a score or more of young motorcyclists turned up. They loaded all the gear onto their panniers, & even managed to offer lifts to some of the party. Dick & I staunchly refused all offers of mechanical uplift during 3 hours of easy walking that nonetheless gained 600m.



Sanglong Xi village was at about 3800m and we were offered space to sleep in a storeroom in one of the local farmhouses. The local people were very friendly and interested in us. From just above the village we had partial views of snowy mountains that lay in the direction we expected but initially found it

hard to make sense of what we could see.

7/10

Steve and Peter headed south to scout the probable approach valley whilst Dick and I attempted to find a track up the ridge to the north-east of the village in hopes of obtaining a better view of the mountain.

The trail that Dick & I followed petered out in animal tracks & underbrush without providing the hoped-for views but Peter and Steve established that there was a good site for base camp and straightforward access to the mountain from their valley.



8/10

The horses arrived at 8.30 am and 3 generations of villagers set to the business of loading the beasts with all our kit amidst much shaking of heads and laughter. We

climbed up past a logging site complete with saw mill and planing machine, powered by “farms” of HEP units about half the size of a spin dryer. Higher up, we trekked through forest where the undergrowth was gaining its autumn splendour of red and gold to a high pasture with makeshift summer shelters and a fine site for base camp. At an indicated 4420m we settled in, catching up with washing and journals.

9/10

We all headed up the valley across a waste of moraine dotted with scrub towards the small glaciers under the steep north wall stretching from Yangmolong main peak past the impressive central peak to Dangchezhengla in the east. This wall looked quite daunting and the saddle to the east was snow-free & composed of very loose broken rock that would be nightmarish if we were load-carrying. We therefore concentrated our attention on the snow saddle to the west. Dangchezhengla itself lay to the south of a low pass while to the north there was a satellite of peak 5850m that looked to be around 5600m: both seemed to be eminently suitable acclimatisation targets that would also give us better views of possible lines on the main or central summits. We decided to site an ABC below the westernmost of the glaciers.



10/10

Rest day for acclimatisation.

11/10

We packed up loads and headed up to find a site for advanced base camp. Luckily enough we found a level gravel campsite at 4900m, within 25m of streams & with good views of our target mountains above the glacier snout just a short distance away. After erecting and stocking the tents we walked easily back to BC with near empty sacks flapping on our

backs.

12/10

We packed up loads for our move up to ABC and walked at an easy pace up the valley. Reaching ABC, we quickly settled in and I scouted the route up the glacier. We decided on an early night before tackling the peak south of the pass next morning.

13/10

We left the tents at 6.30 in semi-darkness, though we were able to dispense with headtorches at the “turn-off” right from the main glacier after about half an hour.

Dick had been having some trouble with his breathing despite having put in some acclimatisation in summiting Mt. Rainier before getting to China. It may have been related to complications following a hip replacement operation a year earlier. His difficulties became acute as he climbed the glacier, to the point where he decided to turn back. It was a simple walk back to ABC so Peter came on to join Steve & me where we had waited upon seeing his solitary progress.

The three of us continued weaving through fallen boulders and moraine debris littering the retreating ice of a



tributary glacier branching off to the south. A precarious scramble up unstable rock and scree slopes took us to a hanging glacier that we were able to climb via a steep ramp adjacent to a rocky ridge on the left. This led to gentler slopes that then steepened more markedly towards the base of the long summit snow ridge, This was buttressed on the left by steep rock and fell away even more steeply into another glacier bay to the right.

The lovely sinuous snow crest led over several fore-summits to reach the main summit with a GPS reading of 5598m and views to the south of the northern aspect of Dangchezhengla, its large fore-summit completely hiding the main summit from below. To the north lay steep rock walls guarding the summit of peak 5850. Cloud had dogged our ascent but we had plenty of time and took some of it to wait for improvements in the view to inform our potential route-finding on Dangchezhengla and the central summit of Yangmolong. From the saddle between them it looked like there were routes to both summits though the one to the central summit seemed distinctly more technical.

Mission accomplished, we rapidly reversed the route to ABC where Dick was waiting with welcome tea.

14/10



On a day of perfect weather it still made sense for us to take a rest day before tackling Dangchezhengla. There had, however, been a marked drop in temperature evidenced by the fact that the streams were dry until midday.

Dick decided he was not going well enough to attempt Dangchezhengla so returned to BC to try for the ridge above that at his own pace, from which he hoped to have sight of us on the summit.

15/10

Away by 4.30, we made the short stumble over moraine to the glacier snout where crampons went on for a steady crunch up the dry glacier by headtorchlight. We headed due west until the glacier became snowy, whereupon we roped up and began a curving traverse left above a heavily crevassed area to reach the foot of a buttress at the base of the north-east ridge of Dangchezhengla. Weaving up steepening snow & rock outcrops, we gained the broad crest of the ridge as dawn broke and climbed easily to a crevassed snow plateau below the fore-summit and about level with the saddle. We crossed towards the saddle but there was no way of turning the fore-summit so I led up steep nev  to its top.

We descended to a small saddle before taking the summit ridge direct. Above a crevasse in the ridge was a steep slope of poorly consolidated snow leading up to a rock shoulder. It was exhausting work, like ploughing up vertical porridge, for about 70m with Steve twice moving carefully up to higher belays as I neared the end of the rope.



From the shoulder the angle eased and a corniced ridge led to the summit. This looked straightforward but proved anything but. Delicate, with several short steep icy steps the ridge itself was nevertheless preferable to upper slopes of the north face that seemed to consist of a couple of inches of frozen snow over unconsolidated “styrofoam”, or simply an airgap where that had melted away. There was a mercifully short horizontal section where we side-stepped along the opening cornice break line whilst gently plunging axes into the cornice itself for support.

Finally, we reached the rounded summit and stopped on the safe side of the break-line of the huge summit cornice with the precipitous north face falling away beneath us. The GPS gave a height of 5847m before we reversed the route back to the little saddle - very carefully!



It had taken hours pitching that treacherous ridge and only back at the saddle could we relax, eat & drink, though the water was far too cold to drink much. We had seen little sunshine and Peter was shocked by the sustained low temperatures. Steve struggled on the reascent of the fore-summit & we were all beginning to realise how much the route had taken out of us.

Fortunately the descent was straightforward and a plod back down the glacier took us into ABC at 18.30: a long day!

16/10

Up late, we sorted ourselves out for the walk back to BC, then set out amidst flurries of snowflakes to find a warm welcome and congratulations at a cold grey base camp.

17/10

Rest day. We snatched washes in icy stream water during brief sunny intervals. It was cold enough for me to wake in the night with feet that took half an hour to thaw out!

18/10

We packed up 6 days food for to restock ABC & trekked back up. On the way the weather was cold with snow & an icy wind. At base camp all but 1 of the streams were frozen, silent.

19/10

Stuck at ABC in cold cloudy weather with frequent snow showers.

Peter heroically climbed up crumbling rock to the eastern saddle but Steve & I remained unconvinced that it offered a feasible route to the main summit. He did, however, take some



pictures of a steep line falling directly from the main summit that looked a little more encouraging.

20/10

We spent much of the day festering at ABC as the weather blew in & out, before deciding to go down to BC for the night to see how Dick was doing & collect the last of the food so that we can wait out the weather at ABC. It seemed fine as we set out but then snowed hard for most of the descent.

Dick seemed quite enthused by Peter's pictures of the North spur and our thoughts began to tend in that direction. I had cold feet again that night!

21/10

We carried a load more food back up to ABC, arriving in a mini-blizzard, although the weather improved that afternoon.

22/10

Peter came over from his tent to say that he wasn't keen on tackling the north spur. The low temperatures had surprised him and he didn't like the idea of slowing the pace by climbing as a 3 when he felt his cold weather clothing was only barely coping with the conditions. However he nobly helped with the load-carrying as we took an assault tent over to the easternmost glacier bay.

Steve & I set up camp 1 at 5140m. With only 920m of ascent we decided to go for a lightweight summit ascent next day.



23/10

Up at 3.30 to a clear night with lots of stars and... light snowfall!! Indecision led to us leaving at 6 when it stopped snowing.

We threaded our way between snow-covered rock debris, steadily gaining height on the glacier. As the slope steepened we encountered a complex crevasse barrier. I managed to make a precarious crossing but then had to climb a long steep step above to find an adequate belay. As I brought Steve up I could see lenticular clouds forming in the northern sky. We were both feeling the cold but decided to press on to a rock corner ahead.

We rounded the corner and traversed right across a steeply sloping snow ledge above the rock buttress above our camp. It didn't get any warmer and the snow conditions were often alarming with an inch

or two of crust overlying deep unconsolidated stuff. We were moving together with at least 1 snowstake placed between us but there was precious little security afforded by this as the stakes were highly likely to pull in the event of a fall. There was probably ice below the unconsolidated snow but at a depth too great for regular excavations to place ice screws.

The repetitious step-kicking to gain purchase in the poor snow was slowing us down, but we continued to climb towards a couloir splitting the upper buttress in hopes of finding better snow conditions. We didn't. Both of us were suffering from cold hands and feet as we debated the issue at the base of the couloir. It didn't take long to agree to bail.

Back at the tent we warmed up with hot drinks and packed up to return to ABC. Peter turned up just as we were about to leave having been unable to see us on the route and therefore worried about what might have happened. Once again he did sterling work helping get the gear back to ABC.

Just as we reached camp a serious storm hit us that lasted until after dark. Had we still been on the route it would probably have killed us.

24/10

We woke to a clear morning with rising pressure but the valley cloud soon rose to envelop us in tiny gently falling snowflakes and intermittent gusts of icy wind. We'd had enough and packed up the first loads to evacuate ABC.

Reaching BC at lunchtime, we found there were some local visitors and at Dick's suggestion a plan was rapidly hatched to arrange with them for horses to come up next day to evacuate BC. Then we could walk right around the mountain to Dangba in 2 or 3 days of what promised to be great trekking. It would also give us a chance to see the eastern and southern approaches to the mountain.

That afternoon we raced up to ABC to bring down the last of the loads and spent the rest of the day packing up ready for the morning.



25/10

A beautiful day saw the horses and yaks arriving to evacuate BC. We cleared up the site and walked down with the "caravan."

This time we stayed at another farmhouse in lower Sanglong Xi. More people there spoke mandarin and it was easier for Gary to make arrangements for us all to get back to the road.

Local estimates were that it would take 3 days to get to Dangba on foot and we only had 2, but they were willing to give us motor-bike rides to the end of the vehicle track that should bring the trek within our time-frame.



26/10

The motorbikes duly arrived at 9am, each taking a pillion passenger and his rucksack. An easy open track deteriorated above the village and the boys did well negotiating multiple river crossings by rough bridges and winding between boulders, felled logs and huge stumps, sometimes on the brink of a nasty drop into the water. They weren't helped by the ice found on shady sections of the trail and this was probably one of the most dangerous things that we did on the trip!

We stopped a couple of times to thaw out and get views of the mountains while the boys had a smoke. Then just above the little lake at Chojunwa Batang we were dropped off at the end of the driveable track. We shouldered our backpacks and walked on up the yak tracks to Yangmolong pasture where we had lunch at 4400m.

We climbed steadily through trees and scrub alive with birds alongside the river with views of the mountains opening up to our right: not particularly encouraging for climbing. Above the tree-line we surprised a lad who was the only person we met that day. He must have been checking out the herds that crowded a broad, damp, but very sheltered yak pasture where we emerged a little later.

The trail out of the pasture became indistinct on the way up to a pass at 4910m. The party split and took a little time to regroup at the head of the pass.

The evening was drawing in and although the views of Dangchezhengla & Yangmolong were impressive, there was no time to linger if we were to find a campsite on the shores of Yamou lake. Pushing on past a shallow seasonal lake we crossed another small col and roofless shelter into the valley of the lake.



Yamou lake was remarkable in that it had little in the way of beaches. The steep rock walls that surrounded it in the main plunged straight into the water and the faint trail to the west ran well above the waterline. Steve & I cracked on to find a campsite only at the far end of the lake where the outwash had formed a more level area. While I pitched the tent, Steve went back to pass on the good news to the others: without success. They had decided to bivouac by a trickle of water further back down the trail. We cooked under a huge full moon.



27/10

The moon was still shining at 7.30 when we were reunited next morning. Ironically the only concentrations of rubbish we found were at this campsite and at the shelter close to this "Heaven Lake" - either left by a previous expedition or people who had trekked up from Dangba.

The trail plunged down into the shadows below the lake's outflow channel, now dry but leaking ice lower down, then traversed cliffs to reach a good shelter in a pleasant yak pasture. A good trail traversed west from there across bare hillside where lammergeiers wheeled above us down through forest and deserted logging camps to the village of Upper Zhongba. We met no-one, but across at the Llamasery Sandens opposite the village it looked as though the entire population had been marshalled for a good haranguing by the monks. We could hear it delivered in a typical hectoring style over the PA system. Perhaps it was some festival on account of the full moon. In contrast with the northern valley there seemed to be a remarkable dearth of birdlife.

After lunch we descended to Lower Zhongba then made the mistake of continuing to contour too far and had to retrace our steps to where power lines descended a long spur down to Dangba. The track was suffering from gullification owing to the motorcycle traffic, but we meandered down to Dangba where Gary was waiting with cold beers and a hotel booking in Batang.

28/10

We drove to Yajang where we spent the night.

29/10

We drove to Chengdu for a celebratory feast with Jiyue, Shauhong and his family... from Abergavenny!

30/10

We all flew home.



Conclusion

The northern side of the Yangmolong massif is spectacular but with no obvious lines on the north wall. Technical climbing is made considerably more serious by the prevailing snow conditions that we encountered on the north faces. Freeze-thaw cycles make for better snow conditions on the other aspects of the mountain, but corniced ridges can prove very treacherous as the Japanese account of the ascent of the summit ridge of Dangchezhengla confirms. The southern aspect is similarly steep and technical: there is evidence of glacial retreat and any lines would be likely to involve mixed climbing on dubious rock (we didn't find any good rock). Satellite peaks like "Snowsnake" offer good acclimatisation prospects (or consolation prizes).

Winter can arrive in October with a sustained cold snap that can make climbing a war of attrition, but we left the range in settled fine weather and on a previous visit to Western Sichuan in September it was clear that the monsoon influence lingered, so "you pays your money & makes your choice!"

Appendix 1

Peaks climbed:

1. 5598m N. 30° 04.086' E. 99° 16.71'
First ascensionists; DWJ, SH, PR.
Suggested name: "Snowsnake"
Route: E. Glacier & E. Ridge
Grade; PD
2. Dangchezhengla 5847m 4720m N 30° 03.291' E 99° 17.027'
First ascensionists; DWJ, SH, PR.
Route: North-east ridge to East ridge at the foresummit, where we joined the Japanese 2002 route.
Grade: D

Appendix 2

Finance summary

Costs

Flights to Chengdu, via Beijing or otherwise: £2400

Sichuan transport & accommodation package: £1200 x 4 = £4800

Lightweight Food: £200

Additional expenses: £500

Total: £7900

Less: MEF Grant: £1550

BMC Grant: £300

Balance made up by members of the team: £6050