

# Winter alpinism in Yunnan

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# WINTER ALPINISM IN YUNNAN

In the Jahresbericht 2013-14, I reported on an expedition – or more accurately an alpine road-trip – in the Chinese province of Sichuan and on the remarkable contrasts with the experience of the 1981 AACZ expedition to the same region. In fact this journey was part of three consecutive visits I made to the mountains of the southwestern Chinese provinces during the Chinese New Year holidays of 2013, 2014 and 2015, whose culmination was one of the least accessible peaks I have ever climbed.

The name of China's far southwestern province, Yunnan, translates as "South of the Clouds." A spectacular land draped over 1,000km of trans-Himalayan foothills, Yunnan spans the full range from tropical jungles on its southern border with Vietnam to high mountains on its northwestern border with Tibet. In the mountainous northwest corner, higher-altitude plateaus give way to the "Deep-Gorge Country," where the huge rivers of the eastern Himalaya flow southwards from Tibet and Sichuan. Here the valley floors of the Salween, Mekong and several Yangtze tributaries lie at 2,000m, but they are separated by 5,000m ridges and 4,000m road passes.

Yunnan has rather few "real" mountains. They begin with the tourist drawcard of Yulong ("Jade Dragon", 5,596m), which rises just north of Lijiang city. Yulong is separated from Haba (5,396m) by the famous "Tiger-Leaping Gorge", carved by the main branch of the Yangtze (known here as Jinsha, the "River of Golden Sand"). The modern tourist trail heads north over a plateau to the formerly ethnic Tibetan town of Zhongdian, recently officially rebranded as "Shangri-La," before diving down to the Jinsha (at 2,000m) and then climbing

the Yakou Pass (4,360m) at the edge of the Baima massif (5,429m, sometimes translated as "White Horse"). From here the view to the west is dominated by the Kawagebo Range, but between Baima and Kawagebo is the deep gorge containing the Mekong. The tourist route descends to the Tibetan town of Deqen and the famous Mekong/Kawagebo viewpoint at Feilai Si ("Flying Temple") before ending at the Mekong and some hillside villages nestled at the edges of the glaciers spilling off Kawagebo. Unlike the other western provinces of China, Yunnan has no official Mountaineering Association and very little climbing has taken place.

The Kawagebo Range, known in China as Meili Xueshan, is a 20km north-south chain of 6,000m peaks and forms the border with the southeastern corner of the Tibet Autonomous Region. Although most famous to the modern tourist for the beautifully fluted, triangular peak of Mianzimu (6,054m), its highest summit, Kawagebo (6,740m), is the second-most sacred mountain in the pantheon of Tibetan Buddhism after Mt. Kailas. In 1991 it became the scene of an infamous episode in the history of both mountaineering and Sino-Tibetan relations when, over the strenuous objections of the Tibetan community, the Chinese authorities granted climbing permission to a joint Chinese-Japanese expedition. The matter was resolved only when an avalanche took the lives of 17 members of the team. Some of the other peaks in the range were attempted in the 1990s, but none were successful and the region has been closed to climbing during this millennium.

Mindful of the religious importance of Kawagebo, my target in the range was



Bruce and Kyle on the ice ridge above the col (photo Marcos Costa)



Misty and mysterious approach on the moraines (photo Marcos Costa)





its second-highest peak, Cogar Lapka (6,509m), which is hidden far to the north end of the chain and located fully on the Tibetan side of the divide. In 2013, after some climbing in southwestern Sichuan, I drove down into Zhongdian and drove as far as the Mekong. I even picked up some hitchhiking Chinese students and drove 9 km into Tibet, in the hope that they could talk the police into letting me take them further, but I was summarily thrown out at the first checkpoint. It was only while skidding and sliding back over the Yakou Pass that I was able to set eyes on Cogar Lapka.

In 2014 I was back with Marcos Costa, again after some acclimatisation action in Sichuan. The heart of old-town Zhongdian had just been destroyed in a huge fire. The Tibetan border was now completely closed by a new checkpoint at Foshan, on the Yunnan side. We drove up a dirt track from the Mekong to a village around 3,000m, but while preparing to hike away we were stopped by the villagers. They felt that we (or they) should report our actions to the police, and after some inconclusive efforts to explain the concept of hiking, both to the villagers and by phone to the police, we were told to wait while they came up to talk to us. The afternoon dragged on, no police arrived, a 4pm deadline was set, still there were no police, and then some villagers started to suggest that we should just get on with our business. Needing no second bidding, we drove to the end of the road, threw on our packs and boots and hiked down into the woods just as a police siren could be heard driving up the track...

We walked into a strange world of steep and little-used trails through thick, mixed forests of bamboo, deciduous and conifers, where every tree was hung by green moss. The sky was dark grey. Excellent ice-climbs appeared on the shady side of the valley. There was almost no flat ground for

camping. At 4,000m, the terrain opened out to some high but deserted pastures beneath steep glaciers spilling down from the clouds. After an uncomfortable moraine camp, we climbed snow gullies to the 5,700m col separating Yunnan from Tibet. With clear skies but stormy winds, we were finally able to assess the ridge, the northern end of the range, the broken-looking Mangkang Glacier beneath us and the East Face of Cogar Lapka itself. The ridge turned into a rocky knife-edge, forcing us to downclimb and abseil to the glacier, where finally an incoming storm drove us to retreat. After passing back through the village at nightfall, the police were waiting for us at the Mekong bridge. We told them we were safe, apologised for any misunderstanding, showed them the lack of photos on my camera, whose LCD screen had conveniently broken earlier in the trip, and were sent on our way. Their last words were "contact us first if you ever come back." This time, we had brought chains, which we needed to drive back over the Yakou La in the snowstorm that had ended our climb.

In 2015, we were back again, this time accompanied by the late Kyle Dempster and fellow climbing activist Garrett Bradley. We tried hiking through the village at dawn, but were followed by a posse of villagers on motorcycles; some were pleased to see us again but the surly headman was annoyed to the point of batting away the offered handshakes. This time, two policemen drove up the road from Foshan immediately, and one of them, a veteran of last year, wasn't feeling very polite. The other, however, was a local (ethnic Tibetan) and seemed much more moderate. We left the talking to Garrett, whose excellent Mandarin and diplomatic skills – or maybe blind luck – somehow worked magic. After photographing our climbing gear, the cop



said "We cannot prevent you from going up there. We can only advise you that it is not safe and you should not go." We nodded gravely and said we would take this sage advice into account. The policemen gave the villagers two packs (24 cans) of beer, clearly the price of ratting us out, and left. We then hiked off into the forest.

On the first night we camped below the tree line and on the second below the col. This year had been warm and the snow gullies to the col had significant stone fall. We continued up and along the icy ridge, again in strong winds, then made the 150m down-climb and abseil to the Mangkang Glacier, placing our final camp beyond the last major crevasse at approximately 5,650m. Although Cogar Lapka has a long East Face, riven with ice gullies between snow flutes, there is not a single possible line that is not highly threatened by seracs and cornices. Thus the only feasible route was to climb the northern edge of the glacier basin to reach the ridge connecting Cogar Lapka with a peak we named P6260 (height estimate from Google Earth) and finish by this upper East Ridge. We climbed snow slopes and then some ice pitches up to 60 degrees, but our arrival at the low-point of the ridge (c. 6,050m) was greeted by howling winds and a descending white-out, which drove us back to camp.

The following morning was clear, but Garrett was too tired to climb and Kyle was too tired of the constant objective dangers of the previous two days. Thus only Marcos and I regained our high point on the ridge and continued up it, navigating minor cornices and occasional crevasses. Dramatic views across to P6260 and over the Kawagebo Range were again blotted out by incoming clouds, but on this side of the mountain we were somewhat sheltered from the winds. Seracs on the ridge pushed us onto the Northeast Face

and into deeper snow, where we came to the final bergschrund. Marcos led out of this with an extremely athletic move through an overhanging ice bulge, but we had forgotten to make a good plan for how to belay in the snows above. I could not repeat his move and he was left trying to haul my sorry carcass over the bulge while belayed only by his legs sinking ever deeper into the snow (visions of *Touching the Void*). Fortunately, this was the last difficulty and a final snow ridge brought us to the summit crest, where we had to crawl around on our knees in the white-out to look for cornice edges. Unfortunately, the conditions denied us the views we had hoped for over the unknown peaks and ranges of southeastern Tibet. Marcos' GPS watch recorded 6516m; to our knowledge this was the first and only summit climbed in the entire Kawagebo Range.

Judicious use of our snow-stake made for an easy abseil at the overhanging bulge. The storm relented as we descended the ridge, giving us sunset views of P6260, but the snow restarted as we abseiled the ice face in the dark. Kyle and Garrett hung out a headlamp to guide us "home" in the storm. True to form, the next morning was clear and cold with wild winds as we climbed back out of the glacier basin, descended the icy ridge to the col and dropped rapidly down the stonefall-threatened gullies to the moraines of the east side. We slept that night in the yak pastures at 4,000m and on the last day walked out through the mossy forests. Back in the valley floors of the Deep Gorges, the cherry trees were blooming and the temperatures were perfect for rock-climbing as we thawed out in the permanent springtime of the land south of the clouds.

Bruce Normand  
Villigen, January 2017



