

Jiazi

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THE WEST FACE of Jiazi rose into view as I made my way across boulders to the edge of the Riuchi Glacier. The face was probably a mile high, broad, craggy and laced with snow-and-ice runnels—an ice-climber’s mountain with a lot of routes to choose from. I was awed and stopped to ponder. Doug McCarty and Pat Callis caught up and passed me, mesmerized and babbling about a Callis-McCarty route on the face as if it were a years-old classic. But detailed route-finding could wait. From our brief reconnaissance we three now knew that the west side of Jiazi was where we wanted to be.

Jiazi is part of the Hengduan Shan, a north-south range bordering Tibet on the east but actually in the Sichuan Province of China. Our expedition of eight climbers and three cinematographers had been assembled by Fred Beckey with assistance from Jim Williams and funded by Quaker Oats. We were a diverse bunch coming from Montana, California and Alaska, with little or no “big-time” expedition experience and prone to chronic individualism. This latter trait tended to neutralize group decisions on the mountain. We also frustrated and ultimately amused our friends Messrs. Song and Zhao of the Chinese Mountaineering Association (CMA), who tried to keep us on schedule during our movements through China.

With our Tibetan horse train we had hop-scotched up the Jiazi Longba, first making Base Camp at the British Army Expedition site (A.A.J., 1982, pages 282-3.), and then moving further up to 13,000 feet after Fred Beckey decided this gave us the option to reach Jiazi from the west as well as the north. We had taken advantage of the British experience by coming to this valley and avoiding the east side. Now we were weighing their attempts on the north ridges with what we saw here. After our west-side reconnaissance and another by Beckey and Dave Stutzman* that same day, everyone favored a western approach.

We established Glacier Camp at 16,000 feet near the base of the west face. Once there, we quickly developed a more sober view of the route possibilities. Objective dangers seemed minimal—the face was virtually free of rockfall and

*Tragically killed in an avalanche while on ski patrol at Big Sky, Montana, December 24, 1982.

PLATE 19

Photo by Richard Nalting

West Face of JIAZI. South Ridge route ascends skyline from South Col on right. West Face route ascends couloirs above climber's head.



hanging ice. However, a steep band of rock, the nemesis of the British expedition, crossed the upper 1000 feet of the mountain and appeared to be a deterrent to good routes on the northerly side of the face. All of us wanted to try the west face, but it seemed too uncertain for a first ascent, and too difficult to film. The south ridge to the right of the face looked more suitable. Moreover, it was not practical or safe for all of us to climb the face by the same route. But Dave Stutzman and Jim Williams were hooked on an elegant line leading directly up to the rock band, where they figured exits left and right surely existed. They proposed that after initially supporting a group effort to the south ridge, they would return to the face for a try.

The south col at 18,000 feet was a deep notch between Jiazi and G-Gongga; it was the first step towards reaching Jiazi's south ridge. On Halloween Doug McCarty and I tried to climb up to the col but barely got a third of the way. With John Markel and Pat Callis adding their efforts, we spent parts of two more days climbing to the col via a gully on the left side. The final leads had stretches of water ice and were somewhat steeper than the usual 45° angle. We fixed about 1500 feet of rope, giving us a veritable trade route from glacier to col. Jim Williams and Dave Stutzman returned from a west-face reconnaissance to help load-carrying to the south ridge.

On November 5, when we moved up the gully to put in Col Camp, the marginal weather finally turned against us. Our pleasure at reaching the col in two and a half hours was squelched by harsh winds and snow that blasted up the gully behind us, and four hours passed before we managed to cut a platform and pitch a tent. Conditions improved for a while the following day, so we made another gear shuttle and Peter Pilafian and Rob Hart came up with a second tent. Biff Bracht had experienced pulmonary edema and was forced to remain at Glacier Camp.

Now the storm took over completely. We six spent the next eight days wondering how long we'd have to hold out. We became convinced that the heart of winter was arriving. Frustrated by a continual bout with bronchitis, Fred Beckey was never able to get as far as the south col. His presence, however, was felt through the medium of our radio as he confirmed or criticized our moves and offered advice.

More favorable weather and dwindling provisions finally forced a move. Pilafian, Hart and McCarty went back down and left Callis, Markel and me with sufficient food for a summit attempt.

Above the col, rather than a south ridge, was a broad snow slope dotted with rock islands, stretching 1500 feet above the col. Though apprehensive about avalanches should there be more storms, we hoped we had time to get up the face. On November 14, our first climbing day since making Col Camp nine days ago, Callis and I bucked strong winds and made it to the lowest rocks, tying off 330 feet of climbing rope before retreating. John Markel joined us next day, and carrying gear and food for five days, we again fought the wind back to the ropes. Gusting wind continued to knock us sideways as we jūmared to our high point. We continued up 50° slopes on firm snow, often using

running belays to avoid being surprised by the wind. Several hours after dark, we finally sprawled exhausted on a large sloping rock. We used our two small tents as glorified bivy sacks, being unable to carve out more than a two-foot-wide niche in the slope. A cocoon of anchoring ropes and gear enveloped us. The night was magically still and not particularly cold. The next day mild winds and clear sunny skies allowed us enjoyable climbing above our bivouac and in three hours we reached the top of the face. The majestic north face of Gongga Shan had come into view directly south, but the most arresting sight was the sharply plunging northeast ridge of E-Gongga immediately southeast.

Above us and to the west rose the south ridge. We proceeded a short distance along the top of the south face to a bergschrund at the base of the ridge. In a corner of the schrund Pat found a cave with room for both tents and freedom from winds.

Our cave proved so comfortable that we did not start up the south ridge until 10:30 the next morning. With light packs we third-classed on reasonably firm very steep snow and eventually came out on an easy broad ridge 100 yards from the south summit 700 feet above our cave. In case we got no further, Pat filmed John and me walking the last few feet to the high point. We then wandered around taking still shots and studying the north summit. It looked like an easy 500-foot rise to the summit, but the half mile of intervening ridge might be time-consuming. The mind-numbing snow slog we had feared all along finally materialized. Fortunately it only amounted to a 45-minute wade around some cornices, and solid snow and easy slopes took us the rest of the way.

The summit of Jiazi was broad and seemed stable enough despite an abrupt drop on the east. We had noticed a thin corniced pinnacle that appeared on the ridge a quarter mile north. Was it higher? We hoped not, for the ridge narrowed dramatically in that direction. After filling a water cup, we leveled both summit and pinnacle and satisfied ourselves that we were on the highest point. Dave and Jim might soon be contemplating that pinnacle from the other side if they succeeded in climbing the west face.

Perhaps an hour later we headed back south. Down-climbing and several rappels brought us to our cave after dark. A radio call to Glacier Camp informed the others of our success and we celebrated by sleeping late once again. An afternoon start preordained a nighttime descent, but by now this schedule was almost ritual. The tenth rappel down the south face at twilight was on our last ice screw. Would it reach the col? Pat and I strained to keep John in view as he rappelled into darkness. We exulted when he suddenly disappeared over the bergschrund at the bottom. Pat and I then took our turns plunging over the schrund and into the roaring wind of the south col. After a night in the surviving tent at the col, we descended the fixed ropes with as much gear and camera equipment as we could manage.

During the next two days we sat lazily in camp watching Jim Williams and Dave Stutzman, now into the sixth and seventh day of their ascent, climb through the rock band and then finally on November 21 up to the north end of the summit ridge. They had done it! Some 5000 feet of ice-and-snow climbing

PLATE 20

Photo by Jim Williams

**Stutzman reaching rock band at top
of JIAZI's West Face.**



and eight bivouacs, together with a long spell of benign weather, had put them on the top of the west face. But now what? A long narrow ridge lay to the south between them and the summit. If they chose to forego that, a northern descent might lead into similar difficulties. Did they still have the equipment to make a safe descent of the face? Time was getting short. The expedition was due to leave Base Camp on the 24th. More importantly, the skies were cloudier each day. The following day, Jim and Dave were out of sight and we began conjecturing about their route down—and when yet another day passed, about other possibilities. On the third day they still had not shown up and we were distinctly worried.

The Tibetan porters had been up each day from Base Camp to check on Pat Callis and me and relay messages since we were out of radio range. Cheerful and gregarious, they loved a cup of tea and a smoke, and our tent was sometimes jammed with as many as eight people during these sessions. On that day, the Tibetans intuitively shared our concern and took turns scanning the mountain with the binoculars. Suddenly at two P.M. two more Tibetans showed up from below, gesticulating wildly as they handed me a note from Fred. Dave and Jim were safe at Base Camp! The collapse of a cornice had stopped them from attempting the summit ridge. After they had lost a pack containing stove and hardware down the east side, they descended the east face after it. The next day they climbed up to the northeast col and continued nonstop through the night down the Tshiburongri Glacier all the way to the Jiazi Longba, arriving dazed and gaunt at Base.

In a happy frenzy we packed up the remnants of Glacier Camp and headed down, accompanied by the singsong chants of the Tibetans and yodels by Pat. The reunion at Base Camp was heady. Everyone was physically together for the first time in a month. The place looked like a Montana dude ranch with dozens of horses and yaks. This was our caravan, ready to carry us down the valley to the other China, leading back to a different world.

Summary of Statistics:

AREA: Hengduan Shan, Sichuan, China.

FIRST ASCENT: Jiazi (Rudshe Konka), 6540 meters, 21,457 feet, via south ridge, summit reached on November 17, 1982 (Callis, Markel, Nolting).

West Face to the ridge just below the summit, November 14 to 21, 1982 (Stutzman, Williams).

PERSONNEL: Fred Beckey, leader; James Williams, assistant leader; Patrik Callis, Robert Hart, John Markel, Dougal McCarty, Richard Nolting, David Stutzman, climbers; Biff Bracht, Peter Pilafian, Michael Stringer, cinematographers.