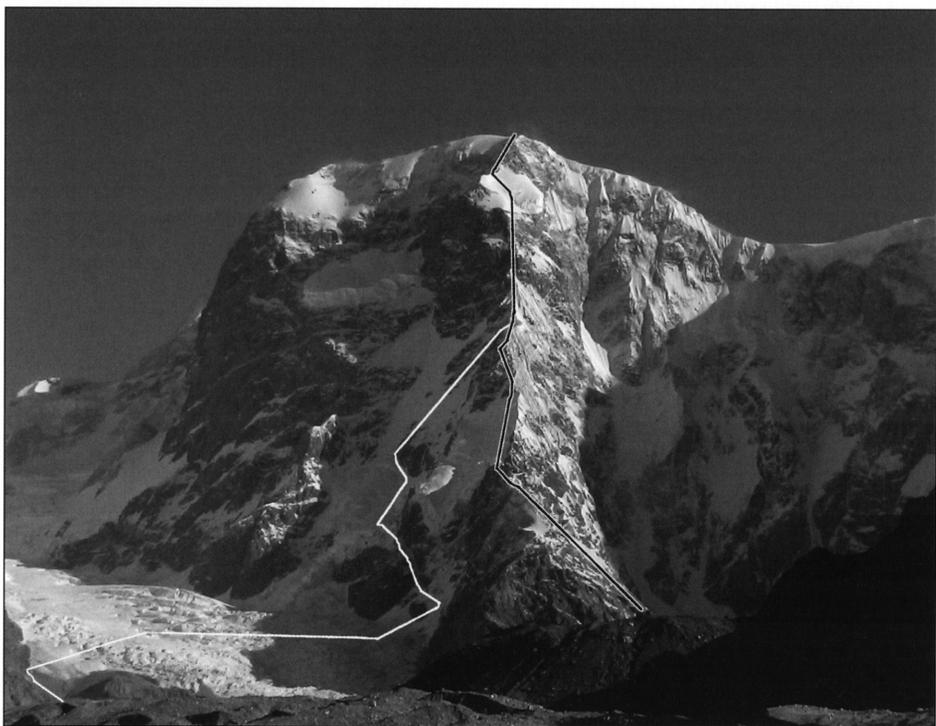


# THE CHINESE TIEN SHAN

*New routes and great potential in a seldom-visited range.*

ANATOLIY DJULIY



The 2,500-meter southern escarpment of Peak Voennih Topografov (Peak of the Army Topographers, 6,873m), with the routes of ascent (black) and descent marked. The route required much traversing, and the team estimates it climbed a total distance of nearly five kilometers. *Anatoliy Djuliy*

**T**he central Tien Shan range in China, south and east of the borders with Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan, is a little-known region with many unclimbed peaks from 5,000 meters to almost 6,800 meters high. The first successful mountaineering expedition into this region was likely in 1977, when the Chinese climbed the avalanche-prone southern slopes of Tomur (a.k.a. Peak Pobeda, 7,439m). Other expeditions can be counted on one's fingers: During the 1980s and 1990s, Japanese teams attempted the Chinese route on Tomur and made four attempts to climb 6,637-meter Xuelian Feng, before succeeding in 1990. There were French and Japanese expeditions to Kashkar (6,435m). Other than my own trips, that's about it. The base

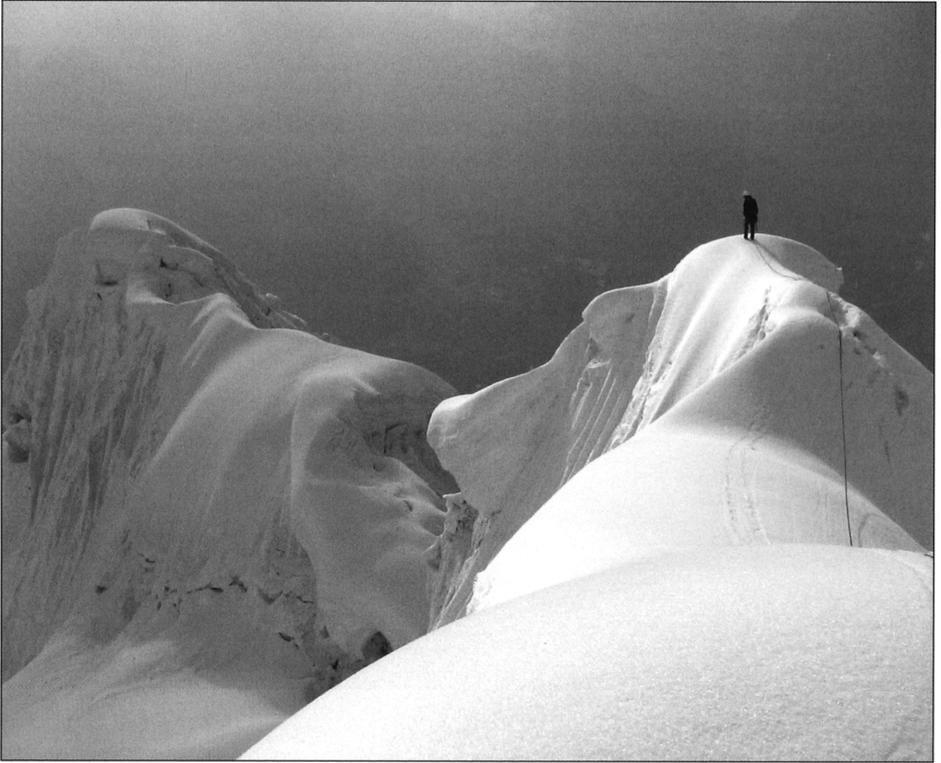


The view of Kashkar (6,435m) from a high camp during the traverse of the Vizbor Massif. Anatoliy Djuliy's expedition made the possible first ascent of Kashkar, which had been attempted at least twice, during a 16-day traverse in 2004. To the right is Vizbor West, over which the 2006 expedition traversed as part of its acclimatization climb. *Anatoliy Djuliy*

camps below Khan Tengri and the other peaks by the Inylchek glaciers, north and west of the border, are busy with mountaineers every summer, but the Chinese Tien Shan often goes for years without seeing any climbers.

Teams under my leadership have conducted three expeditions into the region, in 2002, 2004, and 2006. We completed more than 10 traverses of high passes, most of them very complex, and several first ascents. In 2002, we completed a 270-kilometer trek over seven passes, from China to Kyrgyzstan and back. In 2004, we succeeded in a 16-day traverse of Kashkar, likely making that peak's first ascent. Then, in 2006, we traversed the summits of Peak 5,853m and 5,960m, and we completed the objective that had tantalized us since we first saw it in four years earlier: the steep, 2,500-meter-high southern ridge of Peak of the Army Topographers (6,873m).

Dozens of alluring peaks remain unclimbed in this area, but the Chinese Tien Shan is difficult to access for many reasons. There is no tourist infrastructure: no hotels, no porters, few horses for carrying loads. Getting permits for the region takes several months, and some areas may be off-limits. There is no rescue service, so if you have any troubles you are on your own. The weather near Pobeda, the northernmost 7,000-meter peak in the world, can be extremely rough, with hurricane-force winds and snowfalls almost every day. Last season, however, there was extraordinarily little snow, and the result was heavily crevassed glaciers and highly sensitive cornices.



Double cornices encountered during the descent from Peak Vizbor, the team's nine-day warm-up climb.  
*Anatoliy Djuliy*



We flew from Moscow to Urumchi on the 15th of July, and by the evening of the next day, after a two-hour flight, we had reached the city of Aksu, south of the range. In the morning, having bought some fresh food and fuel, we traveled to the village of Talak to begin our approach. The 40-kilometer approach to base camp was problematic. We were abandoned by the leader of our horse caravan, naturally with his animals, and it wasn't until July 24 that our base camp was organized and we could start to implement our plan.

Our base camp was near a short western tributary from the eastern branch of the Chonteren Glacier, at an altitude of about 3,800 meters. This was three to four hours from the south ridge of Peak of the Army Topographers, and it was only about an hour below the 4,500-meter saddle where we planned to end our traverse of Peak 5,853m and Peak 5,960m, which we later named Peak Vizbor West and Peak Vizbor. This massif is to the south of Pobeda's eastern summit, separating the east and west forks of Chonteren Glacier.

Our traverse of the Vizbor Massif covered about 18 kilometers round trip from base camp—10 kilometers from the 4,600-meter saddle at the start to the 4,500-meter col at the far end. The route was more difficult than expected, with passages of ice up to 70 degrees and rock sections up to UIAA IV+ that required many pitches of belaying. We spent nine days on the effort, two or three days longer than we had planned, and reached the summit of Peak 5,853m

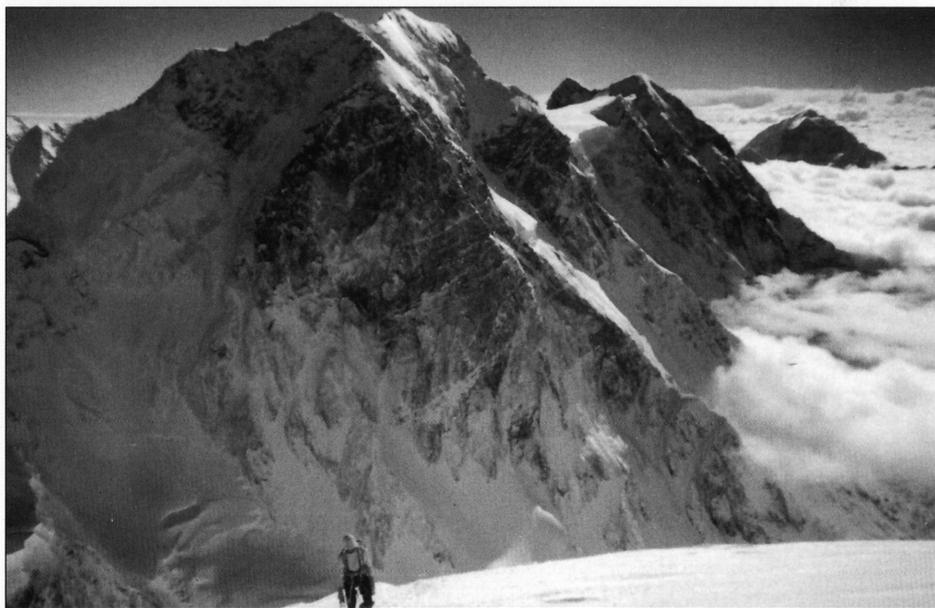
on July 29 and Peak 5,960m, further to the northeast, the next day. We named the massif in honor of Yury Vizbor, the famous Russian poet, singer, and actor, and were back in base camp by August 2 after a difficult descent along a rocky ridge.



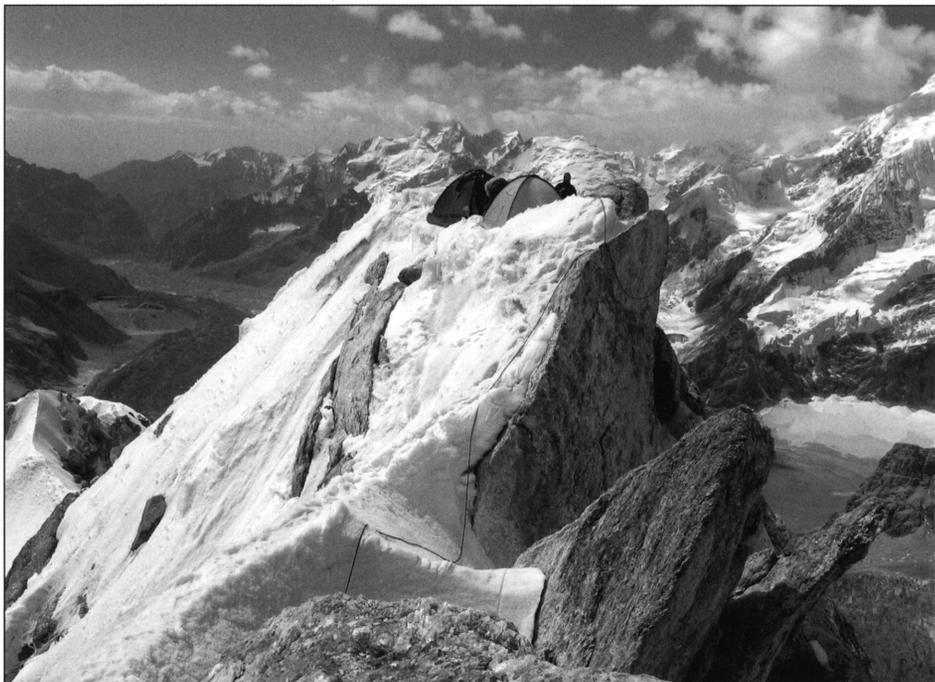
We had dragged a guitar to camp with us, and during the next few days of rest, repacking, and weather-enforced relaxation the songs of Yury Vizbor resounded around our camp. Well-acclimatized and rested, we carried a load to the base of the south ridge of Army Topographers on August 6, then left base camp for good the next day, setting up a bivouac at 4,400 meters, directly below the eastern side of the ridge. We had skirted the lower wall by climbing an icefall to the right of a rocky bastion.

Our first challenge was to reach the nearly horizontal ridge crest at about 5,000 meters. This took two days and required 22 pitches of climbing, mostly not very difficult but time-consuming because of powder snow and icy sections. The rock was very sharp, and climbing along a fixed rope I tore my knee—I never thought so much blood could flow out of a knee. During the second day of climbing we reached the ridge top, only to find it was only 60 centimeters wide—no chance for a bivouac there! We continued along the ridge for several difficult pitches, exiting under some impressive rock gendarmes to reach a possible bivy site against a cornice, late in the evening, as snow began to fall. After several hours of work, we managed to level a space just big enough for two tents. It was pitch dark by the time we were done.

Half of the next day, August 10, was spent carrying loads and retrieving the 16 ropes we had fixed below. Then we were able to fix four ropes over rock gendarmes beyond our cornice



Peak of the Army Topographers from the west, seen from the approach to 5,488-meter Chonteren Pass. The Russians climbed the prominent ridge leading straight to the highest summit (second from the foreground). Peak 6,747m rises behind. See the 2003 AAJ, p. 405, for a direct view of the steep south face of Peak 6,747m. Anatoliy Djulyi



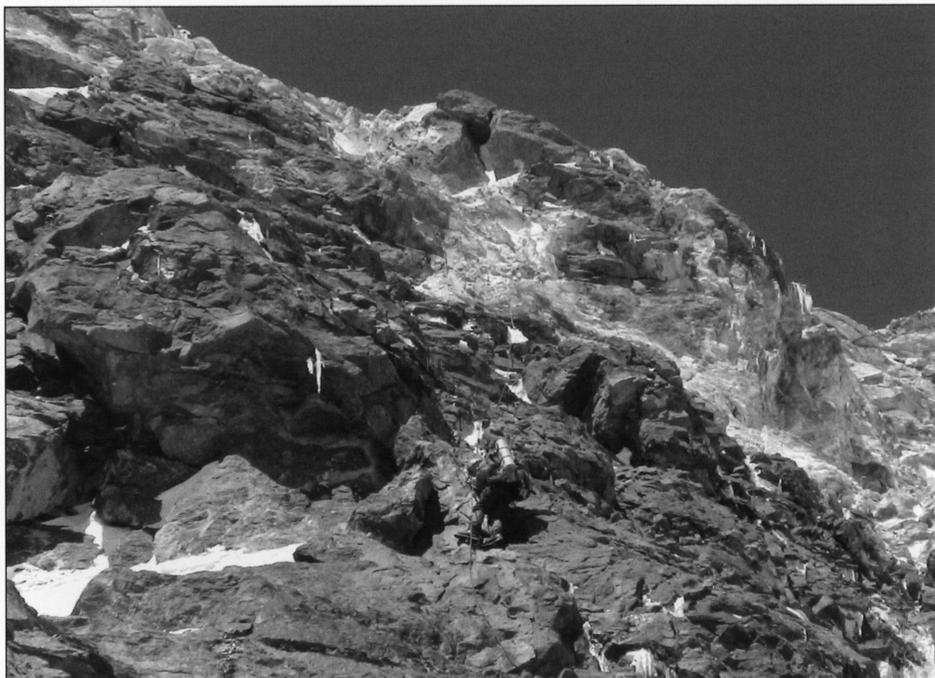
The first camp on the main south ridge of Peak of the Army Topographers, at about 5,050 meters, looking to the south down the Chonteren Glacier. It took two days and 22 pitches to reach this elevation, and the team traversed nearly horizontally for another two days before the ridge headed upward again. *Anatoly Djuliy*

bivy. We began to understand that this climb was likely to take a lot longer than expected. I had planned for six days of climbing plus six days for the Tien Shan weather. As the climbing was proving slow, we would have to ignore the weather.

In all, it took us three days to traverse the horizontal rib, at an elevation of about 5,100 meters, before the ridge reared upward. This was tedious climbing, difficult with our heavy packs, climbing over and around gendarmes and along the sides of steep cornices and ice slopes. We camped once along the ridge and then found a good bivouac site below a bergschrund underneath the upper wall.

We fixed all of our ropes above this campsite over the next two days, in very poor weather: snow and high winds. The angle was not so steep, but the climbing was delicate and took a lot of time. Apparently, however, all this was insufficient adventure, and therefore on his watch Kolya [Nikolay Dobrjaev] managed to burn the fuel hose on one of the stoves. A trivial event normally, but it could set us back significantly. Have you ever tried to repair a stove in the middle of a mountain ascent? It's an amusing task. Vovka [Vladimir Leonenko] and I took the stove into our tent, and at first we just stared at it stupidly, wondering where to begin. But after three hours, with the help of a file, a bit of a nail, some tape, and superglue from our repair kit, the job was done, everything worked, and once again we had two stoves. Why did we have part of a nail in our repair kit? We had a lot of unexpected things in there. Just a year earlier, with the help of two such nails, we repaired some plastic boots that had fallen apart.

On August 15, our eighth day on the route, we were ready to move our camp upward.



Ascending a fixed line on the crux headwall, between 6,300 and 6,400 meters. The light-colored rock above is the very loose marble band. *Anatoliy Djuliy*

Twenty pitches above the bergschrund bivouac, we found a good bivy site at about 5,800 meters. Despite very bad weather, we kept climbing and fixing ropes, aiming for the steep rock headwall that begins around 6,100 meters. We moved our camp to about 6,010 meters on August 17 and fixed several ropes above.

In sun and terrible cold, we started work on the headwall the next morning. The climbing was very difficult, and Kolya led very slowly using a lot of aid; I was freezing. After two pitches, easier climbing led around a rock tower, and by lunchtime we were already at almost 6,400 meters. We had entered the marble zone, and that marble was something! It was difficult to find a place for a piton, the rock crumbled under our hands and feet, and sometimes it fell off in huge pieces. As I belayed, I twisted and turned away from the falling rocks. All of the climbing on the steep lower wall and through the upper headwall was UIAA V or VI in difficulty. Kolya finally reached the upper edge of the wall, but I didn't want to follow. I was too frozen. We quickly descended to our camp at 6,010 meters. The headwall had been climbed.

In the morning of August 19, sick with laryngitis, Anatoly Gorin announced that he would stay at our bivouac while the remaining four of us continued upward. We took food and gas for two days. By afternoon we had regained the top of the headwall, but the snow-covered marble above was still too difficult for the leader to carry his pack. Finally we reached a snow slope that we hoped would provide an easy route, but the snow was waist-deep and we had to dig a path to some ice below a hanging glacier. Fearful of avalanche conditions, we continued to fix ropes. Finally we gained a snow ledge between some seracs at around 6,480 meters.

After a difficult night with all four of us in a three-man tent, we headed for the top in light snowfall. Climbing in two pairs, we found ice and easy rock until we had to climb one more 100-meter band of unpleasant marble. Easier ground brought us to the snow plateau on top around noon, where we found two rock outcrops, each with notes containing the names of climbers from the Kyrgyz side of the border. We left our names on one of them and began the descent.



The weather had improved somewhat—nearly hurricane-force winds were blowing in, which dispersed the cloudiness. We could

see the path to our tent platform below. The tent was buried nearly to its top and slightly damaged. We dug out the tent and built a platform for our second, single-wall tent, where Kolya volunteered to sleep alone. We snuggled in to the two tents, but no one slept. The tent was constantly being lifted up by the wind.

Soon I sensed something wrong with my breathing—it was as though I was suffocating. I realized we probably had been buried and carbon dioxide must be building up inside. I sat up and started to get dressed, and then quickly stuck my head outside. The wind was raging, but I felt better right away. The tent was half buried. After 30 or 40 minutes of digging, I went back inside and the air was noticeably better, but we still couldn't sleep—the devil only knows why not.

Kolya was walking around his solitary cell and digging. After some time, he fell into our tent with the words, "I'm dying!" We explained the symptoms of his "dying" and laughed, saying that we were "dying" as well. Having learned this, Kolya cheered up a bit. We fit him in between us, and right away he fell asleep. Until then he had sat on his haunches all night, afraid he would fall asleep and never wake up.

At first light, we prepared to continue. It was snowing and there was no visibility. Finally we found the pitons we'd left at the top of the headwall and began to rappel. The ropes had iced up, and sometimes this complicated the descent, but, after all, we were headed downward, not upward. Along the way we removed the more or less intact ropes, but we left some 11mm ropes on the lower part of the wall—they were too heavy to lift. At our 6,010-meter camp, Tolya was fine. We had time to go further, but we had neither the strength nor the desire.

In the morning, we considered our options. We had no desire to reverse the horizontal ridge, which might take another three or four days, so after reaching 5,800 meters we decided to head down to the west, despite much uncertainty about this route. During our first observation



of the peak, in 2002, we had rejected any possibility of exiting the ridge this way, because of the obvious dangers from avalanches and falling rocks and ice. Well, the uncertainty won out.

Forty meters from our bivouac site we began rappelling. Slings, pitons, ice screws: I lost count of the rappels around the 10th, but it had to have been at least 20 to 22 rappels before we crossed the bergschrund. A lot of garbage was flying, and on one of the ledges I just hid behind my rucksack as a hail of rocks landed on my pack and helmet. An icy stream of debris flew over the bergschrund without respite—I couldn't imagine where it was all coming from.

As the angle eased, we tied into the rope and downclimbed until we drew near the top of an icefall that plunged 300 to 400 meters to the glacier below us. To the right was a narrow band of ice and seracs along which, possibly, one might pass. To the left, a rocky buttress, but nothing was visible below it. We decided to bivouac on scree atop the buttress, as one is always wiser in the morning than in the evening. Anyway, it had begun snowing again.

The next morning it was sunny and, while we prepared breakfast, I walked out to the left and discovered a wonderful descent route; in the distance I could see an outlet onto the glacier via scree. Had we discovered this path yesterday, we would have started earlier and been onto the glacier before sunrise. Now it was already becoming dangerous, but the sun still hadn't hit the wall above us. Rappelling and frontpointing downward as quickly as we could, we exited the couloir two hours later. It took another two hours to traverse the heavily crevassed icefall, and finally we reached a scree-covered moraine and the descent essentially was over. We prepared a hot dinner—our first during the entire climb—and then descended another two hours to base camp, feeling a sense of deep satisfaction.

#### SUMMARY:

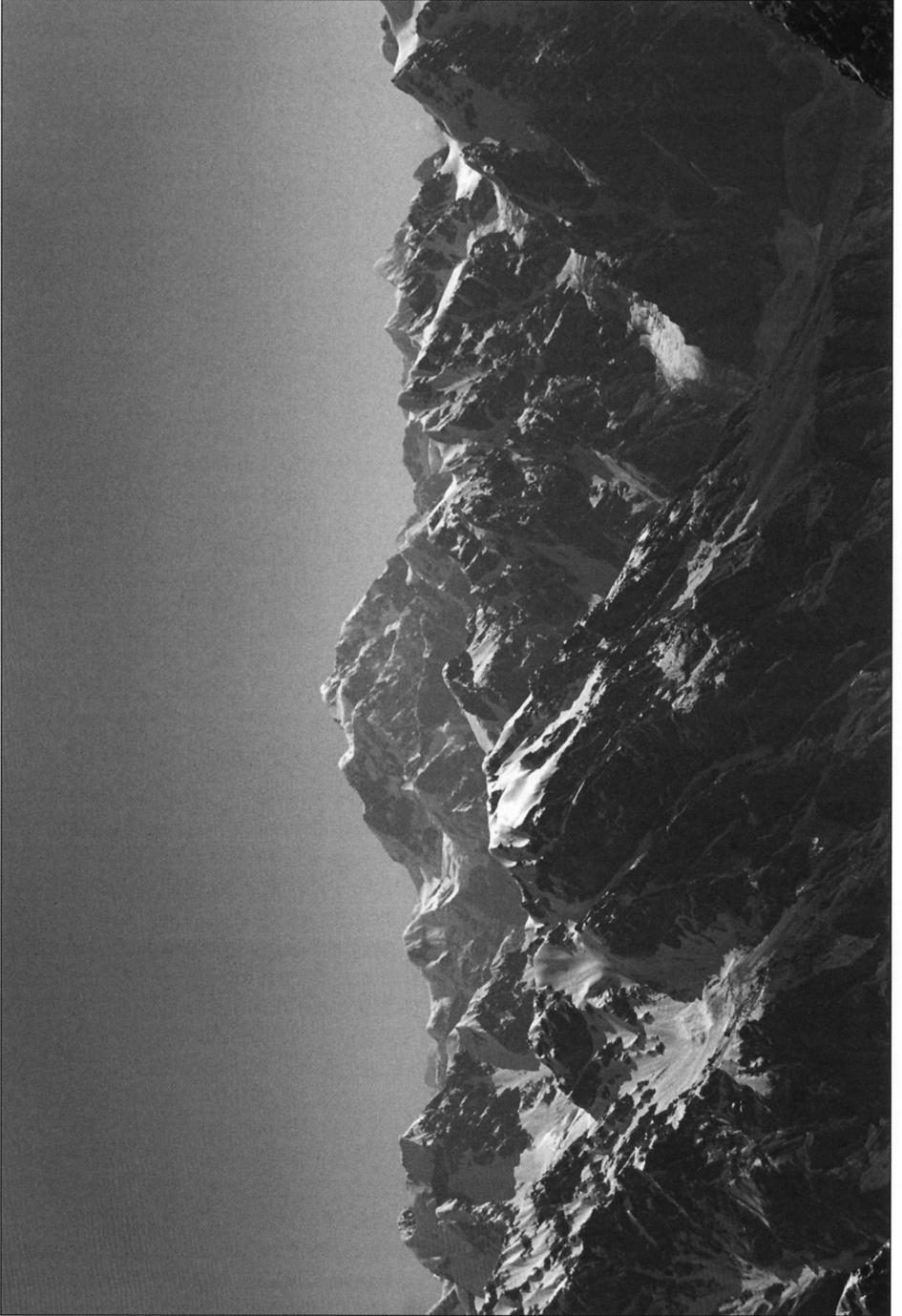
AREA: Tien Shan, China

ASCENTS: First ascent of the south ridge of 6,873-meter Peak Voennih Topografov (Peak of the Army Topographers), Nikolay Dobrjaev, Anatoliy Djuliy, Aleksey Kirienko, and Vladimir Leonenko, with Anatoly Gorin climbing to 6,100 meters, August 7-24, 2006. The team spent 13 days on the ascent, using seven bivy sites en route and often fixing ropes (as many as 16 at a time) above each site until they moved camp upward; they summited on August 20 and descended to 5,800 meters, then moved onto the south face, west of the ridge, to complete the descent. The same team also made the first ascent of the Vizbor Massif via a nine-day traverse of Peak 5,853m and Peak 5,960m, on the south ridge of Pobeda East, July 25-August 2.

#### A NOTE ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

*Anatoliy Djuliy lives with his wife and three children in Moscow, where he runs a mobile electric power station company.*

*This story was compiled from two accounts of the expedition: One written for the AAJ and translated from the Russian by Henry Pickford, and the other published at [www.mountain.ru/eng/](http://www.mountain.ru/eng/). Valuable assistance was provided by Otto Chkhetiani.*



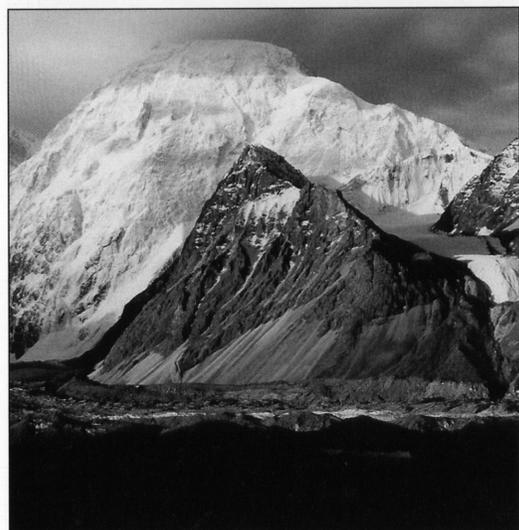
*Otto Chkhetiani*



Otto Chkhetiani



Otto Chkhetiani



Tsutomo Ogawa

### Unclimbed Tien Shan

Most of the Tien Shan peaks to the east of the Chinese border with Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan have never been climbed, attempted, or even seen by mountaineers. Peak 6,571m (opposite page), seen from the southwest, lies due east of Peak of the Army Topographers and is surrounded by rugged 5,000-meter-plus peaks. Peak 6,769m (top, viewed from the upper Tugabed'chi Glacier) is the high point of a massive, marble-topped, east-west ridgeline. Peak 6,342m (middle) rises between the heads of the Kichi-Teren and Tugabed'chi glaciers. Baiyu Feng (bottom, 6,446m), as viewed from the Muzart Pass to the northwest, is the western neighbor of 6,627-meter Xuelian Feng; its northeastern escarpment rises about 2,300 meters above the glacier.

Visit [www.americanalpineclub.org/AAJ/](http://www.americanalpineclub.org/AAJ/) to download a high-resolution panorama of the central Chinese Tien Shan, from the west slopes of Tomur to the mountains east of Peak 6,571m.