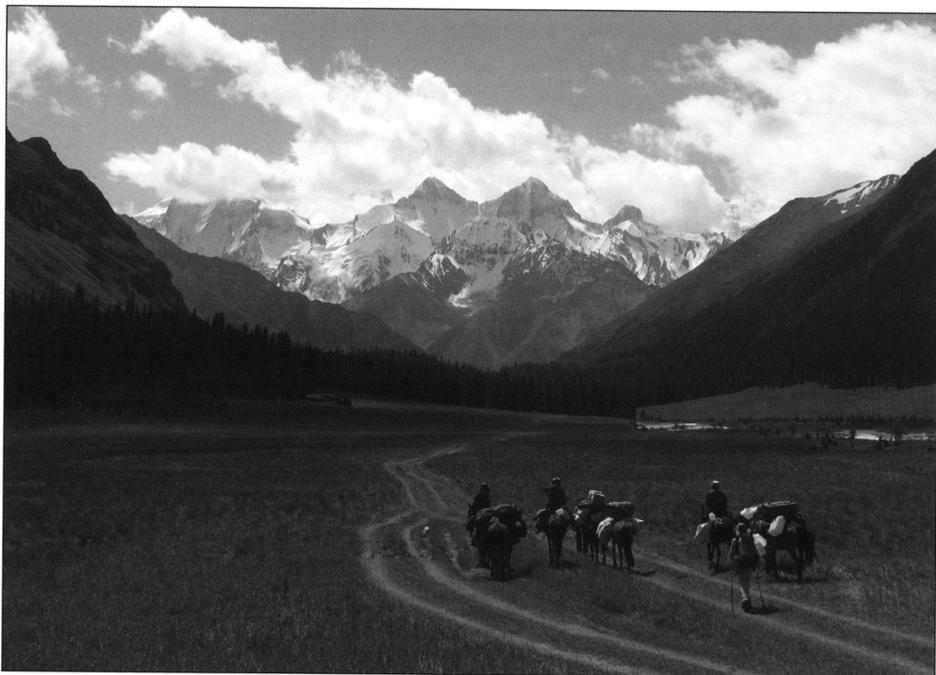


DISCOVERING WHAT LIES WITHIN

A lost mentor shows the way on the north face of Xuelian West, China.

KYLE DEMPSTER



The 2009 expedition was only the second to approach the Chinese Tien Shan from the north. In the background: Khanjaylak II (5,380m; left, in clouds; climbed in 2008), and Khanjaylak III and IV (twin 4,900m peaks, both unclimbed). *Bruce Normand*

We were lost. It was late in the afternoon of our second day on Xuelian West's north face, and storm clouds were building, descending, and darkening. Everywhere was steep, chalky marble, malleable with a firm swing of an ice axe and extremely difficult to protect. My anxiety about the terrain and weather had brought up a brief discussion about bailing, but quitting seemed premature, so we faced the terrain above. With no accord on which direction was best, or even passable, I opted for Bruce's suggestion, took a deep breath, and cast off into the unknown.

Every time it happens, the process is similar. A picture or story yields curiosity, curiosity evolves to captivation, and captivation leads to intimidation. With time and preparation we eventually commit, and from commitment we always grow.

Kelly Cordes had e-mailed me in January about joining an expedition to the Chinese Tien Shan with Jed Brown and Bruce Normand. Just six weeks earlier I'd had one third of my ring finger amputated due to frostbite sustained while soul-searching on a big wall in Pakistan. I'd regained some of the 40 pounds I lost when the soul-searching became a lesson in survival, and I was beginning to feel well enough to think about future trips.

The unclimbed walls and massive peaks in the photos Kelly sent were breathtaking. They made me feel inexperienced and unqualified, at least compared with Kelly's lengthy list of accomplishments, but I found comfort knowing that I'd be climbing with and learning from him. One picture in particular, the steep north face of Xuelian West, intimidated the hell out of me. I couldn't comprehend the level of commitment necessary to climb something of that size and exposure.

"We are going climbing because it's fun and I need a belay," was Drew's sales pitch. He was my older cousin; we were 15 and 13. Throughout our childhood I followed his lead, whether it was drinking whiskey or going climbing. Climbing quickly became both of our passions, though at first in different ways. I loved pushing my physical limits safely in bouldering and sport climbing, while Drew found satisfaction in the mentally demanding adventures of trad and big-wall climbing.

I remember sitting at the dinner table one Christmas when I was about 17, our big family fixated on Drew's harrowing desert climbing adventures. He was a good storyteller, and I sensed he was exaggerating a bit to impress his audience, and it worked—they shook their heads in awe. But as my cousin grew more animated, eyes widening and smile broadening, I also saw the genuine passion the adventure had ignited within him. Again, I was sold. After high school I moved to California to explore bigger stone and new aspects of climbing.

In early February I committed to the Tien Shan expedition and began the most rigorous training program I had ever pursued. Before the surgeon gave me clearance, I returned to the gym and began learning how to climb with 9.66 fingers. Absolutely dedicated to climbing and training, I sold most of my possessions, slept in my parents' basement, and navigated between the climbing gym, weight room, yoga studio, and the local hills by bicycle.

Because of generous contributions from the Shipton-Tilman and Lyman Spitzer grants, I had a bit more money than expected and in early May decided on a last-minute trip to Alaska. I wanted to see how well I was recovering and check the progress of my training. It was my first time returning to big mountains since my injury, and as a testament to how much I worried about my finger I packed six pairs of gloves. Nate Opp and I managed the Bibler-Klewin route on Hunter's north buttress, topping out just above the Bibler Come Again exit and returning to base camp in 37 hours. Considering we had never climbed together and that neither of us had been on an alpine face that big, there was not much reason for complaint. However, deep down I was concerned about my fatigue at our high point. I flew home to Salt Lake City six days after I'd left and immediately increased my training load.

Drew bellowed his mighty laugh as he cruised tenuous aid pitches on a frigid wall on Baffin Island. He mocked the difficulties in a pirate voice or cheesy English accent. I'd chuckle faintly and then ask, "So...is that piece good? 'Cause falling there might suck." Drew could make a beginning climber believe he could send 5.14 in his first week. His lighthearted enthusiasm for serious climbs often got him into situations over his head, yet these were the experiences that made him grow beyond his years. A searcher, he was always on the move, looking for the next lesson that life has to offer.

After we topped out on our 750-meter first ascent, during the second day of our descent, my cousin Drew Wilson rappelled off the end of a rope and began the journey into his next life.



The 2,600m north face of Xuelian West. After four days on the face, Jed Brown, Kyle Dempster, and Bruce Normand topped out in midmorning and descended to the west (right) to return to the foot of the wall. *Kyle Dempster*

As I held his lifeless body in my arms and tears streamed down my face, rain began falling from the sky and the powerful energy of death and life buzzed in and around me.

It was 2005, and I spent the next year in a depressed haze. I climbed a little but was fixated on one thing: returning to Baffin. I hoped a solo return to the Arctic would restore some clarity to my mind. I felt a strong pull to the otherwise insignificant snow ledge where Drew had come to rest after his fatal fall. I wanted to say goodbye to it all: to the Arctic, to Drew, and to that part of my life. A year to the day after I'd held my dead cousin, I sat in the same place, and that same energy of life and death pulsed through my head and my heart. "Drew, is that you? I miss you."

I had hoped to reach some conclusions, so I could move on with my life, but instead I found continuation, the desire to keep questioning and searching. Drew's pursuit of

happiness, discovery, and challenge had sparked my passion for climbing, and now I began exploring aspects of the sport that push the mind much deeper.

One month before our Tien Shan expedition, news of Jonny Copp's death reached Kelly at University Hospital in Colorado. Kelly had spent the past several weeks living by his fiancé's hospital bedside while doctors desperately tried to figure out what was happening to her. As if the news of his close friend's death wasn't difficult enough, the health and survival of his love was in question. I had a good idea of the emotional instability that Kelly was experiencing, and deep down I knew we wouldn't be climbing together in China.

Another friend from Colorado, Jared Vilhauer, soon joined the expedition. He and I had climbed once together, in 2007, on the frozen waterfalls outside of Canmore, Alberta. He is a dedicated climber and motivated adventurer, and for the last eight years had been searching for the right partner for climbing in Asia. I was happy at the chance to climb with Jared, but I sensed a role reversal taking place; with Kelly off the team, I would have to step up as the more experienced partner on the biggest climbs I'd ever attempted.

Drew was far beyond the most influential climbing mentor I've ever had. He encouraged me to go beyond my comfort level, to push myself both as a climber and as an individual, and to reflect on these experiences afterward. Our climbing partnership was both competitive and highly supportive—forged from 22 years of knowing each other, from growing up in diapers through the delin-



Dempster (left) and Normand follow a pitch of low-angle ice during the second day of climbing. *Jed Brown*

quent years of getting into trouble, and culminating on an Arctic big wall. Since his death, finding a similar influence in my life has been impossible. But because of his death, I have had the opportunity to climb with many new partners. All of these partners, most of whom have become friends, test me in different ways than Drew did.

In late July we boarded a bus at Urumqi and rode across the immense agricultural plains of Xinjiang Province. Countless acres of sparkling wheat fields and blinding yellow safflower provided a golden pedestal for a little-explored backdrop, the northern peaks of the Chinese Tien Shan.

Our two-day journey to the end of the road at the little Sino-Kazakh village of Xiate gave ample time for our small team to get to know each other. We were four: Bruce Normand, Jed Brown, Jared, and I, plus Mr. Xu, our liaison officer, and David, our Chinese cook.

I knew Jed only by the impressive climbs that he has written about in past AAJs. He was raised in the Alaskan bush and now lives in Switzerland, finishing his Ph.D. in something I can barely pronounce. Also a Ph.D., Bruce works as a research physicist at whatever university will hire him for long enough to pay for the next climbing expedition. Fifteen years older than me, he's done about as many expeditions as years I've been alive. Bruce's 2008 reconnaissance had inspired this expedition, and as we rode the bus toward Xiate we pored over his photos of the Xuelian massif [AAJ 2009, "Untapped Potential"]. Our group would be only the second expedition to approach the Xinjiang Tien Shan from the north.

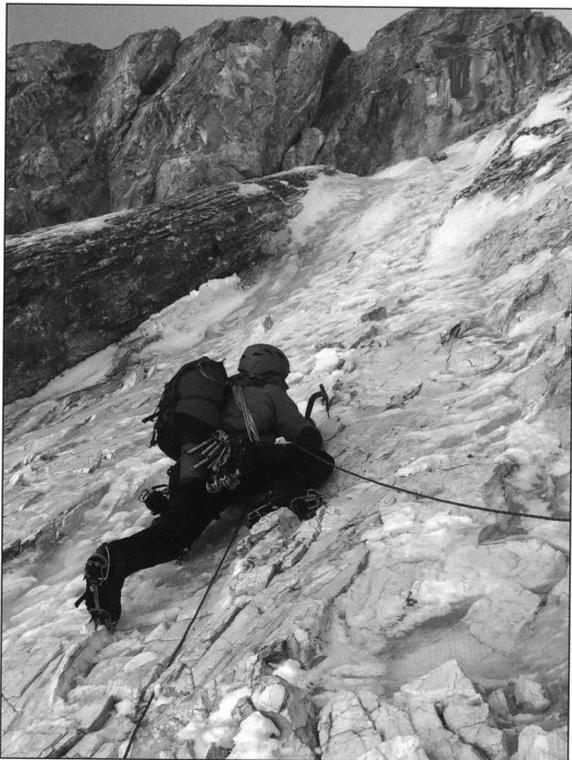
At the end of the road, at midnight, rain beat down on a canvas yurt. The deafening noise

seemed to amplify the intensity of negotiations going on inside by flickering candlelight. We needed to hire the teenage Kazakh horsemen whose 15 horses foraged outside, hobbled and drenched after their long journey down from a summertime pasture. In the early morning light, negotiations concluded with an agreement, they loaded our 1,200 kilograms of gear onto their horses, and we began the 22-kilometer approach to base camp.

Green fields stretched for kilometer after kilometer, decorated with purple forget-me-nots, yellow milkwort, and other aromatic flowers. Towering pines lined the trail, as our caravan of climbers, horses, and equipment wound uphill. Kazakh shepherd families emerged from their summertime yurts to greet us and offer naan, chai, and a bitter, pungent cheese. I envied their traditional way of living, self-sustained and deeply connected with their animals. They smelled of fire and horse, a brute leathery smell that once was common on the American frontier and that I imagine when I turn the pages of Cormac McCarthy novels.

On day two of the approach we crested Muzart Pass and descended slightly to base camp, at 3,580 meters on the edge of the impressive Muzart Gorge. Camp had all the attributes of an alpine climber's Elysium: fresh drinking water and a nearby waterfall for brisk showers, grassy alpine slopes patched with flowers, and red, sun-baked boulders. And directly across the gorge and dominating the view from base camp: the 2,600-meter north face of Xuelian West. After months of preparation, countless hours of training, and days of travel, a place that had existed only as pictures had finally become reality. As we ate dinner and watched the orange glow of day's end bleed from Xuelian West, the soothing colors gave the face a welcoming feel. I could feel my intimidation fading. However, committing to the face would take time.

At the beginning of August, as planned, we split into two teams: Bruce and Jed, and Jared and I. We wished each other luck and set off to pursue different goals. After a week of acclimatization and a reconnaissance of various objectives, Jared and I started up a 1,700-meter route on Xuelian's 6,400-meter eastern sub-summit. The initial 900 meters on the north face consisted of 60°–70° ice, with snow-covered rock pitches up to M5 and plenty of waist-deep snow. We



Dempster leads a thin mixed pitch. During a 2008 reconnaissance of Xuelian West, Normand concluded from a distance that the golden rock must be granite. Instead, the team found soft, difficult-to-protect marble. *Bruce Normand*

rested for a day at 5,500 meters and the following morning crested onto the east ridge. To our surprise the amazing view included two climbers kicking steps up the ridge. Jed and Bruce had departed early that morning for a push to the summit of Xuelian East; we hadn't seen them for 10 days and now ran into them at this unlikely intersection. As a team of four we climbed the remaining 800 meters to the summit in rapidly deteriorating weather.

Jed and Bruce had already climbed one big new route on Xuelian North (6,472m). After they headed back to base camp, Jared and I managed another first ascent on the north face of Yanamax II (6,180m). The 1,600-meter route, Yanamaniacs, took us three days and climbed difficulties up to M4. After the climb Jared and I trekked the 15 kilometers back to base camp and began stuffing our faces with delicious Chinese food. We then focused our attention on the most intimidating mountain we'd ever seen.

Jared and I spent an entire day in base camp resting and discussing Xuelian West. With a frostbitten toe, he eventually decided to forgo an attempt at the massive peak and instead explore smaller peaks along our approach route. Late the next day Bruce and Jed returned from an attempt on Xuelian's northeast satellite. By now we were well-acclimatized and had a good feel for the daily weather patterns. While drinking coffee on the grassy slopes of base camp, I asked Jed about his climbs so far. As if reading my mind, he said, "I'm ready for something harder." With six days left on our permit and our liaison officer getting antsy, Bruce, Jed, and I began packing for Xuelian West.

A blunt prow of complex rock divides the north-northeast and true north faces of Xuelian West. Both faces are capped with huge seracs, and the prow offers the only passage that is relatively free of objective dangers. The route up the top third of the face appeared fairly straightforward, but as we looked through binoculars we couldn't agree on the best route through the bottom two-thirds. By committing, we began the process of finding a solution. On the afternoon of August 24 Bruce, Jed, and I walked over to an advanced camp directly below the face. Before dawn the next day we began kicking steps up a 400-meter snow cone.

Jed led the first block, angling left from the snow. The first four pitches were moderate and allowed us to climb together until Jed ran out of gear; he would then bring Bruce and me up and rerack. Pitch five entered a narrow 80° gully on very thin ice; protection was difficult and our pace slowed. I took over the lead, delicately exiting the gully and climbing another four pitches on immaculate 70° ice. This put us on a wide-open icefield, where we spent two hours chopping a bivy ledge wide enough for five butt cheeks. The weather during the night remained stable, and I fell asleep very curious about the terrain above.

Jed began leading the following morning in the dark. Two pitches of slab covered with rotten ice gave way to four pitches of amazing ice, rivaling in steepness and quality some of



Dempster leads the delicate crux traverse late on the second day, with spindrift compounding the difficulties. *Jed Brown*

the best frozen waterfalls I have ever climbed. These brought us to another open ice slope with a view of the entire left side of the prow. Here I took the lead. As we simul-climbed for 120 meters up a snow and ice field, dark clouds descended and dimmed the light, as if setting the stage for something tremendous. Snow began to fall as I led two more mixed pitches of classic and unique M5 climbing. Then, right on the prow, I reached a dead end. Ten meters above the semi-hanging belay were roofs and blank-looking terrain. I brought up Bruce and Jed, hoping they would see a path. For 45 minutes we looked around and discussed the options. Eventually Bruce said, "I think you should lead out that thin ramp to the left."



The angle of the wall began to ease during the third day, but the climbing remained thin and poorly protected. *Jed Brown*

We were somewhere near 5,000 meters, and a steep seam arced to the left 40 meters and then wrapped around a near-vertical corner, in the direction of anyone's best guess. It looked too steep, too blank. "This is for someone else," I thought. As I tiptoed farther from my last gear and into absolute self-accountability, I tried to breathe deeply and calm my mind. Spindrift ripped down the face, and I squeezed my tools, hoping that whatever they were connected to wouldn't break. A comfortable lightness began building within me.

As the snow pummeled against my hood, I began to laugh. With a strange accent I cursed at the cascade of snow, as if to mock the danger and absurdity of the situation, just as I'd heard Drew do many times. Waves of heat flowed through my body, and my forearms pulsed with each thump of my heart. With the picks of my tools slotted in a flared seam and pricked in a pancake of thin ice, I pushed deeper and felt a familiar energy buzzing inside me. "Drew is with me." Way beyond commitment, I delicately continued upward to the end of the pitch.

Jed took over the lead and climbed a horribly rotten pitch that tested him equally. Day two continued well into the night, as we searched for a place to bivvy. Eventually we cut snow blocks from a 60-centimeter-deep snowfield and stacked them to create a makeshift ledge. We sat with our backs to the wall, as spindrift piled against the tent and threatened to push us into the void. A problem with the stove gave us symptoms of hypoxia and forced us to abandon our efforts to rehydrate. Fortunately, in the morning we were able to get the stove working and melt enough water for the day.

After a slow start I led six long, poorly protected pitches of snow-covered 5.7 rock, as the angle of the wall began to ease. Late in the afternoon we began to realize that success was likely, and Jed and I shared a fatigued smile at a belay. An intense electrical storm rumbled over us that night, and again spindrift built up between the tent and the wall. Selflessly, Bruce spent an hour outside shoveling away the snow.

In the morning the climbing continued to ease, with snowfields separated by bits of 5.7 rock. Strong winds prevailed for most of the day, and we decided to camp just shy of the corniced ridgeline leading to the summit. On day five, in only an hour, we climbed the final 200 meters to the top. Engulfed in fast-moving clouds, we exchanged hugs and congratulations.

Time has slowly and inevitably corroded my memories of Drew; his face and the sound of his voice are fading. But there are moments in my life, as on Xuelian West, when I know he's still present. On top, I took some of his ashes from my pocket and rubbed them onto my face, a final act of physical connection. From my sleep-deprived eyes streamed the best tears imaginable. Letting Drew go into the wind, I turned and continued the search.

SUMMARY:

Area: Tien Shan, Xinjiang Province, China

Ascents: First ascent of the 6,427m northern satellite of Xuelian Feng via the west ridge, August 8–9, 2009 (Jed Brown and Bruce Normand). First ascent of Xuelian's east satellite (6,380m) via the north face (1,700m, AI3 M5, Kyle Dempster and Jared Vilhauer), August 11–14, and via the east ridge (Brown-Normand), August 13–14. Both parties descended the east ridge. First ascent of Yanamax II (6,180m) via its northwest buttress (Yanamaniacs, 1,600m, AI3 M4, Dempster-Vilhauer), August 18–20. First ascent of Xuelian's western satellite (6,422m) via the north face (The Great White Jade Heist, 2,600m, AI5 M6 5.7R, Brown-Dempster-Normand), August 25–29. All ascents were completed alpine style; see more details and route photos in Climbs and Expeditions.

A NOTE ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Kyle Dempster was born in 1983 and lives in Salt Lake City, Utah. He is co-owner of a coffee shop and experiences the joys of small-business ownership, heavy taxation, and working too much. In the future he hopes to spend time exploring wherever his heart guides him.

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Dempster checks out the ruins of advanced base camp before climbing Xuelian West. Jed Brown