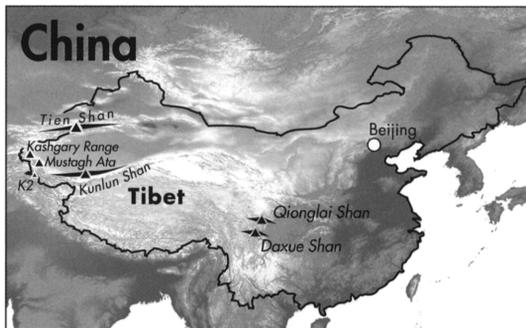


## China

### XINJIANG

*Kara Tagh, Shipton's Arch.* From July 5 to August 15, on the first of my two Year of the Ox expeditions, I visited Xinjiang. Again I embarked on the ultimate challenges of a solo expedition, to get back to a relationship with myself that I can only find while going alone into the wilderness in search of world-class first ascents and moments of *now*. This was my fifth time in the area, and memories told me what to expect in the huge city of Urumqi, filled with Muslim Uyghur and Chinese. Xinjiang Province has an entwined collection of signs written in both Arabic and Chinese characters: Chinese and Muslims coexisting.



But when I arrived, it was quite different from my previous trips. The streets were not packed with people. Markets of fresh vegetables, kebabs, and fried goodies, which once ruled alleyways, were nonexistent. Instead, Chinese military crowded every corner and street. Camouflaged trucks, several tanks, and even two bi-propeller helicopters were prominent on my way to the hotel. Young soldiers, emanating strict discipline, stood in battle-ready formation, all with machine guns, some with bazookas, and some with hand-combat weapons and large shields.

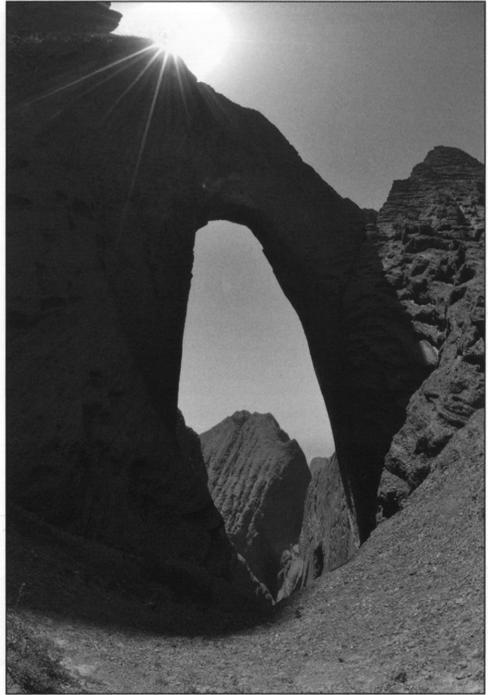
I had arrived on July 7, the day after a major terror and political battle between the local Uyghur and Chinese, when over 600 people were brutally killed in the streets. The Chinese were embarrassed about their lack of control and shut down all communications. The situation changed my plans and military permits, and I canceled my initial goal to climb in an area of grand walls in the western Kokshaal-too, on the Kyrgyzstan border.

My liaison officer, who has helped me plan several expeditions in China, was concerned about my safety. He told me the previous day's terror now ruled the psyche and energy of every person in Urumqi, and likely all of Xinjiang. While in Urumqi, I left my hotel in hopes of finding food in the markets but ended up detained in a military jail and questioned for a day; they thought I was a reporter from *The New York Times*. A couple of days later I left with my Chinese friends for the 1,500km drive to the Kyrgyzstan border.

We passed through 14 military checkpoints; at three where I was questioned, it was not a polite situation. After several days we arrived at the roadhead, a spot I had visited before and just 20km from my potential base camp near dry glaciers. Then, at the last moment the military denied me permission. Devastation. The entire trip that had fueled my psyche for one of the most challenging solo adventures of my life, one for which I had worked for the past year to get the correct permits and paid more money than I will mention, was simply gone. When I politely tried to negotiate, the military officer got pissed off and took my papers. They told me there were terrorists hiding in the mountains, and I had to leave. My liaison officer drove me 1,500km back to Urumqi.

I'm addicted to optimism, so I had to devise a plan B. I knew of a mountain range that is home to Shipton's Arch. I took a 24-hour train from Urumqi to Kashgar, hired locals

to drive me to the mountains, and proceeded to explore. There were steep, big walls up to 900m, made of mud and river stones. In the end I climbed three routes on Shipton's Arch and connecting formations. I repeated, rope solo, the west face of the Arch (5.10, 240m). There were in-situ anchors showing that it had previously been climbed. [The west arm of the Arch was climbed by Americans in 2000. They placed bolt anchors and climbed 180 vertical meters of generally loose conglomerate at 5.6 to reach the summit, for the first known ascent. *AAJ 2001.*] I then climbed the northeast face of a connecting summit, most likely a first ascent (5.10 A2, 270m). There were some strange rope-solo shenanigans with a cool chimney/tube. Finally, I climbed the north face of another connecting summit, which proved scary 5.10 A2 (270m) due to the need to overcome mud climbing on my own. These routes, on different walls, led to different summits. But the formations are connected at the base, and I refer to them all as part of Shipton's Arch.



Seen from north, Shipton's Arch in Kara Tagh, ca 40km northwest of Kashgar. *Mike Libeck*

It was a wonderful solo expedition. I plan to go back to the Chinese western Kokshaal-too as soon as permits become available. My chosen area has some of the most amazing untouched granite walls left on the planet, and I know of three formations that have faces at least 1,500m high, all waiting for a first attempt.

MIKE LIBECKI, AAC

## TIEN SHAN

*Xuelian massif, various ascents.* Following exploration of the north side of the Xuelian massif in 2008 (*AAJ 2009*), Bruce Normand (Scotland) returned in August 2009 with Americans Jed Brown, Kyle Dempster, and Jared Vilhauer. Goals were the major satellite peaks of Xuelian Main (Xuelian Feng, 6,627m), all of which remained unclimbed. On August 3 Brown and Normand established an advanced base on the side glacier that runs below the northwest face of the Xuelian's west satellite (6,422m). On the 6th they made an acclimatization climb of a 4,000m summit directly north of the west satellite and the following day climbed the west ridge of Xuelian's north satellite (6,472m). A 600m snow couloir (50°) led to the crest, where the team pitched a tent at 5,300m. On the 8th they continued up largely rotten snow and then over the 6,150m fore-peak to reach the summit. They noted that the continuation ridge to Xuelian Main would offer 300m of technical rock climbing, and sported considerable cornice formations.