

The Danes' barometric altimeters and GPS recorded a summit height some 200m lower than the generally accurate Chinese PLA maps. However, the German Pedro Detjen, who has visited the region and published Michael Brandtner's fine book on the Minya Konka Group and Tom Nakamura's on the Tibetan "Alps," has checked satellite data, which he considers reliable. (Much work on this has been done by Jonathan de Ferranti; see www.viewfinderpanoramas.org.) Original unprocessed SRTM-Data does not produce a spot height for the summit but records the nearest point as 5,876m. Better, newly processed ASTER-Data shows the summit to be at 5,966m.

QONGLAI SHAN

SIGUNIANG NATIONAL PARK

Siguniang (6,250m), south face, The Free Spirits. From November 23 to 27 Zhou Peng and I climbed the central south face of Siguniang (a.k.a. Yaomei Feng), the main peak of Siguniang Shan (Four Girls Mountains). In December 2008 the Chinese Ultimate Expedition attempted this line using fixed rope and reached 5,600m. Zhou and I were on that expedition. In February 2009 we made another attempt, this time alpine style, reaching 5,950m. Here Zhou was trying to climb the upper part of the icefall right of the central couloir, when it collapsed.

For our third attempt we again climbed alpine style, starting from Rilong on November 23 with sacks weighing less than 15kg. Local porters carried our sacks as high as the traditional base camp at 4,800m. We camped that evening at 5,130m, a short distance below the bergschrund at the foot of the south face. The forecast predicted bad weather on the afternoon of the 26th, and we weren't taking chances. On 24th we crossed the bergschrund and climbed the snow-covered rock buttress that separates the main couloir from a black, steeper, subsidiary rannel to the left. We simul-climbed most of the way to a bivouac at 5,700m, only belaying three pitches, on more difficult rock sections.

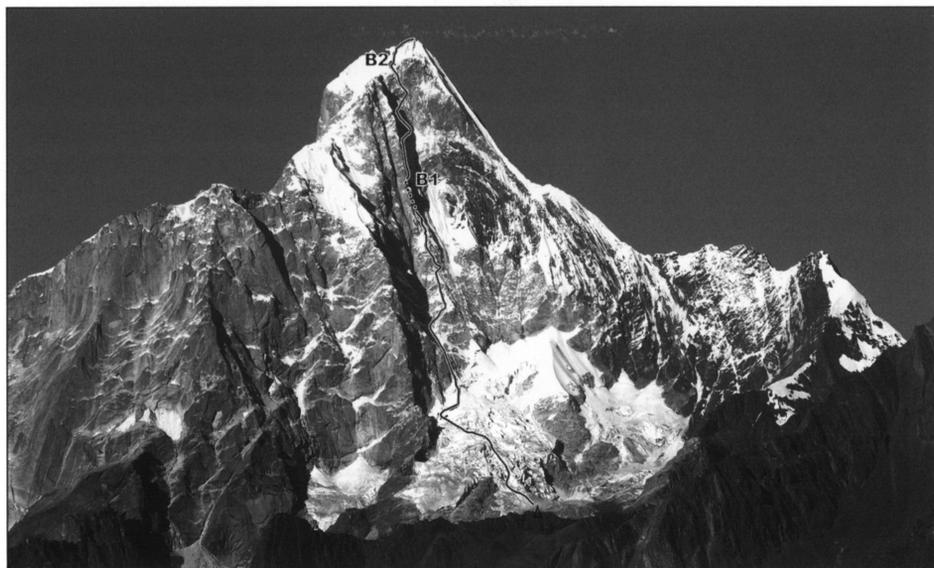
On the 25th we began our summit push a little after 8 a.m., climbing over the right side of the rock step between 5,900 and 5,950m. Above, we climbed four mixed pitches of mainly rock, and then breached the cornice onto the windy southwest ridge. The time was 4 p.m. From here we followed the crest to the south summit, arriving at 6:10 p.m. (Siguniang has three summits on a horizontal summit ridge; the south is marked as the highest on the Chinese 1:50,000 military map, courtesy of climber Ma Yihua.)

We planned to descend the route the same day, but the entire face below was threatened by falling debris and too dangerous to rap in the dark. We spent the night in a snow cave dug beneath a cornice at 6,130m. Next day the rock and ice fall got worse, but we descended anyway, reaching our tent at 5,130m and moving it farther from the mountain after we found nearby several pieces of rock that weren't there when we set out. On 27th we slept until 10:30 a.m. and trekked down the glacier and back to Rilong.

The 1,000m route, the first all-Chinese new line on Siguniang, had difficulties of AI3+ and M4. We named it The Free Spirits, which is the name of our climbing partnership.

YAN DONGDONG, *China*

Editor's Note: The Free Spirits marks arguably the first time in mountaineering history that a Chinese pair has made an alpine-style first ascent of a big technical route on home ground, and on a line that had been attempted previously several times.



South Face of Siguniang above Changqing Valley. Marked is the Free Spirits, with first and second bivouacs. For other lines on the face see AAJ 2007 p.423. Yan Dongdong/Ma Demin Collection.

This line, which is not a straightforward snow/ice gully but a complex mixed affair with steep rock steps, was rumored to have been attempted by Russians some years ago and was definitely attempted by Russians in early October 2009, when the St Petersburg team of Alexey Gorbatenkov and Svetlana Gutsalo climbed alpine style up the buttress slightly right of the couloir before being hit by a big snowstorm, with thunder and lightning, which forced a retreat from 5,800m. Before this, in autumn 2006, guide Philippe Batoux and a “young alpinists” group from the French Alpine Club planned an attempt but found the line dry, with an imposing rock barrier towards the top. Instead they slanted left from its base to reach the upper southwest ridge and the 1992 Japanese Route but did not continue to the summit. The first known serious attempt took place in April 2007, when a Korean team pushed to 5,650m using fixed ropes. But their camp at 5,200m was taken out by avalanche, forcing a retreat.

Chinese Ultimate Expedition members, who attempted the line in dry conditions during December 2008, reaching 5,600m with fixed ropes, were Li Hongxue, Yan Dongdong, Liu Yunfeng, Wang Ting, and Zhou Peng. At about the same time Gu Jie, Luo Biao, and Sun Bin tried a line similar to the French attempt, reaching 5,750m, while Cai Yu, Ji Xing, Peng Xiaolong, Zhang Yusheng, Zhao Jianshan, and Zheng Chaohui attempted the Original 1981 Japanese Route up the southeast ridge, reaching 5,900m.

Siguniang (6,250m), northwest face, Bloody Sunset. Our expedition began as nine Russians from Irkutsk, Moscow, and St Petersburg. However, at base camp Evgeny Korol caught a cold that quickly developed into pulmonary edema, and we had to evacuate him rapidly. The St Petersburg team, Alexey Gorbatenkov and Svetlana Gutsalo, made an alpine-style attempt on a direct route up Siguniang's south face. They followed the buttress to the right of the line later climbed by Chinese, but were hit by a big snowstorm with thunder and lightning and retreated from ca 5,800m.

On October 5 the Irkutsk team of Evgeny Bashkirtsev and Denis Veretenin, with the team of Vladimir Molodozhen from St Petersburg and Valery Shamalo, Denis Sushko, and I from Moscow, started up the northwest buttress. The aim was to climb directly this steep rock pillar right