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## Alpine Style in the Alps of Tibet

At the eastern end of the Himalaya the valleys and mountain ranges turn to the south. Some of these ranges are relatively unexplored with many unclimbed 5000m and 6000m peaks. The exploration and potential for new climbs in the eastern Himalaya has been carefully recorded by Tamotsu Nakamura in several publications, and in particular in a special edition of *Japanese Alpine News*, 'East of the Himalayas – to the Alps of Tibet', vol 4, May 2003.

From the Hengduan Mountains and Tibet-Qinghai Plateau, the Yangtze River flows south and east to the fertile plains of China's Sichuan Province. From Sichuan's capital city Chengdu, travelling via Ya'an towards the Himalaya, the first major range you reach is the Daxue Shan. This is the start of the traditional trading route from Sichuan to Lhasa, a return journey that used to take one year to complete. The Daxue Shan has the lowest altitude glaciers in Asia and the famous summit of Minya Konka (7556m), also known as Gongga Shan. This difficult peak was first climbed in 1932 by a strong American team. In *Japanese Alpine News* Nakamura records that only 20 teams had climbed in the Daxue Shan in the 70 years between 1932 and 2002. Nakamura also highlighted six 6000m peaks near Minya Konka yet to be attempted, the most technical of these being Mount Grosvenor (6376m).

In spring 2003 Mick Fowler organised a team of four British climbers to make the first attempt on the north-west face of Mount Grosvenor. Fowler and Andy Cave attempted a couloir in the centre of the face leading directly towards the summit, while Neil McAdie and Simon Nadin attempted a couloir to the right and leading towards the west ridge (this aspect is the north face of Grosvenor). Cave and Fowler turned back from mid-height when friable and loose rock stopped their progress; McAdie and Nadin were also stopped at mid-height because of strong winds and powder snow avalanches. In the autumn of 2003 Julie-Ann Clyma and I were in China to attempt Chomolhari (7314m) in Tibet's Yadong County. However, we were unable to get the necessary special military permit to enter Yadong and so diverted to the Daxue Shan to attempt Mount Grosvenor. This is our account:

We arrived in Chengdu on 14 October with an official endorsement from the Chinese Mountaineering Association to climb Chomolhari, a border peak between Tibet and Bhutan. To help us obtain the other three permits that we needed to reach Chomolhari we had recruited Cheng Zheng Ling (or 'Lenny'). Lenny is a well-known interpreter and guide with considerable



14. Mount Grosvenor (6376m) in the Daxue Shan range, Sichuan, China, with the Clyma/Payne route marked.

experience of Tibet and tremendous enthusiasm for Tibetan culture and exploration. However, he discovered that because of military manoeuvres near the border between China and Bhutan, we would not be granted a military permit to enter Yadong County. Hence, we switched our objective to the highly accessible Daxue Shan range.

The main gateway to the Daxue Shan is the town of Kangding which is easily reached in a day by bus from Chengdu. A short 30-minute drive from Kangding is Laoyuling which is the final village before entering the northern end of the Daxue Shan. From here an easy two-day walk leads to camping areas below the glacial moraine descending from Grosvenor. On 21 October we arrived at a site for our base camp at around 4200m. Although the dry season starts in October we had rain on the approach, then daily snow at base camp. The regular snowfall made reconnaissance and acclimatisation difficult.

On 31 October we set off from base camp to attempt Grosvenor. It should have been a six-hour ascent to a camp at c5100m at the foot of the face, but because of the fresh snow the approach took two days of trail breaking. 1 November was very stormy with strong winds and snowfall, so we decided to rest below the face on 2 November. This rest day marked the start of a period of clear cold weather with very strong winds, particularly at night.

In November the north face does not get any sun, and we encountered strong winds blowing up the face. Just after sunrise on 3 November we crossed the bergschrund at around 5300m and climbed a diagonal couloir line, just to the right of the line attempted by McAdie and Nadin. The climbing was mostly on very thin ice and névé with several blank rock sections requiring dry-tooling. Ice screw placements were virtually non-existent because of the thin and gravel-filled ice, and rock protection was poor because the rock was very flaky and there were few cracks. On the first day we climbed 15 pitches of mostly Scottish grade IV/V with some grade VI (that also coincided with blasts of chilling spindrift avalanches). The last three pitches were climbed in darkness as we strove to reach the crest of the west ridge for the first bivouac. However, the ridge was much more exposed than expected, and had very loose rock on the first pinnacle we reached. The loose rock resulted in serious damage to the sheaths of both climbing ropes. The first bivouac was on a small, exposed and crumbling ledge at c5850m.

After overnight winds and snowfall, 4 November dawned calm, clear and sunny. After a long day spent in the shadows and the unrelenting cold of the north face, the warmth of the sun allowed for some much-needed re-hydration and warming before resuming the ascent. The west ridge was fairly straightforward climbing on snow-covered slabs with loose rock and occasional short steeper steps (UIAA grade III and IV). To try and reach a level area for the tent we continued the ascent into darkness for a second time. A very windy and cold camp was possible on a prominent snow shoulder at around 6100m.





15. Roger Payne on the first ascent of Mount Grosvenor. (*Julie-Ann Clyma*)



16. Julie-Ann Clyma on the summit of Mount Grosvenor (6376m). (Roger Payne)



17. Julie-Ann Clyma and Roger Payne. (Roger Payne)

Next day, after daybreak, the wind dropped again. Then deep and crusty snow led towards the final summit dome. Some tiring trail-breaking and avalanche hazard finally led to the 6376m summit of Grosvenor at around 2pm on 5 November. Because of the damage to the ropes and the poor anchors on the north face route, we had decided to look at the possibility of traversing the summit to descend by the east ridge. The first part of the ridge was quite straightforward and soon led to a good tent platform at c6200m. Once again, after sunset, we were battered by very strong winds that continued until just after daybreak.

The next part of the ridge looked very corniced and broken with séracs, so on 6 November we decided to abseil down the southern flank of the east ridge. The snow and ice on this face was in excellent condition, allowing for Abalakov abseil anchors between occasional rock spikes. We used surgical tape to tape over the damaged rope sheaths, and left a karabiner on each of the 12 abseil anchors to allow the taped ropes to pull through. At the foot of the face a traverse along crusty snow slopes led to the col at c.5700m between Mount Grosvenor and Jiazi (6540m). The descent from the col to the north is steep and loose, so we spent a windy night at the col before continuing.

Next day started with some easy down climbing, then three abseils down a thin line of ice between very loose and sandy rock to reach easy, soft snow slopes and the glacier below the west face of Jiazi. The first part of the glacier was easy, followed lower down by slow trail-breaking through deep and crusty snow. Eventually we reached our ascent route to the north face of Grosvenor. A further camp, made more humid and warm with snowfall, was established just after darkness and in deteriorating weather. Next day the trail-breaking continued with a slow reascent to 5100m to collect some rubbish, spare food and equipment. Strong winds blew in our ascent tracks, so we had to break trail again to make the final descent to base camp, which was reached in darkness at around 8pm on 8 November.

Since arriving in the Daxue Shan mountains the only people we had met were Tibetan yak herders. But next morning we had a chance meeting with a group of officials from Kangding and the Chinese Mountaineering Association (CMA) who were making a reconnaissance for a mountaineering camp in 2004. They understood the problems that we had experienced concerning access to Yadong County, and why we were in the Daxue Shan without a climbing permit. They were extremely hospitable, and we were able to deal quickly with the formalities on our return to Kangding.

After leaving the mountains we had other meetings with officials from the local government in Kangding, Sichuan Mountaineering Association, Siguniang Mountain National Park and CMA. They were all very interested in discussing ways to make the mountains of Sichuan more accessible and attractive for climbers and mountaineers from outside China; and they were very pleased to welcome us as guests to China and Sichuan.

One of the great things about alpine climbing is flexibility. You can easily change objectives to take account of the conditions and weather. However, one of the bad things about climbing in the Himalaya is that most of the high mountains are still subject to peak permits and inflexible access regulations. Of course in some cases there is a need to control access to sensitive mountain borders, but mostly the peak permits and control systems are no longer necessary. Peak permits and inflexible access regulations easily deter visitors and this restricts development that could bring valuable benefits to remote mountain communities. There are many unclimbed 5000m and 6000m peaks in the Alps of Tibet. Hopefully the authorities in China will liberalise the regulations and make access easier to ranges like the Daxue Shan; the peaks will become better known and explored by mountaineers from China and beyond, and local people will benefit by providing support services to visiting climbers and trekkers.

**Summary:** An account of the first ascent of Mount Grosvenor (6376m) in the Daxue Shan Range, Sichuan Province, China, October-November 2003.

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