Sojourn in Xinjiang

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Located in the eastern half of the Tian Shan mountains in the north central Xinjiang province, Mt Bogda stands at 5445m. Surrounded by pine-wooded slopes where the local Kazak people dwell in their Yurts beside jade-green lakes, their flocks of sheep, goats and horses and the occasional camel grazing and recuperating on the alpine meadows between sojourns along the silk road, this area must rank alongside the most beautiful mountain landscapes of our modern world. Of course I leaped at the opportunity to lead a trekking group to this range, where we planned to explore and make ascents of several of the peaks, including Bogda Shan.

As our aircraft circled down towards Ürümqi, the capital of Xinjiang province, our mountain appeared large and enticing from above. Ürümqi lies on the edge of a massive plain. Brickwork chimney-stacks pour murk into the sky, as this is an oil and coal-producing city. On the outskirts huge prairie-like fields show evidence of grain crops. The view reminded me of early 1960 'Look and Learn' magazine photographs of modern Russian agricultural methods. The Russian influence partly remains, but Ürümqi has changed its politics and its borders many times.

During the first and second centuries AD, Huns forced their way into modern Europe from here. Then in the ninth century a Turkish people (Uygurs) established their kingdoms around Ürümqi. They held an Islamic faith, and this is strongly reflected in their architecture today. Their kingdoms became Turkestan and covered much of central Asia, but the Uygurs were later conquered by a branch of the Liao dynasty, the Kitaya. Less than a century later Genghis Khan took control of the area. The 15th century saw the Chinese taking over the Mongols, but in the 17th century Mongols from Dzungarin regained control. They were wiped out by the Manchus in the 18th century. So today one senses a most exciting blend of blood and character in this functional coal-dust-enshrouded city.

The Chinese Mountaineering Association operates from a dingy concrete building here. We were greeted warmly by our Chinese hosts, Mr Shou (liaison officer) and Mr Chi, our translator. We spent two days in the city purchasing supplies, exploring the famous Natural History Museum and dicing with death, eating chilli kebabs cooked on open charcoal braziers which lined the street.

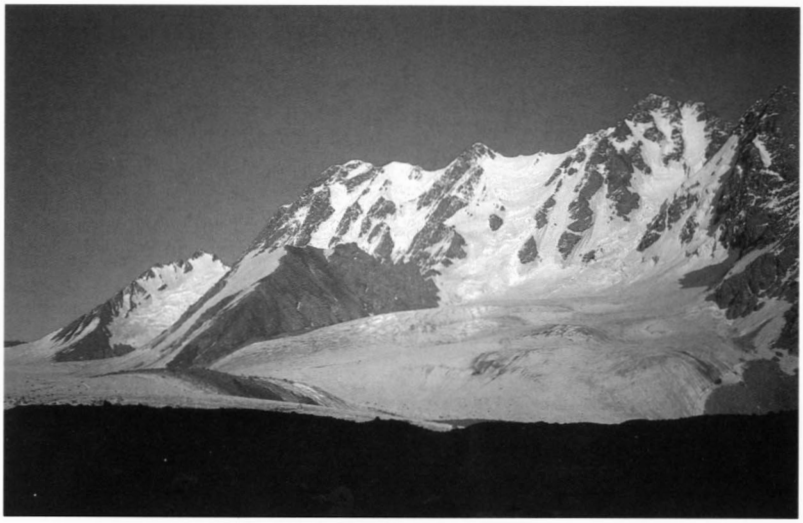
We left Ürümqi in an air-conditioned bus and bumped along the steeply winding road to Heavenly Lake (Tian Chi) where we transferred on to a waiting boat which carried us and our cargo to the far lakeside from where we'd continue our journey on foot. We met the head Kazak farmer and the oxen and horses which would porter our loads on the two-day approach walk, and early next morning our caravan set off. The walking was easy and relaxing and only our cook experienced difficulty, as, while escorting our two sheep which were

tethered together, we often saw him hauled off into dense thickets bordering the track. River crossings were a little awkward, but the wiser of us soon learned to jump on to the pack animals to save us wading.

As we approached a Yurt we saw smoke curling from a hole in the yak-skin roof and were welcomed indoors by the owner. I stooped as I entered the low door and an old wrinkled lady smiled as she poked at a wood-fire in the centre of the floor. A black soot-encrusted kettle was suspended over the flames. We were invited to sit on the carpeted side of the tent, our backs supported by neatly folded colourful blankets and animal hides which were stacked around the inner walls. We accepted the tea, freshly baked bread and dried cheese. A small argument between the Kazaks and our liaison officer arose over the small amount of money received by the locals for the use of their pack animals, compared with that retained by the CMA in Ürümqi. However, peace was regained with the production of a plastic container of the local home-brew. This and other small incidents indicated that these Kazaks were not over-enthralled with the Chinese dominance. We had to move on and continued up the valley, passing by other Yurts with the children of the families herding flocks of sheep. Every afternoon the sheep are gathered and kept in stone-walled enclosures overnight, to be set free to graze the following morning. We camped by a small stream above the tree-line, and next morning we found a covering of fresh snow. We struck camp and moved on up the valley, the sun soon burning off the early morning mist. We crossed a high col and descended on to the moraine where we established Base Camp.

I spent time with the group, leading walks and scrambles on surrounding peaks and teaching mountaineering techniques. With Glenn Rowley I climbed some difficult rock-routes on a crag immediately behind Base Camp. Our Chinese staff asked us to gather the bulbous blossom of the mountain snow-anemone which is regarded in China as a useful medicine. This we did happily in return for all the work they did around Base Camp. We were the first official Western mountaineering expedition in this area since 1948. Eric Shipton and Bill Tilman had come here with Lhakpa Tenzing in 1942 and again in 1948, when Shipton, Tilman, Tenzing and a local man, Agaska, circumnavigated the massif and reached 5200m on the E ridge before retreating because of the steep climbing and shortage of time. I was grateful for their reports and for Dr Groeber's sketch map of the area. I also had a Chinese map, but this was in Chinese and on a very small scale.

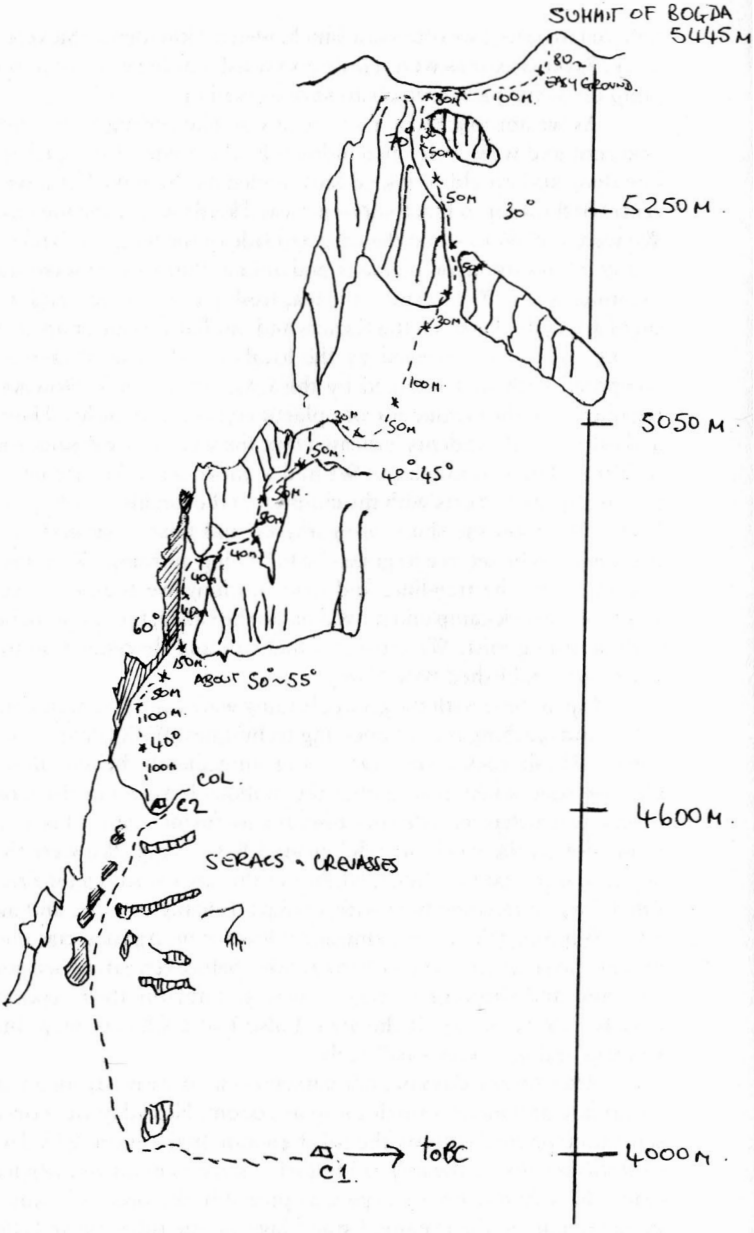
After several days of acclimatization we were ready for an attempt on the mountain, and made a small camp at 4000m. Next day we moved up through seracs and pitched tents on the col at 4600m. In the evening I led out a large coil of static line above the col, as I hoped to have as many of the party as possible reach the summit. Fixing rope was probably the only safe way to make this possible. Late in the evening I stood high on the ridge above Camp 2 and saw dark clouds approaching over the distant desert. I realized that above me the climbing was much more difficult than I had previously imagined. However, I kept this to myself as I abseiled back to Camp 2 and spent a comfortable night there. Snow fell, and a strong wind blew the following morning. Although I wanted to remain and wait for the squall to pass, my clients and Glenn (our



28. *Tian Shan range: Mt Bodga is the highest peak on L on the main massif.*



29. *Looking back down the route to Evan Price as Sandy Allan nears the final summit ridge.*



SKETCH OF OUR ROUTE ON BOGDA.

official leader) wished to descend. We returned to Base Camp and spent time climbing a small peak, awaiting an improvement in the weather.

Although the altimeter still showed a low pressure, one of the group, Evan Price from Canada, remained keen to attempt the route with me. We left Base Camp late in the afternoon of 12 August, and spent a few hours in a bivouac tent at Camp 1. We continued on that night to Camp 2, as the spell of calm weather in which we had departed from Base Camp was not going to last, and we reached Camp 2 at 2.30am on the 13th in swirling snow, to find one of our tents flattened by the wind. But the other was intact, so we had shelter to prepare our meal of haggis, oatcakes and smoked cheese, washed down with copious brews. We slept till 9am and by 10 were ready to set off.

I decided not to follow the fixed rope and took a more direct line above Camp 2. This meant more difficult climbing, but we moved quickly and saved perhaps an hour of slogging in deep snow. At about 5000m we arrived at the foot of a steep buttress which gave magnificent mixed climbing. We climbed ice-filled channels in the rock on front points and occasionally savoured technical moves, where we transferred into a new set of grooves. This led us to a rightward sloping slab with a smear of thin ice. The climbing made Evan whoop with joy. On easier ground we moved together to save time, and came across fixed rope from previous expeditions. The mountain was first climbed in 1985 by a Sino-Japanese expedition, although there had been previous attempts. Once over the buttress we traversed a slope to a second couloir which proved exciting. Easy ground then brought us to a whale-backed ridge leading to the final summit which we reached at 6pm. Evan waved his Canadian flag and we took photos before descending with many abseils to reach Camp 2 at 1am, and thence we descended to Base Camp.

Several days later Evan and I rode out from Base Camp on horseback, over the high col and down through the Tian Shan meadows and pine-scented woods to Tian Chi. My thoughts were on Mt Bogda, just climbed, on the fantastic scenery encountered and the relaxed holiday atmosphere of this trip. But they soon turned to more immediate plans and the prospect of entirely different conditions on the hostile North-East ridge of Everest, where I would be in a couple of weeks' time.