The Ascent of Menlungtse West

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(*Plates* 11, 13, 14, 57, 58)

This expedition in the spring of 1988 had two clear objectives – to find the yeti and to make the first ascent of Menlungtse in the Rolwaling of Tibet. The BBC and *Mail on Sunday* thought the former an attractive prospect and sponsored the trip, with a little help from William Hill, Safeway, Berghaus, Wild Country and others. The team comprised Chris Bonington (leader), David Breashears, Steve Shea and myself as lead climbers, with Charlie Clarke and Jess Stock in support. BBC and *Mail on Sunday* delegates numbered six – including Alan Hinkes as the latter's dispatch runner.

Political hassle left us for 10 days in Kathmandu, slowly sinking into bureaucracy and dust. Menlungtse, it seemed, was suddenly off the permission list! The novelty value of the Annapurna Hotel pool and of the superb 'snack shacks' wore off quickly. Shea's commentary on Kathmandu moved from beautiful Buddhist monasteries and bargain carpets to the 'Kathmandu dogpie on my sneakers'. In case it isn't obvious, Shea is American, and like us all he was finding the waiting a little tedious . . .

'Change money.' A Hindu boy tugged at his shirt.

'Sure,' enthused Steve; 'I give you one rupee, you give me 28 dollars.'

The boy looked keen . . . then he didn't.

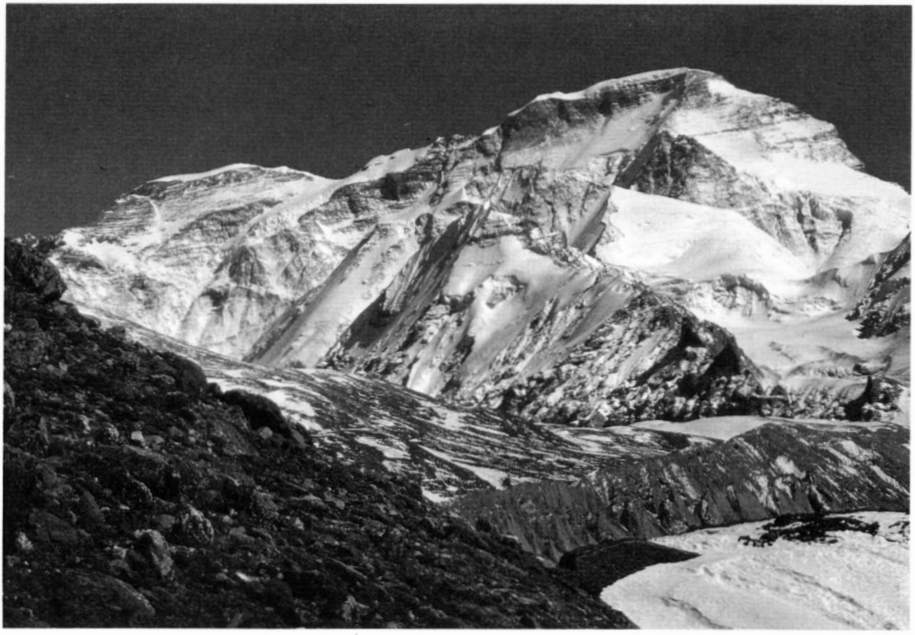
The Chinese Mountaineering Association was embarrassed. 'Perhaps you would like to climb Xixabangma?'

'Xixabangma,' remarked Shea, '. . . is as high as s--t can be stacked.' So we held on and were later rewarded with permission. So kind.

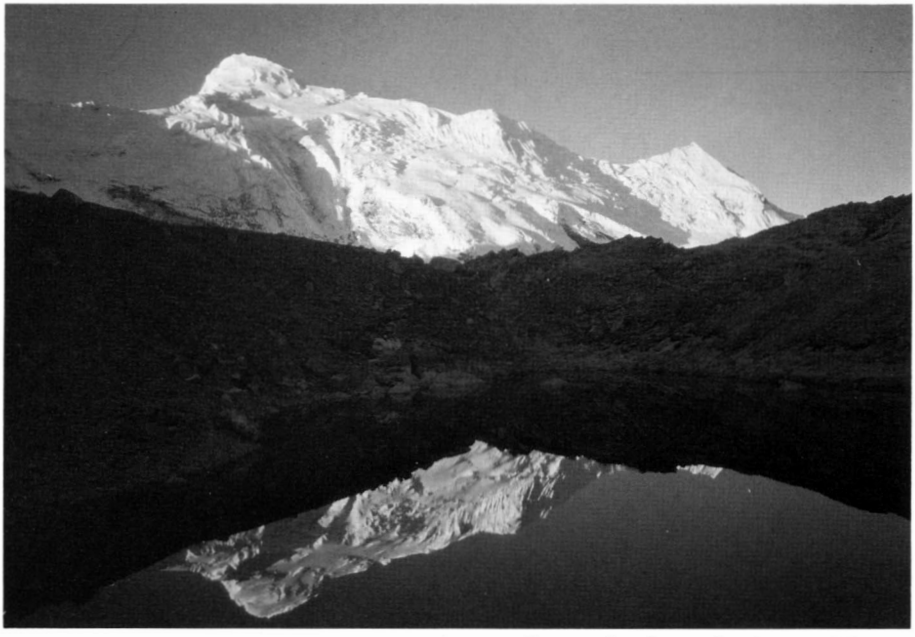
On 12 April we crossed Friendship Bridge into Tibet and here met Francis, our interpreter from the CMA. He had spent one whole week in Lhasa waiting on our political struggle, which can be a particularly boring experience for an atheist. Francis was, however, a lively character and it seemed that no amount of waiting or political nonsense could suppress him.

An absence of yaks at the roadhead sent Chris and Francis wandering in search. 'Keep out of sight of the Tibetans,' urged Francis. Their wandering grew more pronounced as the consumed quantity of village headmen's *chang* increased. Bonington eventually meandered into the compound with 90 yaks on tow, and we scrambled from our hideout to attention. It was time to start walking. Six days of that saw us 'sucking wind' at Base Camp on a meadow at 4600m beneath the E face of Gaurisankar and the W face of Menlungtse.

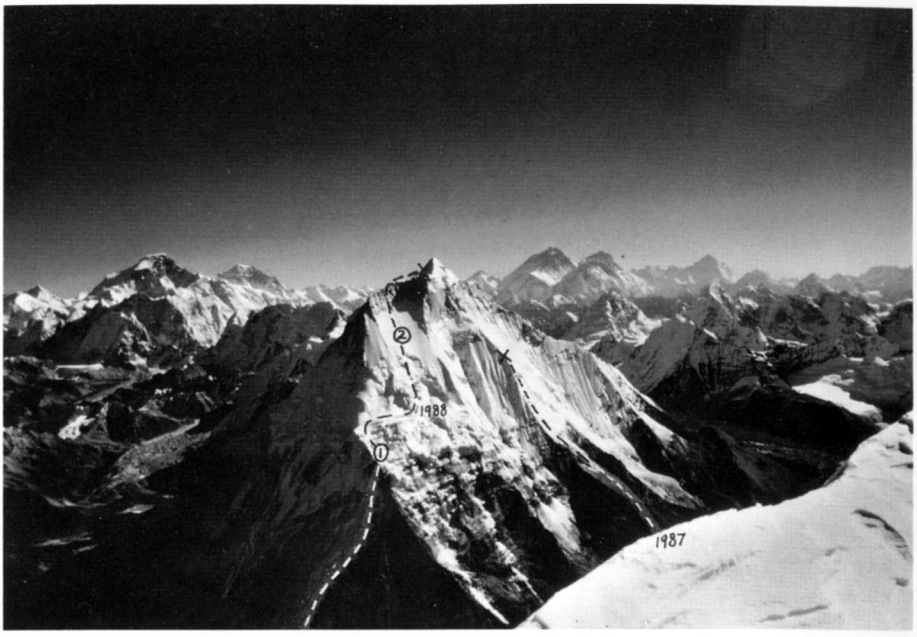
Menlungtse has two peaks, separated by a ridge about 2km long. The E (main) peak at 7181m had no realistic routes to its summit, other than a traverse from the W top (7023m). The W summit was pretty well guarded itself, but its 2000m W face immediately above Base Camp looked reasonable. Complicated



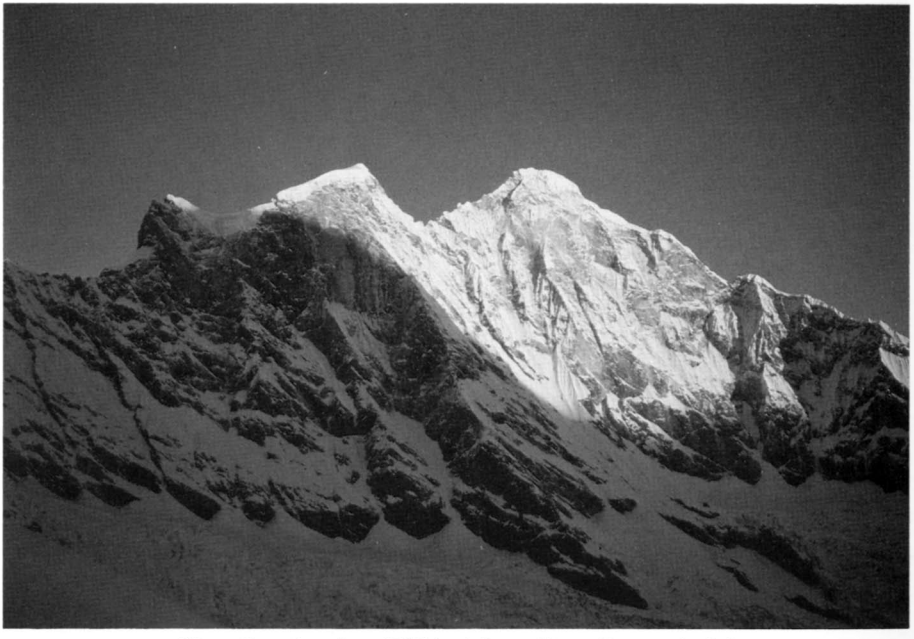
10. Cho Oyu from Fusi La. (p 20)



11. Peak (c6350m) in Upper Menlung valley, Rolwaling of Tibet. (p 34)



12. S face of Menlungtse from E peak of Gaurisankar. (p 26)



13. Gaurisankar (7134m) from Base Camp. (p 34)

but easy ground led to a long 55° ice-field and finally a 300m granite head-wall, right below the summit.

Our first attempt on the W face during five days in early May ended at 6700m just below the head-wall; we were defeated by fatigue and lack of calorific intake. Our commitment to filming left everybody with giant sacks full of BBC film cartridges (and for David a camera), leaving little room for 'peripheral luxuries' such as food. A combination of my restless fidgeting and Bonington's snoring and enthusiasm for diary-writing at two in the morning left Chris and myself with little sleep. Progress was slow, in descent also, and it was four weary climbers who eventually scrambled down the lower scree slopes to be met by welcome tea and puris.

Back at Base Camp, a recce to the desperate looking E ridge served to confirm our earlier suspicions. Dave and Steve decided that enough was exactly that and declared that they had found a superb place to go bouldering. This was tempting. Chris admitted that he had not fully recovered from our last attempt and also opted out of more climbing on Menlungtse. Meanwhile Alan Hinkes had returned from Kathmandu, completing his mail-runner duties; he agreed to join me on a last-ditch effort on the W face. Even carrying only four days' food and no film gear, our sacks were still painfully heavy.

19 May

2am. Pathetic stumbling and groping across the scree. At first light we reached the base of the fixed ropes left by the first attempt and quickly ascended these for 350m up the W ridge. Easy ground, no problem there. Next an abseil (this felt committing) into a couloir running to 5800m, and the start of the face proper. The couloir was bare at its top, rearing up to skirt a huge serac spilling off the face. Plenty of green ice, and screaming calves. We arrived at a site for the tent at 5800m in the middle of a burning afternoon. Al declared that tomorrow should be a rest day. 'It's often better to creep up a mountain and creep back down. It's a question of strategy.' He sounded convincing and I didn't argue; it made sense. Instead, I took a sleeping pill for the first time on the trip.

20 May

We enjoyed a long lie-in, then sat outside brewing and peering over the frontier ridge. There were big anvil clouds in Nepal, but we were enjoying fine windless weather here.

21 May

Route-finding was not a problem, despite the poor visibility at times, as I had previously been up and down this way. Al and I managed on this day to reach our highest bivouac of the previous attempt, at 6600m. Nothing too difficult about the climbing, except the monotony of repetition – pitch after pitch of 55° névé, green ice or occasionally deep unconsolidated snow. We had previously decided to leave our tent and its contents at this bivouac, whilst on a summit bid. There were around four pitches of steep snow and ice to the head-wall where we expected the hard climbing to begin. We pitched our tent here, within a crevasse below a tiny serac – primarily to protect us from stonefall. However, spindrift sloughs had been slowly burying us as they poured over the lip of the serac and eddied in towards the tent.

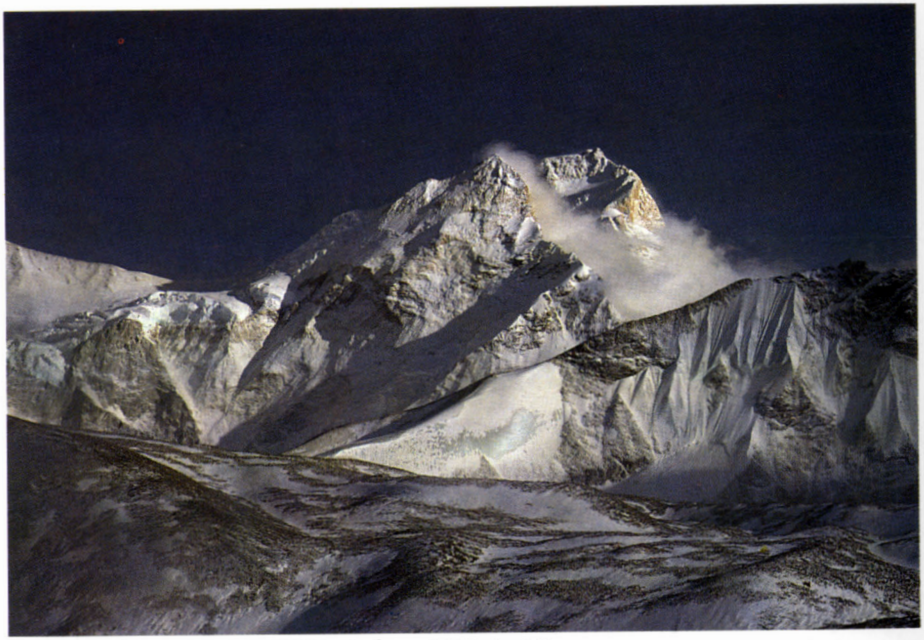
Avalanche! About 11pm, while we were still brewing, there was a low-



14. *Unclimbed peak (c6400m) above Fusi La.* (p 34)



56. *Makalu NW face, partially obscured by Makalu II, from Everest Kangshung Base Camp.* (p 1)



57. *Menlungtse West (7023m), from NW.* (p 34)

pitched rumbling noise from above. Al bolted upright and his jaw dropped – he had the look of a man anticipating a horror about to begin, and helpless to prevent it. 'Sweet death take me now' – I lay quite still and listened to the approaching slide. If there was one thing that prevented my heart from stopping, it was the thought of that serac saving us from the full brunt of the snow. After about a minute all was peaceful again. Alan might have noticed that the walls of the tent were no longer flapping and were unusually depressed, but I did not. I opened the tent door and made the discovery myself – we were buried.

I left the tent and started to dig it out, but immediately the walls began to cave in. 'Like a scene from an Edgar Allan Poe novel,' Alan said. This was no time to be cultural. I remembered another scene – lying on a beach on the Riviera. Climbing really can be horrible.

22 May

In the morning we started to look for the ropes which we had left unattended and unattached. Four hours later we found them under two metres of snow! Another rest day. We ran out of food.

23 May

We set out lightweight for the top, at first in very poor visibility. Three long pitches (we had 60m ropes) of 60° ice took us to the base of the rock-wall. Al looked secure on his ice-screw and pointed me up a crack-line on the left, disappearing into a bay out of sight a little over 40m above. It felt strange to find myself suddenly doing some scratching, after so much snow and ice below, but the pitch passed easily enough. Alan followed through and led a pitch across a powder-covered slab and into a vertical crack-line in a rib, descending in about two long pitches from the final leaning wall.

The first pitch of 50m from Al's tiny hanging stance in a niche above the W face was the finest of the route, and one of the best mixed pitches I can remember. Stemming across an ice-choked crack, hooking on incuts and over solid granite blocks, I felt for the first time totally content with my lot. There could hardly have been a finer situation, and route-finding was pleasantly thought-provoking. Primarily this was why I had travelled to Tibet. Al enjoyed my euphoria and I enjoyed his encouragement. Another long pitch on a series of flakes in an incredible position allowed us to traverse leftward from the rib and up to a traverse line which would lead to the base of the fault-line. I perched myself amongst some small detached blocks. There was no ice and most of the flakes were expanding. The head-wall was vertical here.

I brought Al up for him to lead through, but my tied-off blade was, he pointed out, of more use as a runner than as a serious attempt at a belay, considering the gravity of our situation and the difficulty of the climbing. Al belayed on a good spike 6m below me and glanced at the chimney 20m distant. The 20m traverse across the vertical wall and the 20m of climbing through the chimney took close to three hours. I remember dislodging many huge blocks and being very, very gripped. I got my first runner, apart from the blade, 40m out from Al and hung my sack and crampons there. If I could not have seen the summit ridge above, I would never have managed those last few rewarding metres. I was in tears on the final scrambling moves to the ridge and upon my first view north and east to Cho Oyu and Gyachung Kang.



58. *Menlungtse West from SW.* (p 34)



59. *Bhutan: rice planting in Paro.* (p 38)

Al didn't waste time following the pitch and we quickly dumped one rope and most of our hardware and set off with only half an hour of light left. We knew that we would not make the E summit so we directed all that was left of our energies towards reaching the W top. We didn't need a discussion to come to this decision – it just happened.

Edging along the summit's clean edge from the head-wall's turret top, we were tiny intruders. We felt neither easy nor confident. There was no pleasure here; and if we did not go on, there would be no pleasure later. In failing light we could only see each other as silhouettes against vague shapes of rock and ice, cloud and sky. Above all difficulties and faces, with only an open broad slope to the summit, I started to count steps and breaths; many more of the latter. It was 10.30pm when the slope flattened . . .

We stood together on the summit, casting tiny pools of head-torch light on its snow. It was an unusually unhurried occasion tinged, for me, with a contentment I hadn't felt for a very long while. The perfect bulk of Menlungtse's main summit in the east was elegantly outlined against a pale moonlit sky. Such pleasure – such brevity.

We didn't linger, setting off down our tracks and abseiling the head-wall in the small hours of the 24th. At last we were descending, and it felt really good.