Chinese Chequers in Shiwakte

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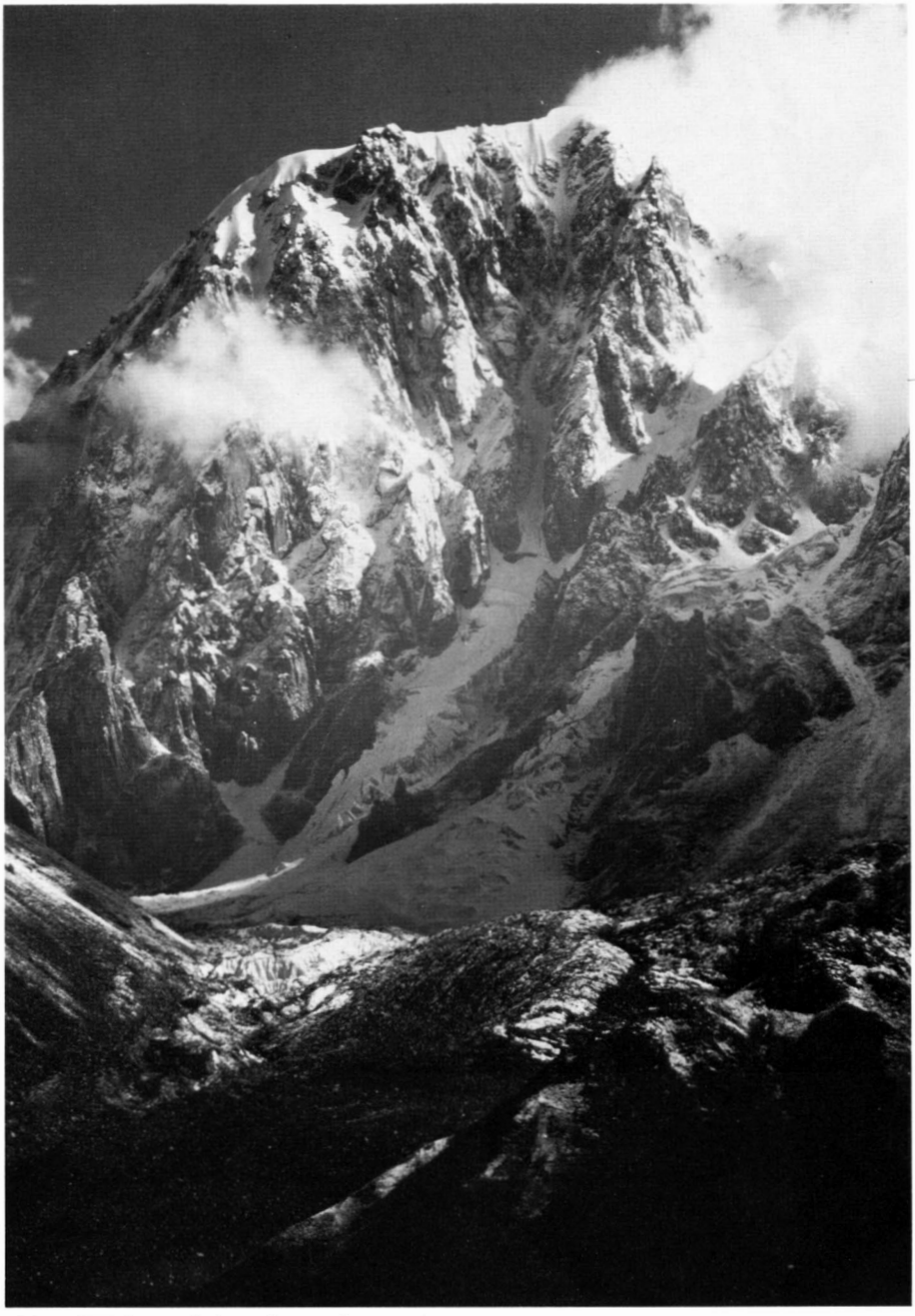
(*Plates* 33, 34)

All expeditions are hard work. What makes them memorable? Surely not Tom Patey's description of the summit of Rakaposhi: 'ten minutes of shivering misery as the climax to a year's preparations'. Nor, in our case, the long see-sawing of hope and dejection as we tried to reach our goal in the face of Chinese inscrutability and Kirghiz incomprehension. But we will certainly not forget the moments of horror as we clung wide-eyed to our camels in the midst of the seething Chimghan river; nor our strange evening entry to the summer settlement of Sekya under the vast E face of Kongur, never before seen by Western eyes; nor the afternoon in our tiny tent, poised between crevasse and cornice near the summit of Shiwakte II, while clouds enfolded the rock fangs around us.

It all started with a desire to celebrate the centenary of the Scottish Mountaineering Club by going to an unusual area of China which would involve us in exploratory mountaineering as well as interesting climbing. Our negotiations with the Chinese were lengthy and frustrating, and with only three months to go we abandoned our designs on Gurla Mandhata and opted instead for the Shiwakte peaks, which lie just east of Mt Kongur in western Xinjiang. Though much lower than their neighbour, they were reputed to be steep, rocky and exciting. We travelled by road from Islamabad up the Karakoram Highway, over the Khunjerab Pass and on to the broad Pamirean plateau. Encamped by the Karakul Lakes we were told that camels could not cross the Karatash Pass to reach our Base Camp, while horses were expensive and in short supply. After a week's attempt to resolve this problem we were provided with two camels, two horses and three fur-hatted Kirghiz drivers – none of whom, it transpired, knew the way! As predicted, the camels found glacier moraines tricky; so it was only eight days and many negotiations later that we arrived at Base Camp, with a different set of animals and a different driver, the redoubtable Hari Beg.

En route we had survived what was probably the most dangerous moment of the whole expedition at the crossing of the Chimghan River, which drains the whole of the east side of Kongur and the Shiwakte group. It was late afternoon when we reached it, a turbid torrent several hundred metres wide. Hari Beg engaged a local camel herder who rode with the panache of a cowboy, to lead us across by the safest route. The water was well up to the camels' bellies and the horses' shoulders on the first ferry across with the baggage. But Hari Beg was too frightened to return to get us and the cowboy, for some inexplicable reason, took a different line on his second crossing. In the middle of the river the animals got out of line and began to panic, horses and camels pushing against each other and leaning against the force of the current. Mistakenly I fixed my



33. *SW face of Shiwakte II from Sekya. Route followed snow ramp on extreme R, then glacier in cloud (summit is hidden).* (p 97)

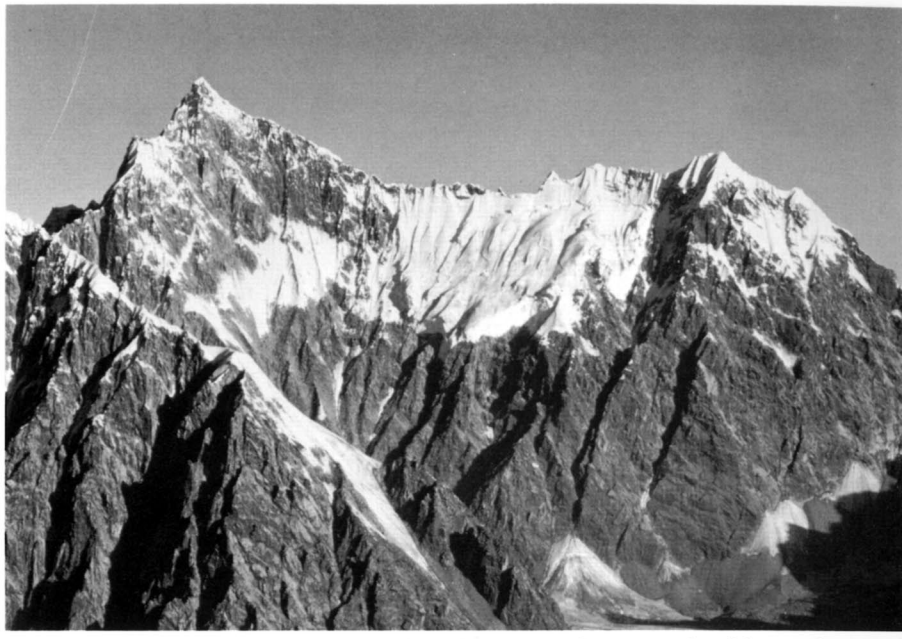
eyes on the grey swirl near my knees and, mesmerized, felt as if I was being carried backwards. A horse broke free and was swept away. We felt disaster close at hand, but by some miracle the cowboy guided the stolid camels to safety.

The huge basin on the south-east side of Kongur had many attractive challenges, but, basing our plans on the map of Shiwakte given by C P Skrine in 1925, we had decided to put our Base Camp by the Aq Tash glacier on the E side of Shiwakte. As it turned out, the peaks were even more difficult on this side, though we did have access to the lower, gentler peaks of the Aghalistan range. Skrine's numbering of the Shiwakte peaks, to which we adhered, was somewhat eccentric. Shiwakte I was reputedly the lowest of the group, II the highest and III and IV intermediate; while subsidiary summits were labelled IIa and IIIa. At the head of the Aq Tash were two cols separating Shiwakte IIIa from the long summit ridge of Shiwakte I. To approach Shiwakte III from this side required climbing a steep mixed ridge to the subsidiary top IIIa, and then following a long serrated horizontal ridge. Both flanks were extraordinarily steep, and the face of Shiwakte III on the Aq Tash side was subject to enormous rockfall, so that no more direct approach was possible.

Four of us attempted this ridge with a minimum of gear, having rather underestimated it on casual inspection. From the col we had 20 pitches of exciting rock and ice climbing, some quite difficult (IV/V), to a tiny bivouac ledge. Next day, after several pitches up hard ice to a shoulder, we got a clear view of the last 500 or so feet to Shiwakte IIIa – ice steps formed of strangely impending seracs and cornices. The halo round the sun provided the excuse for those who wanted to retreat. In such situations it is they who hold the aces. In any case it was quite clear that we could not reach beyond IIIa to the true summit of Shiwakte III in the time available, as the intervening ridge looked horrendously complicated. We descended to another exposed bivouac and abseiled down the next day, beating the storm by about 18 hours.

Meanwhile two of our colleagues had climbed an easy but beautifully shaped snow peak in the Aghalistan range which gave them a good view over the whole Shiwakte group.

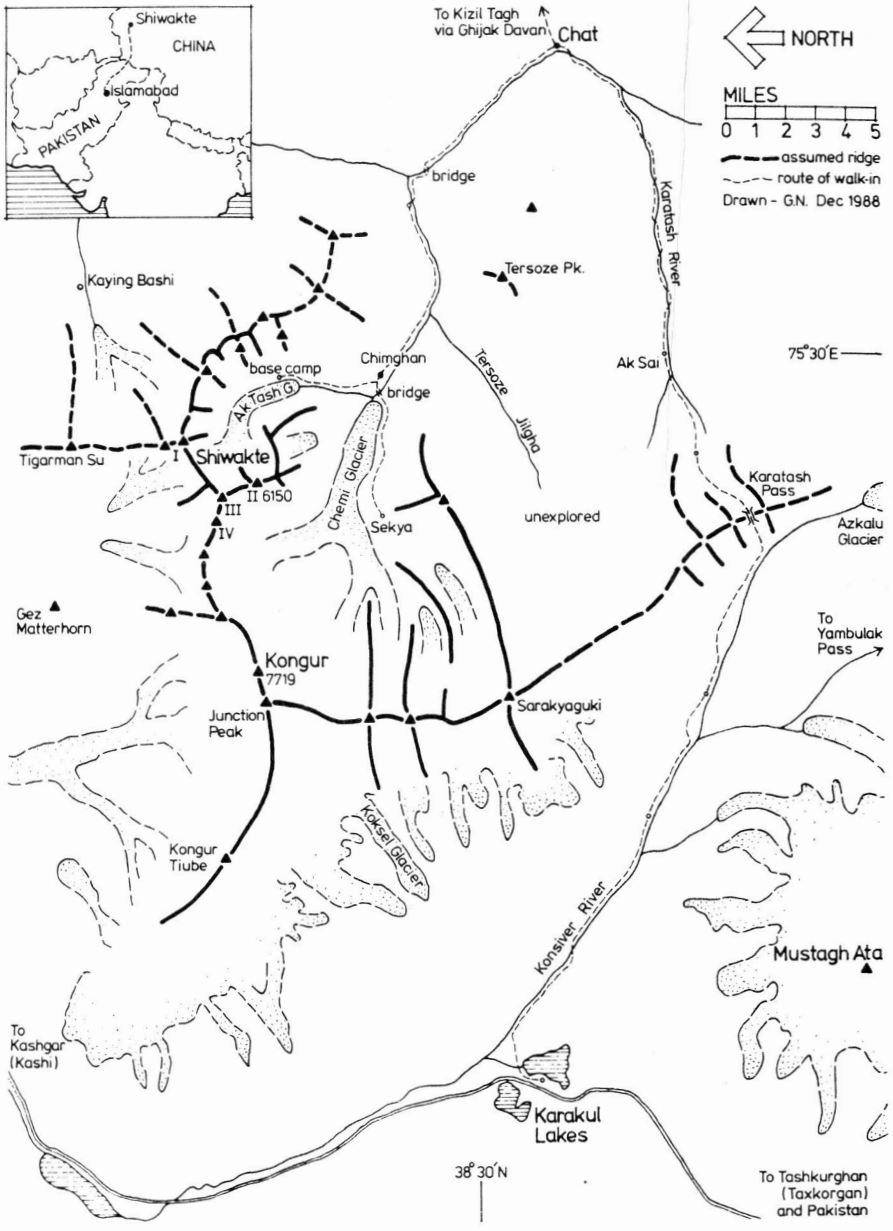
The snow kept us in camp for nearly a week, and when it began to clear we had only seven days left to achieve something, our time at base having been sorely reduced by the delays *en route*. Shiwakte II was our official objective, and the only feasible approach from the Aq Tash side was a long and crenellated snow and ice ridge that looked decidedly tricky. Hamish Irvine and I preferred to return to the other (SW) side of the mountain, facing Kongur, and attempt a line we had seen briefly on our first arrival. Our route turned out to be technically straightforward, though exposed to considerable objective danger. On the second day, climbing as fast as we could, we passed around several huge serac barriers with only the odd steep pitch, and finally emerged on the horizontal ridge between Shiwakte II and IIa. Our camp-site gave us a magnificent viewpoint – sadly the Aq Tash basin was filled with cloud, but to the SW we could see the splendid snowy southern satellites of Kongur. The following morning we found our way through the final barriers and finished up an elegant alpine ridge. There were shafts of sunlight and patchy views of the



34. *Shiwakte III from the SE. Shiwakte IIIa is the snow shoulder at the R. Route followed ridge on extreme R to smaller snow shoulder below Shiwakte IIIa.* (p 97)



35. *Skolnik from the N, showing NE ridge.* (p 101)


THE SHIWAKTE MOUNTAINS — XINJIANG — CHINA
Shiwakte
CHINA
Islamabad
PAKISTAN
To Kizil Tagh via Ghijak Davan
Chat
NORTH
MILES
0 1 2 3 4 5
assumed ridge
route of walk-in
Drawn - G.N. Dec 1988
bridge
Karatash River
Tersoze Pk.
Kaying Bashi
base camp
Chimghan
bridge
Tersoze Jilga
Ak Sai
75°30'E
Ak Tash G.
Tigarman Su
I
Shiwakte
II 6150
III
IV
Chemi Glacier
Sekya
unexplored
Karatash Pass
Azkalu Glacier
Gez Matterhorn
Kongur 7719
Junction Peak
Sarakyaguki
To Yambulak Pass
Kongur Tiube
Kakser Glacier
Konsiver River
Mustagh Ata
To Kashgar (Kashi)
Karakul Lakes
38°30'N
To Tashkurghan (Taxkorgan) and Pakistan

savage Shiwakte III, which seemed slightly higher than us. The great bulk of Kongur, dwarfing the Shiwaktes, never cleared completely. It was colder than on a comparable peak in the Karakoram. We shouted to our companions who, we hoped, might be coming up the other side where there was thick cloud, but we got no reply.

In fact both the other ropes of two, who had stayed on the Aq Tash side, had experienced heavy, dangerous snowfalls in the bad weather and had retired frustrated from their bivouacs on Shiwakte I and II respectively.

We were all reunited at base on 10 August, with just two days left. Ironically, the weather turned fine again, and Hamish and Grahame crossed the Kepek Pass which Skrine had taken from Kaying Bashi 60 years ago. The woods of which he had written so lovingly, a rare sight in this part of the world, are happily still there, and so are the Kirghiz shepherds. The rest of us ascended two minor peaks of the Aghalistan range on our last day, obtaining fantastic views of Kongur and all the Shiwaktes. Our climbing was over and sadly we had to retrace our steps. There were so many attractive climbs we had to leave behind, frustrated by the short time at base that fate had dealt us. After two years of planning and two months away we had only ten days of climbing, and that at great expense.

To the traveller in Asia, managing the obstacles becomes a challenge which the connoisseur may enjoy. As a German put it to us on the bus, 'in Asia everything is possible and nothing is certain'. On this particular trip possibility greatly outshone actuality. Nevertheless, we will savour the memory of afternoons sipping yoghurt in remote yurts, the bright green pastures dotted with camels and the untouched snows of Kirghizia.

Summary

Scottish Mountaineering Club Centenary Expedition to China. Members: Geoff Cohen, Hamish Irvine, Grahame Nicoll, Barry Owen, Stan Pearson, and Des Rubens. Shiwakte II, c6250m, climbed by SW face by Cohen and Irvine on 8 August 1988. Shiwakte IIIa attempted by E ridge. Three peaks climbed in the Aghalistan range.