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A Cautionary Tale

We all like Tibetans. They are generally friendly and smiling people, and even drink chang while they are praying, which I have always thought a very civilized habit. We think of them as deeply religious and very pacific people. Some of us associate their behaviour with great and inscrutable wisdom. Some of us even contribute to movements such as Free Tibet, though it is not too obvious how they propose to get the Chinese out. The story that follows is not meant to change this admirable view of things, just to show that it is not always quite like this.

In spring 2004 I was a member of a four-man party that attempted Haizi Shan (5833m) in the Daxue Shan mountains of western Sichuan. At the end of our trip we travelled north as far as Garze where my attention was caught by the twin peaks of the Gongkala group (5992m and 5928m) to the east of the town. Enquiries seemed to indicate there had been only one reconnaissance of these mountains, by a Japanese group in the 1990s, and no real climbing attempts. The only photos we could obtain (from Tom Nakamura) were all taken from on or close to the Sichuan Tibet Highway, which crosses a pass just north of the peaks.

It seemed almost too good to be true that here were two good-looking, unattempted peaks with a base camp within a day's journey of the road. I did not think such things still existed. I had no trouble recruiting three companions for a trip in the autumn of 2005. I knew Toto Gronlund and Dave Wynne-Jones from Steve Town's trip to Pokharkan in Nepal in 2002, while Peter Rowat and I had a climbing association going back to an ascent of Cenotaph Corner in 1965. Peter's wife, Nona, accompanied us to our base camps and also acted as trip doctor.

In two days' travel by road from Chengdu we reached Garze, and spent three interesting days reconnoitring the north and south sides of the Gongkala peaks. There were possible but not easy routes from the north, including a 1000m 'grand course' direct to the summit of Kawarani I, but we decided the south side offered better prospects for us.

A good grazing trail led from the village of Khur Chong, in the gorge of the Yalung Jiang river, around the hillside to a hanging valley directly below the southern glaciers of Kawarani I and II. From this it appeared possible to reach the col at about 5500m between the two summits. From the col there seemed to be routes to both.

Below the village were two or three apparently rather inactive monasteries. We stopped at the principal one but found literally no one to talk to, so we continued to the village where the people were very friendly and cooperative.



48. The south face of the Gongkala peaks. Kawarani I (5992m) is on the right.
(Dick Isherwood)

One young man spoke good Mandarin, which helped as our interpreter had little or no Tibetan. He also told us he was the nephew of the Rinpoche, which made him seem even more useful. We explained our plans and they were very happy to assist us by making horses available to carry to the base camp. On the afternoon of our first visit there was a thunderstorm with lots of large hail; this was not unusual as it seemed that the monsoon was not yet over.

Two days later we returned with all our gear and had an uneventful journey to a base camp at 4200m. The monastery showed its goodwill by providing a monk leading a very large white yak at the head of our column. We were told he had been sent to bless our climb. It was like being led into battle by a knight on a white charger. We could hardly have got off to a more auspicious start. There was no evidence that any climbers had been in this area before.

We set to work and four days later had just completed carrying to a second camp at 4800m when we heard a commotion in the valley below. Eight young monks came running up the moraines in red robes and plastic shoes at an impressive speed. We did not have a word in common with them but it was immediately clear that this was not a social call. They wanted us off the mountain right away. As we argued in sign language, reinforcements appeared from below and we concluded that resistance was hopeless.

We returned to our base camp and found that the total delegation was around 40 assorted monks and villagers. The monks were from the same

monastery that had assisted and blessed us four days earlier. When we pointed this out they simply said that they had changed their minds as a result of two thunderstorms that they believed we had caused. One mature and corpulent gentleman was introduced as their leader and for a few minutes I thought he might prove reasonable to deal with, but he was soon pushed aside by a younger and much more aggressive individual who said that *he* was in charge. As our meeting progressed it became apparent that this was a mob with no one in charge. They had no respect at all for our permit from the Sichuan Mountaineering Association. They were very confrontational and thoroughly unpleasant to deal with. After a long and unproductive discussion, during which distinctly unpacifist attitudes were repeatedly displayed, we decided we had no alternative but to go down. Toto began to swear in Finnish, which I have come to recognize as a bad sign.

By now it was past 5pm and there was not nearly enough horse and yak transport to clear the base camp that night. The mob was, however, adamant that as many of us and as much gear as possible should go down right away. Dave and I stayed up, with a posse of monks to keep an eye on us, while the others suffered a chaotic descent, largely in the dark. The gear that went down with them was taken to the monastery and we spent much of the following day retrieving it, not without cost. They claimed money for injury to the horses in the dark, which if it happened at all was entirely their own fault. Once this was handed over every one, even the most aggressive of them, became all sweetness and light. They waved us farewell like lifelong friends. While all this was going on we were told that the helpful young man and his family were being banished from the village for assisting us.

A telephone protest by our outfitter, Sichuan Adventure Travel, to the civil administrator of the Garze Tibetan Ethnic Group Autonomous Prefecture, which governs this area from Kangding, drew only the comment that these monasteries can be difficult to deal with. (This gentleman himself is apparently a reincarnate Lama.) As it was now 6pm on a Friday and the following week was one long national holiday we gave up on any further protest through the government, but I cannot believe it would have done any good for our immediate situation.

We were able to get our permit switched, with amazing speed, to Haizi Shan and spent our last ten days attempting to complete the route which Geoff Cohen, Martin Scott, Bill Thurston and I had tried on the north face in spring 2004. Unfortunately the weather was poor and we expended a lot of energy getting nowhere. We retreated from the bottom of the northern glaciers at 4800m in a foot of new snow on 10 October.

So what does one make of all this? Firstly, if we had been a bit faster up the hill rather than allowing time for acclimatisation, rest days, etc, we would have been in the snow and ice and well out of plastic shoe country before the monastery took umbrage. The eventual consequences might not have been pleasant, but we might have climbed the mountain.

Secondly, we are not the only climbing party to have run into this sort of problem in recent years. See, for instance, the *American Alpine Journal* 2001, p408, and 2003, p410. The latter, though in Yunnan rather than Sichuan, describes a very similar experience in that the villagers welcomed the climbers, but the monks told them not to co-operate and threatened punishment if they did.

Third, the Chinese Government seems to have a 'hands off' approach to this area, in striking contrast to what goes on in Tibet proper. The Garze Autonomous Prefecture was established in November 1950 within a few months of the invasion of Tibet. This is perhaps more than coincidence. The Khampas of Sikong, as this western slice of Sichuan was formerly known, have clearly been given freedom of religion, and also considerable economic assistance, just possibly in return for making no trouble. Their communities certainly look prosperous today. How this squares with the well-known Khampa resistance to the Chinese occupation of Tibet in later years I do not know. In trying to find out a bit more about this I got as far as a Khampa website which seemed to be dominated by different tribal sub-groups trading insults. I guess there are Khampas and Khampas.

The monastery's stated reasons for their actions have little credibility, since thunderstorms and hail were regular events in the area. Perhaps the simple fact that we were the first outsiders to go onto the mountains was enough to spook them, but it seems more likely that we got into the middle of a feud between monastery and village, which we could hardly have foreseen.

There is also, as ever, the question of money. It is possible that a sufficiently large donation to the monastery up front might have averted what happened, but on our arrival there seemed to be no one suitable to give it to, even if we had thought it necessary. Certainly a number of previously hostile monks became remarkably friendly once we had paid \$250 for the return of our gear.

We did not have a liaison officer. It did not seem to be a requirement in this area and was not a condition of our permit. Possibly if we had had one of suitable stature the outcome might have been different, but I suspect that even if we had asked for one we would have been given someone too junior to be effective in this situation. You would have needed a general in the PLA to make an impression on these people. Besides, who would want to go down in history as the first expedition to have *insisted* on having a liaison officer? Our interpreter was a pleasant but very young Han Chinese lady from Chengdu who was clearly and understandably intimidated by the situation and not very effective as a negotiator. Perhaps a different individual in this role could have achieved a better outcome, but I doubt it.

I guess it is a matter of opinion how much of this really relates to religion, or superstition, or local politics, or plain greed. I do not have any answers – it is just a cautionary tale.