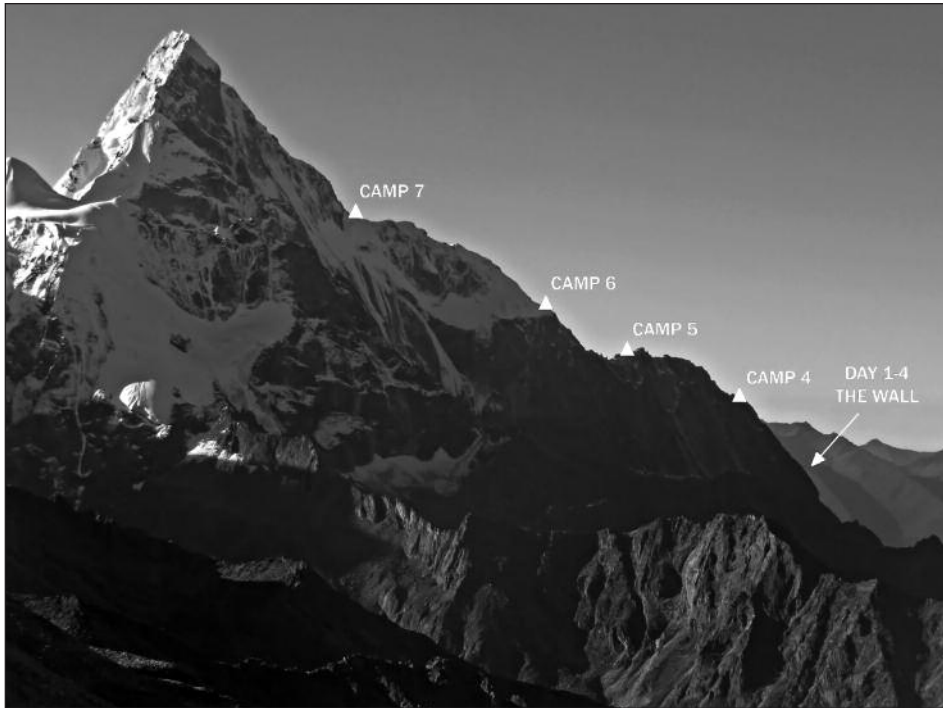


RETURN TO SIGUNIANG

A 72-pitch new route in China concludes a story of obsession and redemption.

CHAD KELLOGG



Siguniang (6,250m) from the north. The southwest ridge gains ca 1,925m from the base of the rock wall at its foot. The climbers descended the south face, on the opposite side of the ridge. *Dylan Johnson*

On September 28, 2008, at 4:35 p.m., Dylan Johnson and I summited Siguniang Shan. The journey had thrown many obstacles in our path, from lightning storms to knife-edged ridges, days without food and water, and sleepless nights. We climbed 72 pitches of technical terrain over eight days to stand on the 20,505-foot summit, and to complete the greatest climbing achievement of our lives. However, the quest to climb Siguniang had begun many years earlier.

When I saw Siguniang for the first time in 2004, the scale of the massive granite north wall and seemingly endless southwest ridge amazed me. My wife, Lara, and I had just climbed a new line on Luk Tse in the Nyanchen Tanglha West range of Tibet. We had taken Charlie

Fowler's suggestion and visited Siguniang National Park as a reconnaissance for future peaks to climb. Siguniang was breathtaking in its grandeur; I knew that I had no choice but to return and climb the Fourth Sister.

The following year I recruited Joe Puryear and Stoney Richards to attempt Siguniang's north wall in September and October. To our disappointment, 10 days of snowstorms pounded the mountain as we waited at the base. However, we completed two first ascents on that trip. We put up the Raindog Arête (1,800', IV 5.10c) on the northwest ridge of a peak we named the Angry Wife. Most significantly, we put up a new route we called the Salvage Op (2,800', IV 5.10+) on the south face of Daogou Main in a 17-hour ascent.

In April 2007, Jay Janousek, Joe Puryear, and I returned to the Changqing Valley, hoping once again to climb Siguniang. We began our trip with the first ascent of an unnamed 18,700-foot peak to the northwest of Siguniang; we spent six days acclimatizing and negotiating the serac-covered south face. Back in base camp, Joe and I decided to change our objective on Siguniang to the southwest ridge. We found a way to the foot of the technical climbing, and we expected to begin carrying loads to the base of the wall once the weather cleared.

The next morning, Ma Gou Bin, the main guide for the area, arrived at our base camp, 12 miles from the nearest town of Rilong. He was carrying a message from Michelle Puryear saying that my wife had been in an accident in the Ruth Gorge of Alaska. Not knowing the extent of her injuries, I quickly loaded a pack, and Joe and I left for town while Jay remained to watch base camp. I phoned home and learned that my wife had been killed three days earlier when she rappelled off the end of the rope while trying to set an anchor. The news shook me to the core. Ma Gou Chan, Mr. Ma's brother, drove me all night to Chengdu so I could catch the next flight home.



I felt some responsibility for Lara's death. She had asked me to climb with her in the Ruth Gorge. Instead of going to China, and after the accident I was plagued with internal turmoil. If I had climbed with her in Alaska, would she still be alive? I knew that I had put a higher priority on my obsession with Siguniang than the wishes of my wife. To honor Lara's memory, Jay, Joe, and I agreed to name the peak we had climbed Lara Shan. Meanwhile, I felt like I had to return to Siguniang to finish what I'd started. In my mind, a successful summit would help to clear the slate.

A few months later, in July 2007, Joe, Jay and I began making plans to return to Siguniang that September. I purchased my plane ticket and scheduled work around the trip dates. However, the anger and sadness bottled up inside me were like acid eating at my organs.



Among the many obstacles the climbers faced was the steep, 800m approach to the foot of the wall. Dylan Johnson bushwhacking. *Chad Kellogg*



The 600-meter, 17-pitch rock wall (5.11 A2) at the start of the climb, with the upper southwest ridge and summit visible behind. In 2006, Cosmin Andron and Wai Wah Yip climbed a direct line to the top of this wall several hundred meters to the right of the 2008 route. *Dylan Johnson*

then ice climbing. My friend Dylan Johnson and I began to climb together, as all of our other partners were out of the country on other expeditions. Dylan stands six feet three inches and has a plus-seven ape index. He possesses an incredibly positive attitude, has been climbing 5.12 for over a decade, and has the full mix of alpine skills. We attempted winter ascents of some of the North Cascades' unsolved problems and had a great time despite less than successful results. Through these adventures, we recognized that we had skill sets that complemented each other's strengths and weaknesses.

In February 2008, after Dylan returned from a trip to Patagonia, I approached him about going to China in September. Dylan, an architect, was not certain he could get six more weeks off from work. However, after we received an AAC Lyman Spitzer grant, the prestigious nature of the award convinced Dylan's boss to give him the extra vacation time. We began to train with Siguniang as our objective.

On April 12, 2008, we learned that a massive earthquake had struck the Sichuan region. It seemed that the loss of life and the massive damage to the infrastructure might prevent us from attempting Siguniang once again, but we continued to train, believing that everything would work out for the best. In late July we got word from the Sichuan Mountaineering Association that we would be given permission to climb that fall.

That spring I had enrolled in a series of Tibetan Buddhist meditation classes. Week by week, I began to learn how to resolve some of the anger and grief that I was carrying. One year after my cancer diagnosis, I got a clean bill of health. After some successful alpine climbs together, Dylan and I felt mentally and physically ready to face the challenges of the southwest ridge of Siguniang. It seemed that everything was finally coming together.

In August, I was diagnosed with stage-two colon cancer. I spent September and October recovering from surgery and wondering if I would ever climb again, let alone return to Siguniang. Joe and Jay headed to China without me that fall, and though they didn't go to Siguniang I felt very angry with them. As I recovered, though, I began to look inward to find the sources of my anger and self-centered behavior. I felt I had a decision to make: I could quit climbing or refocus my climbing ambition as a way of embracing life, having been given a second chance to live out my dreams. In the end, that year's experiences increased my devotion to climbing. Facing my fears and embracing challenges through climbing seemed to parallel what I was going through emotionally.

By December I was able to begin rock climbing at the gym, and



On September 6 we arrived in Rilong. The earthquake had badly damaged all the hotels, and only two remained open. My friends the Ma family had lost their homes, as had many of the other families in Rilong. I was told that, miraculously, no one in Rilong had been killed. The villagers believed that Sukolajiddha, the mountain god of the local area, had protected them. Although they were living in makeshift tarp houses, they still had one another, which, after everything I'd experienced, I knew to be more important than any material possession.

At the start of the hike up the Changping Valley, I saw that the monastery that had lain in ruins the year before was being rebuilt. Lama Rinzin Dorje invited me to tour the monastery and pray together for our journey at the stupa. I was very excited to see all the positive changes and have the lama's blessing for our climb.

From the Lianghekou base camp at 11,550 feet, Dylan and I scouted a path through heavily vegetated cliffs to the base of the southwest face of Siguniang; we each carried a 45-pound load of climbing equipment to cache at the foot of the wall at 14,200 feet. We scoped a crack system in the center of the face, far to the left of the line climbed to the ridgetop by Cosmin Andron and Wai Wah Yip in 2006.

On September 21 we started back toward the face under clear skies, each carrying another 45-pound load, including enough food and fuel for seven days. We reached the base of the wall by early afternoon and retrieved our cache. Our method on the wall was for Dylan to lead and me to clean each pitch, jumaring with a 50-pound pack and hauling a 70-pound pack. We climbed two pitches that day and slept on small rock ledges at the top of the first pitch. On day two we made great progress, reaching the 10th pitch before dark. As a present for my 37th birthday, I followed pitch 10 in my free climbing shoes without a pack. Dylan made it halfway up the 11th pitch before darkness forced our retreat to the ledges below, only halfway up the wall.

Unable to set up our tent on the small ledge below the 11th pitch, we used the tent body as a bivouac sack to keep dry as thunder squalls passed in the middle of the night. In the morning we realized we had only one liter of water apiece; we had expected that two days and 10 liters would see us to the top of the wall. The face steepened and we climbed well into dark on the third day, trying in vain to reach the top of the wall and find some snow. We spent an uncomfortable night in a sloping alcove at the top of the 14th pitch, still 500 feet below the ridgetop.

On the morning of our fourth day on the wall, I gave Dylan my last sip of water as he set off on pitch 15. Three pitches later we reached the ridge at ca 16,200 feet, just after noon. We repacked our backpacks to include all of the wall gear and shouldered 75-pound loads as we began



Chad Kellogg enjoys his 37th birthday present: following pitch 10 without his 50-pound pack. *Dylan Johnson*



Johnson melts snow at a rest stop at ca 5,000m. The two climbers had been without water for more than 36 hours. *Chad Kellogg*

climbing the ridge in search of snow. We had been without adequate water for over 36 hours. A few pitches later, I found a deep chimney with snow in the back, and we stopped to melt eight liters of water and eat a hot meal. At the end of the day we set up camp in a notch between two large gendarmes. The weather had changed and a thick cloud enveloped the ridge, covering the rock with slippery mist.

The next morning we began to negotiate the many gendarmes that define the lower ridge. This was classic alpine ridge climbing with technical difficulties up to 5.9. Despite the moderate difficulty, we struggled with our very heavy packs. Often we had to rappel from gendarmes before continuing upward. We established Camp 5 at about 16,800 feet, just before the most prominent notch in the southwest ridge.

We spent the evening building a level tent platform out of rocks, and then, inside

the tent, we had a serious discussion regarding our food and fuel supplies. We decided we had enough calories and fuel to reach the summit and descend in four days if the weather did not worsen and we carried lighter packs. Our plan was to leave a cache at Camp 5, including pitons, rock shoes, our static rope, a set of Camalots, jumars, and other equipment. We'd retrieve this equipment on our way down.

The following morning we found that the dense clouds had covered the rock in a layer of verglas. We downclimbed the ridgeline until we found ourselves atop an overhanging cliff above the prominent notch. I worried that we would find it very difficult to return to our cache, but we decided to pull the rope after rappelling and forge on. With our lighter packs we were moving much quicker, and we found a good crack system leading out of the notch, bypassing some fingerlike gendarmes to the north of the ridge. Dylan led through steep, iced-up chimneys to a stance just below the ridge, and I tunneled through the cornice to arrive on the shoulder of the lowest serac. At the top of pitch 49 we made our Camp 6 at 17,225 feet. The clouds cleared for a bit in the evening, and we caught glimpses of the spiky ridge below, which we called the Rake after a peak in the Cascades back home.

We woke early, climbed the snow above the serac, and began to traverse left. On snow-covered rock we took a direct line back up to the ridge that involved two M5 pitches back to back. Above this the ridge was similar to climbs in Alaska, with very good granite and stable snow. We climbed right along the crest, often encountering sections that involved the "happy cowboy," riding the ridge with one leg on either side. The last section of the Changping Cowboy led us to a glacial plateau, where we dug a snow platform for our high camp at around 18,300 feet and anchored into the rocks above. Inside the tent Dylan and I again assessed our food and fuel rations. We had just enough calories for dinner that night, a summit attempt, and a hungry descent.



Johnson contemplates the view down the southwest ridge from the sixth bivouac, at ca 5,250m. *Chad Kellogg*



Johnson is a "happy cowboy" straddling the southwest ridge below Camp 7. *Chad Kellogg*

top. I climbed the delicate cornice to the summit at just after 4:30 p.m., and after Dylan joined me we took a few minutes to spread Lara's ashes. On top I felt some closure. I think Lara would have wanted me to achieve my dream of climbing Siguniang, but to truly honor her memory we needed to descend the route safely. It was late afternoon and we needed to make as much progress downward as possible before nightfall.

We had almost made it down to the upper happy cowboy section when we were engulfed in a major thunderstorm, complete with lightning and a blizzard. The ski pole on my back began to hum with electricity. I quickly removed the pole from my pack, and we huddled among rocks below the ridge. As soon as the lightning passed, we shimmied across the happy-cowboy ridge in the dark. The snowfall was heavy and our tracks were covered. We couldn't find our high camp, but we couldn't stop searching because of the cold. Each time we started downward we'd find another cliff band below our front points, the eerie darkness swallowing the light of our headlamps. We wandered all night without finding our cache.



When dawn arrived we were still lost in thick clouds. At last a gust of wind blew apart the clouds and we discovered that we had spent all night negotiating the slopes 1,000 feet

We woke at 4:30 and each drank a liter of water and ate two energy bars. After caching what we didn't need for the summit attempt, I began to break trail up a steep snow slope past the next serac. Dylan led us left above the seracs, but I soon asked to take over as I work well at altitude. At the top of pitch 64, above some alpine-ice runnels, we discovered fixed lines and an anchor left by Japanese climbers during their first ascent of the south buttress in 1992. This was the first evidence of other climbers we had seen on the entire climb. High on the ridge, Dylan led another two pitches of happy cowboy and we climbed onto the plateau below the summit seracs.

After a pitch through the seracs, I led across the summit plateau enveloped in a thick cloud. I noticed as I placed protection that the rock had changed from granite to a type of shale. In the fog I couldn't tell where the summit was, but then the clouds broke and we realized we were standing just 100 feet below the

above the glacial plateau that held our Camp 7. We quickly made our way down to the plateau and dug up our cache. We had been on the go for 27 hours with only one liter of water apiece. Desperately tired and thirsty, we tried to figure out what to do next.

The storm had dropped eight inches of snow overnight. Given the distance, technical difficulties, and poor weather, we knew it would take us at least two days to retreat to Camp 5, and we felt we had no choice but to abandon the thousands of dollars of gear stashed there. To descend by the Japanese route, we would have had to climb back up about 1,000 feet on avalanche-prone slopes, and we were too exhausted to even consider that option. We decided our only choice was to rappel straight down the nearly 3,000-foot south face below us.

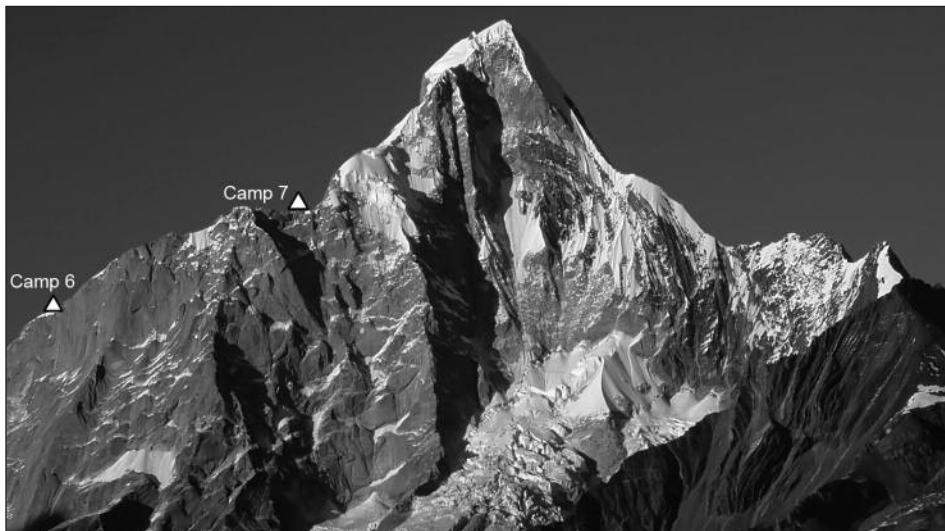
We had a meager rock rack, 50 feet of 5mm cord, and a single rope; our second rope was cached at Camp 5 with the rest of our rock gear. We began to rappel, 30 meters at a time. We continued down the face for nine hours, setting single-stopper anchors and slinging horns. We were engulfed in wet snow slides off the face. In all, we made 25 to 30 rappels. At dusk we reached the small glacier below Siguniang's south wall. We were determined to reach our base camp that night, as everything we carried was soaking wet. We coiled the ropes and took off the harnesses we had worn for the previous nine days, donned our headlamps, and gratefully filled our water bottles for the first time in 36 hours.

At 11 p.m. we realized we were stranded above a cliff in the dark, so we made a rough stone floor for our tent in the talus slope and tried to sleep in our soaking down bags. A few hours later, when the sun came up, we ate our first hot meal in over 52 hours. Refueled, we began our descent through the cliffs, making one more rappel beside a rushing waterfall. The cliffs gave way to the forest, and we began to pass yaks at high pasture. We found the trail and slowly made our way back to base camp, where the smiling and relieved faces of Ma Gao Chan, our base camp manger, and Mao Fei, our liaison offer, greeted our safe return.

Looking back on my four-year journey to Siguniang's summit and back, I see an unbroken chain of life-enriching moments—in the many setbacks we faced, the successes and failures. I made some terrible mistakes along the way: not listening to Lara about her climbing



With only a single rope, Kellogg and Johnson completed 25 to 30 rappels to descend the south face of Siguniang in a storm. *Dylan Johnson*



After an all-night descent from the summit, the climbers continued down the 900m wall directly below their Camp 7, reaching the base after nine hours of rappelling. The prominent buttress just right of their descent line was climbed by a Japanese team in 1992. The southeast ridge (right skyline) was climbed in 1981 by another Japanese team for the mountain's first ascent. See the 2007 *AAJ*, p. 423, for a photo with all of the route lines on the south side. *Kenzo Okawa*

dreams; allowing the anger seething inside me to create rifts between me and my friends. I was so focused on my goals that I never considered how they affected the people around me. Fortunately, Siguniang gave me one last chance to grow as a human being as well as a climber.

SUMMARY:

AREA: Qonglai Shan, Sichuan, China

ASCENT: Alpine-style first ascent of the complete southwest ridge of 6,250-meter Siguniang Shan (1,925m, 5.11 A2 AI3+ M5), Dylan Johnson and Chad Kellogg, September 21-30, 2008. The two climbed a 600-meter rock wall with three bivouacs, and then followed the ridgeline to the summit with four more bivouacs, joining the 1992 Japanese route on the upper southwest ridge at ca 5,900m. They descended the southwest ridge to their high camp at 5,600m, and then rappelled the south face, left of the Japanese route.



Chad Kellogg, left, and Dylan Johnson, about to start up Siguniang's southwest ridge. *Chad Kellogg*

A NOTE ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Born in Washington state in 1971, Chad Kellogg still calls Seattle home. He works as a general contractor to fund his climbing ambitions.