

FREE MOUNTAINEERING

An inside look at modern Chinese alpinism.

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China likely holds more unclimbed 5,000m and higher peaks than any other country on Earth. But Chinese alpinists face serious difficulties tackling these objectives without government or commercial sponsorship and supervision. Here, unclimbed 6,000m peaks above Lake Jambo Tso and the Maraipo Glacier, Nyaqientanglha East, Tibet.
Tamotsu Nakamura

When the words “Chinese” and “mountaineering” are used together, you probably think of siege-style expeditions on big-mountain routes established 50 or 60 years ago, involving large teams, huge amounts of time, money, and gear, and the “reach-the-summit-by-whatever-means-for-national-glory” ethos.

That was an accurate description until pretty recently, and there are still examples today, such as the 2008 Everest expedition that took the Olympic torch to the summit. However, such

climbs do not monopolize the scene as they once did, nor do the commercial expeditions that arose in the past decade and have since grown into a large industry.

Let me define the term “free mountaineering” as used in this article. It covers climbs on which there are neither government officials and subordinates nor guides and clients, but only climbers who go to the mountains because they really want to climb them, and who stand as equals on the team, each taking his or her own share of responsibilities. I had considered using the term “alpine-style mountaineering,” but this article is not about climbing style; it’s about the climber’s spirit. A free mountaineer is someone who doesn’t climb for national glory or another lofty goal, nor for profit; it’s someone who is ready to match his abilities against the pressures and dangers of mountaineering, and prepared to face the consequences (thereby excluding the commercial client from the definition). I think it is a China-specific term because no other mountaineering community in the world needs such a clarification.

The reason I’m stressing this is because there are many “official climbers” getting paid by the Chinese Mountaineering Association (CMA, a governmental organization) and local mountaineering associations, and still more commercial guides and clients, but relatively few free mountaineers in China—perhaps no more than 100, and only a handful of these attempt first ascents. I believe the differences between free mountaineers and the other types of climbers are much greater than the differences between free mountaineers who choose alpine style and those who go in large teams and fix ropes. I also believe China is only going to have a robust, healthy mountaineering community when there are enough free mountaineers.

ORIGINS OF FREE MOUNTAINEERING

In 1989 the first Chinese student mountaineering club was started at Peking University in Beijing. This was a time when recreational outdoor activities were supposed to take place in well-developed scenic areas with paved trails, and only soldiers, surveyors, and nomadic minorities slept in tents. There were no training programs, no translated textbooks, no gear stores, and the Internet was a distant concept. The student climbers had to learn basic techniques (mostly Russian-oriented) from sympathetic CMA officials, and they borrowed gear wherever possible. In the earlier days, when kernmantle ropes were not available, they tied military bedroll strings together and used waist belays to protect rock climbs in nearby hills.

All of this sounds very crude today, but it marked the beginning of modern free mountaineering in China. In August 1990, Peking University student climbers summited Mt. Yuzhu (6,178m, Kunlun Mountains, Qinghai), which was likely the first time a Chinese team climbed a high-altitude mountain just because the climbers themselves wanted to. They climbed the easy southern slopes, reaching the summit in three separate groups. CMA instructor Xiong Jiping went with the team and escorted the summit groups.

After this, the Peking University students’ team continued to climb a mountain each summer vacation, mostly without outside help, and similar student clubs soon emerged at other universities and colleges in Beijing, most notably at Tsinghua University and Beijing Institute of Technology. (I began climbing during my freshman year at Tsinghua in 2002.) Many of the student team members dropped climbing after graduation, but some carried on.

In 1994 a team of 10, consisting partly of ex-student climbers, attempted 6,268m Ane-maqen II in Qinghai. Team leader Wang Xiaozheng was severely injured in an avalanche after



Mt. Yuzhu (6,178m) in the Kunlun Mountains was climbed by Peking University students in 1990, "likely the first time a Chinese team climbed a high-altitude mountain just because the climbers themselves wanted to." Luo Biao

the summit assault and died after two days of exposure. Of the two others in the rope team, Wang Junbiao headed back toward base camp alone to seek help and was not seen again, while Sun Ping staggered back into camp after eight days on the mountain. This was the first time a free-mountaineering accident in China had resulted in deaths. Sun later wrote an article titled "Eight Days and Nights on Anemaqen," which became the Chinese version of *Touching the Void*.

The normal Chinese bureaucratic response to something like the Anemaqen deaths would have been a ban on free mountaineering, but fortunately, because of the lack of a government agency directly responsible for it, no officials got pressured enough to issue such a ban. However, several newspapers and magazines reported the incident, causing the word "mountaineering," if not the actual concepts behind it, to be more familiar to Chinese people.

So student clubs continued to exist and climb, more often independently than not, and other people began to learn of and get into mountaineering. The tiny community of free mountaineers in China grew at a slow but steady rate.

OFFICIAL COMMERCIAL MOUNTAINEERING

With the growth of the mountaineering community came the first commercial expeditions on high mountains, but at first such expeditions were few in number and poorly organized. (Some say the aforementioned Anemaqen expedition had a commercial element, as the deceased team leader, Wang Xiaozheng, went partly for profit.) In 1999 the CMA organized its first commercial expedition, to Yuzhu. The climb was successful, and the same clients went the next spring on a second commercial expedition, also organized by the CMA, to Changtse, the 7,543-meter peak just north of Everest.

Just after the Changtse expedition, the Qinghai Mountaineering Association (QMA) hosted the first Yuzhu mountaineering festival, a gathering of several commercial expeditions. Due to a sudden snowstorm, two of these expeditions went badly wrong, and five clients were killed over two days. The leaders of the two expeditions bore the blame; the QMA did not. CMA officials and guides from Changtse were called on to help with the body searches, and several of the clients also went to Yuzhu to help. One of these clients, Liu Fuyong ("Big Liu"), wrote a narrative on the search titled *Yuzhu in Tears*.

Several months later, in October 2000, the CMA held its own Yuzhu festival, and 50 clients reached the summit in six groups and came back safely. Large festivals then became one of the chief ways in which provincial mountaineering associations organized commercial events. Tibet held its first mountaineering festival on Jiagsang Lamo (6,325m) in 2001, and Xinjiang on Muztagh Ata (7,546m) in 2002.

Such festivals might seem to have little to do with free mountaineering, but with the growth of "official" commercial mountaineering in China, more people came to understand mountaineering, and more joined the related online discussions (including armchair climbers), making for a bigger and noisier scene. In addition, the success of such commercial expeditions prompted the CMA to offer training courses on modern technique, which had a direct positive influence on the Chinese free-mountaineering community. On the downside, the rise of commercial mountaineering also resulted in more rigid regulations, which were created with commercial expeditions in mind but also applied to free mountaineers, and which have now become one of the greatest obstacles to the development of free mountaineering in China.

TIBET MOUNTAINEERING GUIDE SCHOOL

With the rise of commercial expeditions, the need for qualified, competent mountain guides was pressing. The Tibet Mountaineering Guide School, established in 1999, soon got support from the CMA, the China Tibet Mountaineering Association, and Ozark Equipment (China's leading outdoor brand at that time). The school began a lasting cooperation with the École Nationale de Ski et d'Alpinisme (ENSA), the French guides' and ski instructors' school.

The Tibet Mountaineering Guide School recruited students exclusively from Tibetan families, and with the help of CMA and ENSA it quickly turned these sturdy Tibetan boys into good Himalayan guides. The best students in each class (the school took in a new batch every two to three years), along with a select few climbers from the CMA, got the chance to climb for a few weeks in Chamonix with ENSA professionals each year. When the first batch of students graduated, a company called Himalayan Expedition was set up to provide them with jobs.

For the first time, China had a number of trained, certified modern commercial guides, ready to be dispatched anywhere when they were not on duty with Himalayan Expedition, and their numbers grew every few years. This stimulated the growth of official commercial mountaineering, but also indirectly caused the demise of student clubs as free mountaineering organizations, as we shall see.

CMA TRAINING COURSES

With several successful commercial expeditions and rock and ice climbing courses under its belt, the CMA began to contemplate more advanced training courses for the rapidly growing numbers of mountaineering enthusiasts. In October 2003 the first CMA Guide Course was held, on a mountain in Sichuan, which was then named Guide Peak (5,800m). This course was not as successful as hoped, because none of the students was skillful or experienced enough to begin training as a professional guide. After this, the CMA changed the course's name to the CMA Mountaineering Skills Course and held it every one or two years.

Under the leadership of Ma Xinxiang (director of the CMA's training department) and Sun Bin (once a member of the Peking University students' team, and later sent to Chamonix by the CMA for guide training), these training courses were the first in China to explicitly advocate the "light and fast" style of climbing. Students were eager to try out this new attitude on real rock, ice, and mountain routes.

In 2007 the CMA and Ozark launched the first Chinese Mountaineering Development Institute [CMDI] program, a guide-training course that was open only to candidates from provincial mountaineering associations. The program was taught by ENSA instructor Olivier Balma and Chinese instructor Kang Hua. Since the first batch of eight trainees graduated in 2009, additional sessions have begun.



A Chinese Mountaineering Development Institute guide-training class at Moon Hill in Yangshuo, Guangxi Province. Luo Biao

REGULATIONS AGAINST FREE MOUNTAINEERING

In 2002 the summit group of the Peking University students' team was hit by an avalanche on Shishapangma West (7,292m, Tibet). All five climbers were killed. Before this, there had been a set of Regulations on Domestic Mountaineering, issued by the Chinese National Sports Bureau in 1997, but the rules were neither comprehensive nor strictly followed. After the Shishapangma incident, the National Sports Bureau urged the CMA to make a new set of rules, and to carry them out more ardently.

The immediate result was that student teams were required to hire at least three certified professional guides for their expeditions, and the guides would be in complete control of the climbing. Until the guides' schools were created, such a requirement would have been difficult or impossible to meet, but by 2003 the first batch of Tibet Mountaineering Guide School students had graduated. This regulation was the beginning of the end of Chinese student clubs as free-mountaineering organizations.

In addition, provincial mountaineering associations were urged to follow the previously neglected 1997 regulations to the letter. These required all mountaineering expeditions to be "organized by an entity with corporate capacity," in other words, by a registered company or agency. Free mountaineers could not register unless they could find a corporation willing to back them up.

In 2004 a new version of Regulations on Domestic Mountaineering was issued, which further required all expedition members to "have graduated from at least one climbing skill-training course held by the CMA or one of the provincial mountaineering associations," and all expeditions to "hire at least one certified professional guide for every four members." Free mountaineers could not register a team for an expedition unless they could (1) find a corporation willing to back them, (2) find the time and money for a training course, and (3) pay the wages of one or more guides. This was true even if the climbers were totally competent and willing to assume full responsibility for their own safety.

Moreover, there might have been enough Tibet Mountaineering Guide School graduates to meet the guiding requirements for student clubs' summer-vacation climbs, but their numbers were definitely inadequate for free-mountaineering expeditions throughout China. And after its unsuccessful guides' course in 2003, the CMA never certified any guides other than the few CMDI graduates.

In the province of Sichuan, especially after 2005, these regulations have not been carried out as rigorously as elsewhere, so some free-mountaineering teams have managed to register to climb. In the province of Yunnan, where there are mountains but not a fully functional mountaineering association, the regulations don't mean much. But in Xinjiang and Qinghai, and particularly Tibet, the registration of a free-mountaineering expedition is either impossible or prohibitively expensive, costing up to tens of thousands of RMB (1,000 RMB equaled \$146 in May 2010.)



The first ascent of the west face of Xuebaoding (5,588m, Sichuan) in 2004 was a milestone in Chinese alpine-style climbing—and poaching. Zhou Peng

UNOFFICIAL COMMERCIAL MOUNTAINEERING

In the spring of 2003 the Arête Alpine Instruction Center (AAIC) was founded in Sichuan by Chinese climber Ma Yihua and American Jon Otto, who had studied at Peking University and had been involved with the students' team there. It was one of the earliest companies of its kind in China, and certainly the most famous. Ma, Otto, and their people not only led commercial expeditions, but also explored new mountain areas and routes whenever possible. [Editor's note: Jon Otto's reports have frequently appeared in the AAJ, including this edition.]

Ma left China after his colleague Liu Xinan, one of the most accomplished Chinese alpine climbers, got killed in a rappelling accident in 2007, and Liu's family demanded large compensation, which Ma couldn't pay. The AAIC stopped operating last November.

Although the AAIC was a commercial company, it strongly promoted the spirit of free mountaineering. The same could be said of a couple of other unofficial mountaineering companies, including the Shu Shan (literally "Sichuan Mountains") and the Ultimate Mountaineer, which went out of business after its founder and director, Li Hongxue, was killed on Celestial Peak last June. However, most such companies (especially those outside of Sichuan) are not really interested in anything other than profit, and whether more companies like the AAIC will emerge remains to be seen.

Another form of unofficial commercial mountaineering has been on the rise in some mountainous areas, particularly the Qionglai Range in Sichuan. Because the CMA and local mountaineering associations have long provided their own high-altitude porters, liaison officers, and other technical services for foreign expeditions, local yak and camel herders living in mountain areas never learned modern mountaineering techniques from foreigners, as Nepalese Sherpas did. But now some local people have become part-time guides, escorting tourists up easier mountain routes. Some of these local guides have learned to be good technical climb-

ers, while others barely know how to handle ropes. The Sichuan Mountaineering Association (SMA) has been providing training courses and certification for such guides, but the licenses are valid only within the province. Some local guides are talking about banding together to form their own companies, so their expeditions can be insured against accidents. This is a very good start, but they still have a long way to go.



An ascent of Bogda Feng (5,445m, Xinjiang) in 2000 by Cao Jun, Chen Junchi, Xu Xiaoming, and Yang Chunfeng may have been the first alpine-style climb of a technical route by Chinese climbers. *Luo Biao*

MOUNTAIN POACHING

For Chinese free mountaineers, the only way to climb most mountains without joining a guided or officially sanctioned expedition is to do it illegally—in other words, to “poach” their summits. Many of the notable Chinese free-mountaineering events after 2002, including the alpine-style first ascent of Xuebaoding’s west face (5,588m, Sichuan, 2004), the solo first ascent of Jianshanzi (5,472m, Sichuan, 2005), and the recent first ascent of Zalaqueni (the 5,476m main peak of White Horse Mountain, Yunnan), were done illegally.

Some provincial mountaineering associations, especially Sichuan Province’s, tend to turn a blind eye; others, most notably Tibet’s, have done what they could to stop these poachers and to fine them when possible.

One of the major problems with an illegal expedition is that, if you get killed or injured, an insurance company is not going to pay up. In the winter of 2005-’06 a team of three and another team of two were lost on Lamo-She (6,070m) in Sichuan. Neither had registered. I’m not sure who paid the bill for the body search, but certainly no insurance company was involved.

Mountain poaching is still widely practiced among both free mountaineers and unofficial commercial guides. Unless the regulations are changed, or the practice of free mountaineering (and unofficial commercial mountaineering, for that matter) comes to an end, I don’t see how this problem can be solved.

ALPINE STYLE

As far as alpine-style climbing goes, the 2000 ascent of Bogda Feng (5,445m, Xinjiang), by Cao Jun, Chen Junchi, Xu Xiaoming, and Yang Chunfeng, was among the earliest alpine-style successes on a technical route by Chinese climbers, if not the first. Among other early alpine-style endeavors by Chinese free mountaineers were attempts on the west face of Xueba-



Steep ground on The Free Spirits, a new route on the south face of Siguniang (6,250m) climbed by Yan Dongdong and Zhou Peng in November 2009. Zhou is employed by the Chinese Mountaineering Association, but the pair registered for the ascent as individual climbers and completed the difficult ascent alpine-style after two previous attempts. *Yan Dongdong*

oding in 2000 and a 2001 expedition to Yulong (5,596m, Lijiang, Yunnan). Before that, there had been some small-party, single-push ascents of 5,000ers and 6,000ers, but not on truly technical routes.

In the years since, alpine-style climbs have become more common, though many of these are difficult to trace because the climbers poached their summits and wouldn’t want to talk openly about them. By 2004, when Xuebaoding’s west face route was finally accomplished, the term “alpine-style” was commonly known, though perhaps not commonly understood. (There are always more armchair climbers on the Internet than there are real mountaineers.) Most of these climbs have been in Sichuan, Yunnan, and the parts of Qinghai more neglected by the QMA.

China has perhaps the greatest number of unclimbed peaks above 5,000 meters in the world, and huge potential for new routes. Naturally many alpine-style attempts have been aimed at new summits or new routes, but the success rate of such attempts has not been high. Of all the new routes established by Chinese parties in the past five years, fewer than 30 have been alpine-style ascents (as far as I know—no one currently keeps a record of these things).

THE FUTURE

At the National Mountaineering/Rescue Conference in January 2010, CMA officials stated frankly that if the Regulations on Domestic Mountaineering were to be changed, it would only be toward the stricter side. In Tibet, with the CTMA/Himalayan Expedition monopoly on commercial expeditions, free mountaineering is regarded as both troublesome and unprofitable, and they have been rather successful at suppressing it, especially since Tibet is so far from the rest of China that few free mountaineers go there anyway. In Xinjiang and Qinghai, the provincial mountaineering associations also frown upon free mountaineering, but poaching is easier and more frequently done. In Yunnan, the main obstacle is not the mountaineering association; it's local governments and tourism offices that neither understand nor desire mountaineers coming on their own instead of paying thousands to join commercial festivals.

The most hopeful case is Sichuan, where any Chinese team can register for less than 200 RMB [ca \$29 in May 2010] to climb any mountain below 7,000 meters, whether it's unclimbed or not, as long as the climbers can provide a photocopy of a company's business license and a photocopy of an SMA-certified guide's license. (The company does not actually have to organize the expedition, and the guide himself need not come on the team; this is understood though never stated.) This is why most Chinese free-mountaineering expeditions in the past few years—and certainly every free-mountaineering expedition that's been properly registered—have taken place in Sichuan.

Perhaps in the next 10 or 20 years, the number of free mountaineers in China will become so great that the CMA and other officials will be forced to recognize our presence and hear our voices. But in China, things are usually done the hard way. Perhaps Tibet will not be officially open to free mountaineers until climbers have poached every unclimbed summit, leaving the mountaineering associations no first ascents for which to charge big fees to foreign expeditions. Meanwhile, free mountaineers will have to be content to climb legally in Sichuan and to poach summits elsewhere—and be very careful not to be caught.

A NOTE ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Born in 1984, Yan Dongdong lives in Beijing and works as a freelance translator. He summited Mt. Everest in May 2008 as part of the Olympic torch expedition, and since then has focused on free mountaineering, including a new route on Siguniang (6,250m) in 2009 and the first ascent of Wuse Shan (5,430m) in early 2010, both in Sichuan Province. Both of these ascents are reported in the Climbs and Expeditions section of this Journal.



Yan Dongdong (left) and Zhou Peng at a bivouac during an attempt on Siguniang in February 2009. Zhou Peng