

## THE ASCENT OF SHISHA PANGMA

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*(Deputy Leader of the Chinese Expedition)**(Four illustrations: nos. 53-56)*

**A**T 10.20 A.M. (Peking time) on May 2, 1964, the last of a group of Chinese mountain climbers stepped on the summit of the hitherto unclimbed, 8,013 m. high Shisha Pangma, in southern Tibet.

It was a double triumph in world mountaineering history. The only remaining peak above 8,000 m. in the world had at last been scaled. And it was the largest single group of climbers ever to reach the summit of an over 8,000 m. mountain in one expedition. The Shisha Pangma climbers had thus written another glorious page in the youthful history of Chinese sports, a fine sequel to the Chinese Mountaineering Expedition's ascent of the world's highest peak, Mount Chomo Lungma, by its northern slope, in May, 1960.

A new round of determined effort to conquer 8,000 m. peaks began in 1950 when Maurice Herzog of France scaled the 8,078 m. Annapurna in Nepal, the tenth highest in the world.

Then the world's highest peak, Mount Chomo Lungma (8,848 m.), fell to man's mountaineering endeavour for the first time in 1953. Edmund Hillary of New Zealand and Tenzing Norkay of Nepal, members of the British Expedition led by Sir John Hunt, reached the summit on May 29. After that it was scaled by Swiss, Chinese and American climbers. However, the Chinese conquered the mountain from its perilous northern slope which had turned back seven earlier, western expeditions.<sup>1</sup> The other successful attempts were all made from the southern side of the mountain.

The Chinese conquest of Shisha Pangma, the only remaining unclimbed summit of the fourteen highest peaks in the world, thus brought this fourteen year round of effort to a close.

Shisha Pangma is located in Nyenyam province in south Tibet. It is known as one of the Himalayan giants, but the mountain actually lies on a branch range north of the main Himalayan chain.

When we started making our plans to climb the mountain, we combed

<sup>1</sup> The Chinese story of climbing Everest was printed in *A. J.* 66. 28. Supplementary notes and criticisms are in *A. J.* 66. 313; 67. 310; 68. 48.



many libraries but found little useful data about it. Chinese geographical literature offered little detailed information on the area.

Very few western explorers or climbers had ever been anywhere near it. A. F. R. Wollaston of Britain in an article in the *Geographical Journal* July 1922, (vol. LX, p. 9) said that he had only managed to get to within about twenty miles of it. The British mountaineer H. W. Tilman described the mountain as 'elusive', in his book *Nepal Himalaya* (Cambridge, 1952).<sup>2</sup>

Before forming our expedition, we sent reconnaissance parties to scout the mountain. They studied the environment, the weather and the topography of the area, and actually climbed to a height of 7,160 m. on the northern slope. A sketch map was drawn and photographs taken.

This reconnaissance work was the basis of our preparations, which proceeded apace last summer. Climbers were selected and sent to Sinkiang and Szechwan for training in skill and physical fitness. Detailed plans were worked out. Orders were placed for down garments, climbing boots, sleeping bags, pitons and other equipment and provisions including high-calorie concentrated foods.

An expedition of 195 members was officially formed in early 1964. It included the cream of China's mountaineers—Hsu Ching, who became the leader (he had been the deputy leader of the Chomo Lungma Expedition), Wang Fu-chou, the geologist (he was one of the three who reached the top of Chomo Lungma), and Wang Feng-tung, Chang Chun-yen, Mimar, Sodnam Dorji, Liu Ta-yi, Wu Tsung-yueh, Liu Lien-man and Shih Ching (all of whom had reached 8,100 m. or higher on the Chomo Lungma climb). There were also a good many newcomers, the youngest being nineteen years of age.

Our climbers were of Han, Tibetan, Manchurian or Hui nationality. Among the members of the expedition were workers, peasants, herdsmen, servicemen, professors, scientists, journalists, cameramen, photographers, signallers, weathermen, medical workers, drivers and chefs.

Attached to the expedition was a scientific corps including members of the Chinese Academy of Sciences, the Academy of Geological Science under the Ministry of Geology, the State Bureau of Surveying and Cartography, Peking University, and the Peking Geological Institute. They studied the glaciology, geomorphology, geology, surveying and cartography, high altitude physiology and meteorology of the area.

The expedition ended its approach march on March 18 and established Base Camp on a clearing north of the peak, 5,000 m. above sea level. It was virtually a townlet, with eighteen large tents each capable of accommodating twenty people, and ten smaller ones; all were fitted with

<sup>2</sup> A recent party that inspected the mountain was that led by Lord Glentworth—see *A.J.* 68. 291. Further references are to be found in Dyhrenfurth, *To the Third Pole* (1955), p. 156, with illustration at Plate 26, and in *A.J.* 68. 40.





*Expedition photo]*

SHISHA PANGMA VIEWED FROM THE NORTHERN APPROACH.

(No. 53)





*Expedition photo]*

SHISHA PANGMA: CLIMBERS TAKE A REST AT AN ALTITUDE OF 6,800 M.

(No. 54)





*tion photo]*

SHISHA PANGMA: CLIMBERS ON THE WAY TO CAMP V, 7,500 M. ABOVE SEA LEVEL.

(No. 55)





*Expedition photo]*

CHINESE MOUNTAINEERS ATOP THE TRIANGLE-SHAPED SUMMIT OF THE 8,013 M. SHISHA PANGMA. EXPEDITION LEADER HSU CHING (THIRD FROM RIGHT) IS SEEN REPORTING THEIR VICTORY TO BASE CAMP BY WALKIE-TALKIE.

(No. 56)



electric lighting. Apart from the living quarters, we had an auditorium, a kitchen and canteens, a clinic, and radio and weather stations.

South of Base Camp, the glittering peak of Shisha Pangma towered high above the other mountains and, like a giant, dominated the skyline.

Around it lay its sister peaks, Molhamongjim, and Khampenjim and the North Peak.

Between 5,300 m. and 6,700 m. on the northern slope of Shisha Pangma lies the thirteen kilometres long Yebokangal glacier, which feeds the Bhong Chu river.

Snow-bound all the year round, Shisha Pangma is full of innumerable open and hidden ice and snow crevasses. Its northern, eastern and western slopes are marked by many sheer cliffs and ice 'steps' which bar the way. And the southern slope is an almost perpendicular wall, as though a giant hand wielding a fantastic axe had chopped off the mountain on this side, making it impossible to ascend from this direction.

From Base Camp, our route wound upward along the abandoned course of an ancient glacier until we reached 5,300 m. From there to 5,800 m. the route cut across moraines. Further up, enormous séracs of myriad shapes and sizes form forests of ice stalagmites across the glacial tongue, all the way up to 6,000 m.

The area below Base Camp is a vast grassland extending northward. It is dotted with hillocks and lakes with wild geese, ducks and swans splashing in the crystal clear water. Tibetan herdsmen graze their cattle on the downy grass.

The climate in the Shisha Pangma area is approximately the same as throughout the Himalayas; from November to March there is the windy season and from June to September the monsoon season. Only April and May are favourable for mountaineering. Even then the temperature drops to as low as over  $30^{\circ}$  below zero Centigrade, and the peak is often shrouded by palls of snow dust churned up by tempestuous winds, which at times can sweep people off their feet. A spell of good weather lasts for no more than three days. Colossal snow and ice avalanches sweep down from time to time, rumbling like thunder and stirring up huge masses of snow fog.

Another difficulty for the climbers was the exceptionally long route from Base Camp to the peak. Extending thirty-six kilometres, it was the longest route ever ventured upon by Chinese mountaineers. Adding to the difficulties was the fact that the whole route and the higher camps were exposed to high winds.

Basing ourselves on the topography of the mountain, we set up Camp I at 5,300 m. and Camp II, which also served as the advance base camp, at 5,800 m. But from then on the expedition struggled against very difficult terrain to pitch Camp III at 6,300 m. and Camp IV at 6,900 m.



By April 6, five tons of equipment and provisions had been moved up to these camps.

Meanwhile a party of thirty-seven climbers led by Yen Tung-liang and Liu Lien-man set out on March 25 to explore the higher altitudes, while another party of the twelve other fittest members, reserved for the summit, undertook an acclimatisation march up to a height of 6,600 m. Wang Fu-chou was to join the summit party later.

By April 21, two more camps had been pitched, one at 7,500 m. and the other at 7,700 m., stocked with sufficient provisions and oxygen cylinders for the final assault. Camp VI was just 312 m. from the summit, the nearest final assault camp ever achieved by Chinese mountaineers. The final assault camp on the Chomo Lungma expedition had been 382 m. below the summit.

Our summit party was made up of six climbers of Han nationality and seven Tibetans. They included the expedition leader Hsu Ching, the deputy leader of the assault party Chang Chun-yen and the Chomo Lungma hero Wang Fu-chou.

Reports from the weather station confirmed that there would be good weather in a week's time. So on April 25, we gave the summit party a big send-off at a stirring, drum-beating ceremony at Base Camp. Finally we all sang the national anthem, and a national flag and a sculptured bust of Chairman Mao Tse-tung were entrusted to the group to take to the top of Shisha Pangma.

Now here are some extracts from the account given by Hsu Ching upon the summit party's triumphant return to Base Camp on May 4:

'Trudging up against a heavy snowstorm, we wound along the glacier on the northern slope and weaved through the labyrinth of séracs to reach Camp III at 6,300 m. in three days.

'At dawn on April 28 the weather was glorious. We pressed on, racing against time, toward the snow valley at 6,900 m. After climbing a huge ice and snow step, to our surprise we found no trace of Camp IV which had been pitched earlier by the advance parties. Heavy snow had buried not only the tents but all the markings that had been left.

'However, we took turns in laborious digging and finally, after two hours, retrieved the tents and provisions. But the next day, the weather kept us camp-bound.

'We resumed our advance on April 30, plodding through knee-deep powdery snow on a long hard-frozen ice-slope with an incline of 40°. There was a dizzy cliff on one side of the slope sweeping all the way down to the foot of the mountain. After a strenuous climb of seven hours fifty minutes, we arrived at Camp V at 7,500 m., and then spent another two hours, digging out the snow buried tents.

'On May Day, we reached the final assault camp at 7,700 m. That evening we received a radio message from Base Camp, forecasting un-



usually fine weather the next morning. I called a "council of war" and we decided that ten members would take part in the final assault, leaving the remaining three, who were suffering from the effects of the altitude, to stay behind and act as a support party if necessary.

'The summit climbers set out in three ropes from the final assault camp at 6 a.m. Peking time on May 2. A waning moon was over the mountain, but it was still so dark that at times we had to use torch-light.

'At daybreak we reached 7,800 m. above sea level and came to an ice-slope with an average incline of over  $50^{\circ}$ , the bottom of which ended in a precipitous ice-face several hundred feet high. The hard ice glittered with a bluish light in the dimness of the dawn. We had to traverse this slippery slope to get to the route leading to the summit, and every step had to be cut out with ice-axes.

'I drove a piton at one end of the slope and ran a nylon rope through the ring to secure safe anchorage for the whole party. In the course of the traverse, we had to support ourselves, leaning sidewise against the sheer slope.

'An accident occurred when the trodden steps gave way under the geologist Wang Fu-chou, who brought up the rear. He slipped and fell twenty metres before being brought to a halt and rescued by the rest of the party. It took us over half an hour to negotiate this slippery ice-slope though it was no more than twenty metres long.

'Then we skirted two large ice-fall areas and continued the ascent along a snow slope with a  $45^{\circ}$  angle of incline. Here the snow had been compacted under low temperature into a solid shining slab and we had to crawl on all fours, using ice-axes to clinch our hold. Our progress was reduced to a snail's pace. We were gasping for breath and our legs felt as heavy as lead.

'We rested briefly on the snow slope and then climbed another fifty metres, gaining a rather gentle ridge covered with knee-deep snow.

'"The summit!" someone yelled. It was just about ten metres above us, and quite unlike the aiguille which it had looked to us at a distance; it was just a gently sloped crest covered with snow. But this time we were so exhausted that we had to call another halt before attempting the final stretch.

'The sun had risen in mid-sky, and a gusty wind was blowing at a speed of twenty-five metres per second. By-passing a cornice in the shape of a mushroom, we hit a rather gentle snow ridge to our left, and gradually found the ground narrowing down.

'A few steps more and we emerged on the very highest point of the mountain, a triangular ice-and-snow-covered piece of ground, about five square metres, commanding a panoramic view to the farthest horizon. A head wind hit us with full force. Looking up, we saw the sun shining in the south-eastern sky, and well below where we stood floated colourful clouds.



'It was 10.20 a.m. Peking time, May 2, when the last of our party reached the top. At 10.30, I tore the sheet marked "May 2" from a calendar I had brought with me and pencilled on the back "Ten members of the Chinese Mountaineering Expedition including Hsu Ching have conquered Mt. Shisha Pangma, May 2, 1964." Sodnam Dorji, a Tibetan climber, produced the five-star national flag of China and the sculptured bust of Mao Tse-tung from his rucksack and, together with my note, we placed them in a hole we dug in the snow at the centre of the summit. Our cameraman filmed these actions with his 16-mm. ciné camera.

'We posed for group pictures and then we looked around in all directions. There was the world's highest peak, Chomo Lungma, towering in the south-east. To the north, we saw highland prairies stretching for a considerable distance, cleft by the Bhong Chu river, which looked like a silvery ribbon, and marked by two large lakes which gleamed like mirrors. To the south rolled range after range of snow-clad and dark brown mountains.

'At 11.00 a.m., we began our descent, again in three ropes, and arrived back at the final assault camp at noon.'

Base Camp was thrilled by the news of the victory which Hsu Ching flashed down through ultra-short-wave walkie-talkie from the summit.

We at Base Camp danced in jubilation and congratulated each other heartily on the success, while losing no time in transmitting the good news to Peking and the rest of the world.

*Editorial note:* It is to be regretted that the precise route taken on the mountain is not given in the Chinese account. An enquiry has been made in Peking for more exact details—whether the climb was by the North face, or by either the Eastern or Western ridges or perhaps by a combination of face and ridge. That the ascent was made from the north is clear from the narrative.