
PAUL KNOTT

Adventure and Discovery in The Chinese Tien Shan

From the well-known summits of Pobeda (Tomur, 7439m) and Khan Tengri (6995m), the 6000m peaks of the Tien Shan extend eastward into Xinjiang as far as they do to the west into Kyrgyzstan. Yet for all this vast potential, the climbing history of the range within Xinjiang is succinct. The major summit Xuelian Feng ('Snow Lotus', 6627m), 60km east of the Inylchek glacier basins, received its first ascent only in 1990, when the last of four Japanese assaults reached the summit from the south-east. More recently, a group of Russian climbers explored and climbed in the area immediately south of Pobeda and nearby Military Topographers' Peak (6873m). Everything else beyond the Kyrgyz border appears untouched from a climbing perspective.

'I'll have you know, I am not suicidal,' Bruce exhorted. For me, this story begins here – Mt Tasman, New Zealand, January 2006. Much to Bruce's disgust, I had refused to continue towards the face. I found the constant stream of falling rock and ice and the sound of running water too much to ignore. Putting aside our conspicuous differences in risk appetite and temperament, Bruce Normand and I subsequently pursued our common interest in exploring the Chinese Tien Shan. Our initial research pointed to the north side of Xuelian Feng as an attractive target. Satellite-derived images and maps formed our only detailed information; in contemporary terms, we were exploring a blank on the map.

It seemed clear that we were destined to have an adventure, not a holiday, and this adventure started well before the trip itself. Our first difficult choice concerned the access route. The historic Xiata trail traverses the range from Aksu in the south to Ili in the north, and actually crosses the Muzart glacier close to Xuelian Feng. It used to be an important trade route, and in the 1940s the Uighur army used it to launch surprise attacks on the Chinese to the south. Subsequently, it fell into disrepair, though it is beginning to undergo a revival for trekking. Reports suggested that high river levels would prevent horses from following the trail from the south, although the Japanese parties on Xuelian had approached this way. Instead, we elected to start from the north via the smaller Xiata valley, and cross the 3582m Muzart pass.

We also had to get some sort of official permission. Given the restive history of the Ili region and the close proximity of the former Soviet border, we expected, and found, a well enforced set of bureaucratic and security checks on the approach to the Xiata valley. Through our agent, Kashgar-based Kong Baocun, we obtained a permit for Xuelian Feng. This seemed



17. View from Zhaosu Hotel, from left to right: Yanamax (6332m), Xuelian East (6400m+), Xuelian Feng (6627m), Baiyu Feng (6422m). (Paul Knott)



18. View from Hadamuzi base camp, (L-R): Xuelian North (6472m), Xuelian Feng (6627m) and Baiyu Feng (6422m). (Paul Knott)

straightforward, though it was not cheap and it made us dependent on Kong. The timing of our trip, in August 2008 during the Beijing Olympics, caused various concerns, not least of which was tight enforcement of China's visa regulations. The New Zealand team members, Guy McKinnon and I, trusted the bureaucracy to function and paid for our plane tickets. For a variety of reasons, in the weeks before we were to leave, Bruce's loosely assembled party of eight dwindled to four. Shortly before we departed, it became tragically clear that the four were now three, as news emerged of a solo climbing accident in Pakistan.

Despite these unsettling developments, Guy and I flew to the regional capital, Urumqi, and shortly afterwards we met Bruce, who arrived by sleeper bus from Kashgar. After some difficult exchanges with Kong, Bruce had thrashed out a compromise deal in which we paid only for the climbing permit, base camp staff (a translator plus a guide for the journey in) and insurance for the staff. Kong took every opportunity to deal dishonestly over the prices for these services. Fortunately, with the help of our translator David, we were able to arrange everything else independently, finding the local prices very reasonable. Unsettling developments continued, however, as we read news reports of bomb attacks on Xinjiang border posts, which we felt could compromise our permission to travel. We finished buying food and supplies, and set off overnight on the modern highway past the scenic Lake Sayram to Yining, capital of Ili Kazakh Autonomous Region. As we passed through the rich, cultivated land around Yining, we encountered the first of many checkpoints where we had to show our passports and permits. In the city itself, we had more paperwork to process, which took all afternoon and required intervention from Kong. In the evening, we continued on upgraded roads through the Ketmen range of limestone hills to the small county town of Zhaosu.

In the morning, our first view of the mountains lifted our spirits: a panorama from Yanamax (6332m) in the east to Khan Tengri in the west. A short drive, and several more checkpoints, one of which parted us from our passports, took us to the road end at Xiata Hot Springs (2380m). In all, our journey from Urumqi had taken us 1½ days including the overnight stop. Notwithstanding the onerous security checkpoints, we noticed that the authorities are developing the Xiata valley as a tourist centre. A new concrete bridge and hotel were under construction at the hot springs, and an upgrade of the access road was mostly complete. Beyond the hot springs, we had a further 22km to cover to base camp. For this, we relied on horses, and we knew this could be problematic given the lack of previous parties. The terrain was gentle through pasture and forest, but we made slow progress, as our horseman was ineffective at securing the loads and generally seemed inept. After a forced overnight stop due to high afternoon river levels, we continued on 8 August up the distinct trail over the barren Muzart pass (3582m) to reach our long-anticipated base camp.

Base camp was at Hadamuzi (3525m), a stunning, if exposed, alpine meadow clinging to the slopes south of the Muzart (Benzhaerte) glacier.



- 19 Guy McKinnon and Bruce Normand on Hanjaylak I (5424m). The peaks behind, from left to right, are Xuelian North East (6231m), Xuelian Feng (6627m) and Xuelian North (6472m). (*Paul Knott*)

In earlier times, this area housed a large military garrison to maintain and guard the trail, and artefacts from this habitation were clearly visible around the site. Immediately across the glacier was the imposing north face of Baiyu Feng (Aketasi Feng or 'White Jade', 6422m or 6438m) and the cirque formed by Xuelian North (6472m) and Xuelian Feng (6627m). These peaks were typical of those we saw in that they were apparently of granitic rock with steep walls on the north sides, long ridges, and sérac-threatened slopes on most aspects. As we arrived at the site, an afternoon squall caught us in what was to become a regular pattern. Cloud often built up in the north, and the pass channelled it in our direction.

We focused our reconnaissance on what we hoped would be accessible climbing near the head of the Muzart glacier. Some 12km of undulating moraine-covered glacier took us to what became a kind of advanced base camp on rivulet-covered white ice at 3950m. As we negotiated this glacier, we passed surprisingly dry-looking peaks, with slopes stripped of snow to remarkably high levels. It was also apparent that accessing routes could take some cunning, as most of the side glaciers contained broken icefalls. Disappointingly, the reconnaissance ended when we woke to a covering of several inches of wet snow. Snow continued to fall through the day, and we returned to base camp.

Our second reconnaissance was more productive, and took us through the crevassed area where the glacier curves south beneath Yanamax (6332m). The terrain that unfolded was awe-inspiring and grandiose, but frustrating from a climbing perspective. Tempting summit ridges always seemed inaccessible above icefalls, crumbling walls, and sérac barriers. We continued to the 4640m col between Yanamax and Xuelian East (6400m+), hoping to find a route to the snowy upper slopes of Yanamax. Disappointingly, a rocky ridge and fore-summit separated us from these slopes. The

precipitous walls on the south side were out of the question. This left only a somewhat threatened slope rising under the west face, an option I had already rejected as too contrived and risky. Meanwhile, Bruce's child-like enthusiasm was unabated.

Back at the glacier camp, we looked again at a route to two of the 5000m peaks visible from the Xiate valley and its Hanjaylak summer pastures. These became our acclimatization objectives, but a prolonged dump of snow again disrupted our plans. This time, snow lay deep at base camp too. Information varies as to whether this pattern is typical. The nearby Inylchek glacier basins are known for unsettled summer weather, but some sources suggest it should be drier further east. Fortunately, our tarpaulin shelter held up well, and we sat in it making fry-ups. I was also glad of some escapist reading, appropriately entitled *Absurdistan*.

As soon as the weather cleared, we headed back to our glacier camp and up the side glacier to the north to position ourselves for the Hanjaylak peaks. We bypassed the icefall on the rocky moraine to the left. On 21 August, we finally set off for our first summit. A slope with a small area of fallen ice blocks led us to the south ridge of what we were to call Hanjaylak I (5424m, WGS84 GPS height). A detour to the left to avoid 'schrunds took us over packed wind deposits to the snowy summit. Here we lingered at length, photographing the panorama of unclimbed peaks around us.

The following morning, we walked in moonlight through the upper glacier bowl towards Hanjaylak II. Positioned second on the rope behind Bruce, I was beginning to wonder why we were approaching glacial relief on the right-hand side when suddenly, the crust gave way beneath me and I fell forward. For an age I felt and heard myself crashing through what seemed like layer on layer of aerated ice. Finally, I broke free of this honeycomb and felt a rush of air as I accelerated face first into a black abyss. Just as I became convinced I was in for serious injury, I felt the powerful elastic tug of the rope. Pulling myself upright, I found myself swinging uncomfortably in my minimalist Alpine harness. I looked around in the torch beam to see that I was in a sizeable icicle-encrusted cavern. I thought I must be deep under the surface, until I looked up to see my own hole a few metres above. When I reached out to the walls with my ice-axe, this only brought down more icicles from above. I prepared to prussik out, but knew from experience that pulling from the surface is usually easier, and anyway was nervous about the state of the belays. We had inherited our snow-stakes from Bruce's Pakistan trip, and they were of the bendy homemade variety cut from soft aluminium section.

After this incident, I returned to the tents, not only to recover some composure, but also feeling that things were not right. Bruce continued like a machine, and he and Guy summited Hanjaylak II (5380m, altimeter height) via slopes on the north-east side. Following this, we returned to our camp on the main glacier. During the rest day that followed, it became clear that Bruce was set on the route he had enthused about on Yanamax, and Guy was equally keen to follow. For me, several things were not right

about this plan, and the risk simply too high. Unfortunately, there seemed no mileage in selling the merits of carrying through a project as a team, or in proposing the alternative Xuelian East (6400m+). Feeling a sense of social exclusion, I returned to base camp to await the outcome.

Guy and Bruce returned two days later. Their climb had not started well, as they had set off an avalanche that carried them, roped, far enough to create minor equipment damage. Drive unabated, they had continued by a different line, still on very poor snow, unconcerned about the séracs on the face above. After a camp at 5150m, they had followed the upper south-west ridge to reach the well-earned summit of Yanamax (6332m) on 25 August.

After this, even their risk appetite was compromised, besides which there was more snowfall and stormy weather. We descended a few days later, reaching the hot springs in one modest day with the assistance of Kazakh herders from the high pastures. Our return to Urumqi was trouble free, assisted by China's curious but surprisingly civilised sleeper buses. Guy and I spent several days in and around Urumqi, and found these enriching but thought provoking; in the new museum, I was struck by the portrayal of every era in the region's history as 'inalienably' connected with China.

Our exploratory trip leaves many unvisited, unseen glaciers and unclimbed summits for future parties. West of the deep Muzart valley is a 25km-long ridge containing numerous 6000m summits, culminating at its western end in what may be Chulebos ('Tiger', 6769m). South of this ridge are several individual 6000m peaks including Muzart (6571m) and peaks 6342m and 6050m. There are plenty of 5000m summits too, including some elegant-looking ones we saw and photographed. For these areas, the northern access we used would not be convenient, mainly because horses would not be able to negotiate the moraine-covered lower Muzart glacier. Instead, it may be worth investigating the access route from the south. We rejected this due to concerns about the Muzart river, which drains a large area and is described in one source as 'tempestuous'. Trekking parties come in spring or autumn, when the water is lower. The main problem appears to be a section of the river that runs against 150m-high bluffs. Climbers can negotiate these, but not horses. There are also major side streams to cross. Although the Japanese parties on Xuelian successfully passed through this valley to access their base camp, they branched east well below the Muzart glacier snout.

Based on our experience, these mountains offer much potential for future adventure. Their form is challenging, the weather is fickle, and snow and ice conditions unreliable. Added to the access issues, these things create a huge sense of uncertainty and discovery. As for my own sense of discovery, on this trip it was as much to do with diversity in the climbing community as it was with this alluring range of mountains.

Summary: An account of exploratory climbing in the Xinjiang Tien Shan, China, by Paul Knott, Guy McKinnon and Bruce Normand in August 2008. First ascents of Hanjaylak I (5424m), by all three members, and of Hanjaylak II (5380m) and Yanamax (6332m) by McKinnon and Normand.



20 Bruce Normand on Hanjaylak II (5380m) with Hanjaylak I (5424m) behind.
(Guy McKinnon)



21. West face of Yanamax (6332m). (Paul Knott)