JOE PURYEAR

Things Invisible to See
A quest for unknown mountains in Chna and Nepal

At first the telltale sound of death came from above, like a helicopter's blades spinning and rapidly approaching. But as soon as I saw it, I knew rockfall wasn't going to kill us: its path skewed slightly from our position, just enough to leave us safe. I could even let myself notice its eerie, unusual beauty. Rocks glided down the blue ice, skimming the surface as they approached terminal velocity. Then my heart pounded loud again: Rockfall? David Gottlieb and I were right in the middle of a tilted ice sheet, weaving our way through two gargantuan hanging glaciers, concerned about icefall. We hadn't even considered the rockband that rose directly above us.

But there was no way, really, to prepare for a mountain like this: the summit of Jobo Rinjang was untouched, our line unattempted. All we had to go on were incorrect maps and low-res photos taken from a distance. We didn't even know what Jobo Rinjang would look like close up. My past experiences on unclimbed peaks had taught me that each one would be entirely different from the next.

Beyond the swath of blue ice we'd chosen, a decaying rampart of ancient stone, barely held together by patches of disintegrating ice, fell away to the Lunag Glacier. Dikes and streaking bands of burnt umber, dark gray and beige were crayoned across the wall like a child's chaotic drawing. No settlements appeared at the base, no potato fields, no yaks. The only thing moving was the mountain: ice calving into glacial lakes, rocks falling down and rolling forward— while the snow line keeps retreating, rising higher. Far away down valley, the local residents could not even agree on a name for where we were. How many people had even glimpsed this side of the mountain?

I craned my neck back to check on the forward end of the rope. There was David, kicking away as if the rockfall were irrelevant. We both knew there was only one direction to go—up. At this point there was no reason to retreat. Perhaps we would be exposed to more hazards going down. Meanwhile, there was so much, still, to see. Things invisible from the ground, now opening up for the first time to human eyes. To our eyes. And in the distance, the familiar horizon became new with every step: an endless array of peaks, some unclimbed, some climbed, and some justly popular, but none ever beheld from this angle.

We live in an era of speed ascents, linkups, summitless first ascents. Exploratory peak climbing has become an often overlooked and under-recognized pursuit. Haven't all the great peaks of the world been discovered already? Google Earth gives us the impression that each corner can be previewed, known. With all our technological tools, it's easy to think that pioneering in the old way no longer exists. Climbers try to keep a modern version of it alive through their imagination, creating new forms of adventure on paths previously travelled.

As David likes to joke, when you look at the history of a mountain range, as soon as enchainments become big news, "that's the death knell." No more grand first ascents left. I used to wish I'd been born thirty tears ago, so I could experience the great mountain all the lines were drawn on them. But I know, in fact, there still exist many large, untouched peaks in the greater Asian ranges. We are only limited by our own perceptions and those of others.

The *how* of the ascent is critical to this paradigm shift. I climb alpine style to travel as lightly as I can. Instead of fixed gear or tat, whenever possible I make V-threads and pull the cord through. That way, the next climbers won't even know that I've been there; they, too, can have a mountain without any garbage or old fixed ropes, without the human impact of long sieges. Nothing but pure ice, rock and snow. But this is just my way. It's not a matter of elitism or of ethical judgment. It's simply my own vision of beauty. For you see terrain differently when you know you're just passing through. Siege climbers go up and down the same pitch over and over, until its familiarity may become ingrained, almost banal. With alpine style, you only get to encounter each section of the mountain once. Even if you descend the same route, the perspective changes. You have to look more carefully to remember.

In the Qonglai Mountains

I first caught sight of it in the Qonglai Mountains in China. In 2005 Chad Kellog, Stoney Richards and I had been attempting a new route on the north wall of Mt. Siguniang. When four weeks of bad weather thwarted our efforts, we wanted to salvage something from our trip. With little more than a hand-drawn map and a vague idea that there might be something new to climb, we headed up a remote side valley deep in the Sichuan wilderness.

Days later on the last pitch of a huge unclimbed rock spire, Mt. Dangou, I led up an icy, unprotectable offwidth and over a small, but stubborn, chockstone. Then, forty feet up the final, back-to-toe featureless chimney before the summit—I got afraid. Carefully, I retreated to a small ledge. For the last sixty feet, I'd lacked a decent belay. Chad and Stoney were tentatively simul-climbing behind, unaware of my predicament. By now they must be clinging to the rock, staring up at an unmoving rope, wondering, worrying. They were hidden below in the depths of the convoluted blocks and cracks that comprised this complex summit pyramid. I couldn't see them or even speak to them.

For the first time, I realized how far out we were. If I turned back, no one else in our group would lead this pitch, and we'd miss the summit. But if I continued and I fell, no one but us even knew which peak we were hoping to climb. It was a far cry from leaving a detailed itinerary with my mom and dad, or having a cell phone tucked into the top of my pack. The choice I faced now at nearly 18,000 feet could be between life and death. I had to make it alone.

Clouds swirled through the sun's low evening rays. Inside the chimney only cold and darkness awaited. High on the peak, a light layer of snow covered all horizontal surfaces. My toes were numb. My bare hands scarcely functioned. I meditated for a while, trying to focus on nothing except the chimney. *It's just a chimney; climb it like you would at home. Push the flood of consequential thoughts away. Climb up into the sun. Out of this chasm of doubt.*

At last I started up again, pressing my feet firmly against the wall, feeling for the slightest indent or imperfection. The chimney size strained my body proportions. Had I been any shorter, I might not have fit. Instead, I steadily made upward progress, yearning for the sky. Fifty feet up, with no protection, I brushed the snow off a small ledge behind me and committed to a stem. I had to move fast, now: I couldn't reverse that sequence. If I waited too long, I'd lose my strength. I reached both hands up to the diagonal sloping ledge, swung my leg up in a quick, swift move.

And all at once, I flowed over the top of the chimney toward the summit. In that moment, everything—from years of hard alpine climbing in Alaska to days on practice cliffs in my home state of Washington—had come together in a complete synergy. A fiery sun set through a small break in the impending storm. Waves of clouds rolled up the peak and over me, turning into waves of euphoria. *This*

will be my future.

In the Genyen Massif

Once you've climbed and descended a peak you never imaged achievable, all possibilities seem endless. Regardless of where you find yourself, glimpses of mountains, photos and articles, appear in your peripheral vision. A perfect pyramid, a strong line, draws you in. You start to imagine what the route might be like; you weigh the objective danger, the aesthetics of climbing, the quality of the rock, ice or snow. Every new mountain presents its own set of challenges, questions and concerns.

Before 2005, my climbing life had fallen into a seasonal cycle: Alaska in the spring, the Cascades in the summer, Yosemite in the autumn, Patagonia or the Canadian Rockies in the winter. Routines comprised of known quantities had replaced the joy of discovery I'd once felt. On Dangou I'd sensed a way to keep exploring beyond my comfort zone—but strangely close to it as well.

At home, I couldn't stop thinking about the consequences. Will the dangers be too big on another new peak? Will I make the right decisions? Will I ever wake up with my wife, drink coffee and go swimming in the river again? The questions terrified me, but I knew that as I made each step, the greatest awareness would heighten my reasons for living. All that I feared losing I would cherish that much more.

Rene Daumal wrote in *Mount Analogue,* "Alpinism is the art of climbing mountains by confronting the greatest dangers with the greatest prudence. Art is used here to mean the accomplishment of knowledge in action. You cannot always stay on the summits. You have to come down again.... So what's the point? Only this: what is above knows what is below, what is below does not know what is above." A year later, *eager to know* more, I went back to China.

Thick smoke eddied and escaped from the inner walls of a monastery in the middle of the Gongga Mountains. Young monks practiced their prayers. I'd just met talented Colorado climber Peter Inglis. Already we sat sipping yak butter tea, concocting a new adventure. We'd heard about an unclimbed 5,965-meter peak in the remote Shaluli Shan. We had a low-res picture taken from afar and another hand-drawn map on which the peak wasn't even labeled.

Joined by my wife Michelle and two other friends, Jay Janousek and Julie Hodson, we traveled to a small outpost in the Mt. Genyen wilderness. From there, we took our best guess and started hiking. Sparsely populated evergreens lined golden hills and crystal rivers. We could have been in my home state's Okanogan Valley. Here, just a few semi-nomadic Tibetans moved their black tents and their yaks across the fertile landscape. After three days and thirty miles, we were pretty sure that the huge mass that appeared before us—ice, rock and hanging glaciers sweeping toward a small pointy summit—was indeed the mountain we'd set out to find.

Three days later, after two attempts, a mixed couloir, a steep snow face and an Alaskan-like knife-edge ridge, we were absolutely positive we'd hit our mask. Pushing through the mist of whirling clouds, we arrived at the summit and confirmed that it was the highest point west of Mt. Genyen and the second highest in the Genyen Massif. It was also the most isolated place I'd been. Hills and valleys billowed in lightening horizons of brown, then gray. There were few big mountains here; no reason for hordes of other climbers. Only Mt. Genyen's sharp ridges and seracs stood out against the eastern sky. In November 2006, our friends Charlie Fowler and Christine Boskoff were killed attempting a new line on the peak.

Peter took a breath and spoke softly, "They died in the most beautiful place in the whole wide world. And

we miss them dearly." Initially when Charlie and Christine went missing, no one knew where to search for them. All we'd heard was that they were exploring the mountains of Western Sichuan, looking to climb new peaks.

Since the mid-nineties, Charlie had been the preeminent alpine visionary of the region, climbing new peaks under the radar. In the Qonglai Mountains, I'd continually come across his first ascents. I was awed at the breath of his exploration, most of which he'd done alone. In 2005 with Chad and Stoney, I planned to repeat one of his solos, on the jagged rock pyramid of Yangmantai. Partway up a knife-edge rock ridge, I felt how out there he'd been: by himself, over fifteen years ago, with none of the modern development that now sprawls toward the base.

That day, not completely acclimatized— and suddenly aware of the sheer scale of the endeavor—my partners and I bailed. But as I looked back, above the tourist-jammed boardwalk and meadows, Charlie's peak soared up, pure and untrammeled as if it had never been climbed. Thanks to his leave-no-trace alpine style solo, our attempt had felt like the first ever. Charlie had left this experience for us and for the future. It was his gift.

David Gottlieb traversing snow flutings of Kang Nachugo.

Climbing the upper section of the West Ridge of Kang Nachugo.

Kang Nachugo in the Rolwaling Himal

"Let's go. When do we leave?" David Gottlieb replied when I invited him on my next new-peak expedition in 2008. David and I had worked together as climbing rangers at Mt. Rainier National Park. Skinny and tall, with crazy hair and a straggly beard, this outspoken eccentric was the only person I knew who would drop everything at a moment's notice for an adventure. He'd never done anything like what I proposed, but from dirtbagging through Eastern Europe, to jumping trains across the US, to wandering into the farthest reaches of the Amazon, David was a natural explorer.

The international search for Charlie and Christine had brought the Chinese government's attention to mountaineering activities in Sichuan, resulting in stricter regulation and stiffer fees. David and I began to look toward other regions. We found our next objective in plain sight. It seemed incomprehensible: a gleaming pyramid peak that forms the visual centerpiece of a major Nepal Himalayan valley, the Rolwaling—one that hundreds of climbers and trekkers pass by every year and that rises over 3,000 meters above the valley's only Sherpa settlement—remained unclimbed. Somehow, Kang Nachugo had escaped notice.

As David and I hiked up from Beding to the walled town of Na, the deep valley opened to floods of sunshine and massive peaks, pastures and small stone huts. None of the giant hotels you see in the crowded

parts of the Khumbu; no signs advertising hot showers, Internet, fresh pastries; no locals talking on cell phones; no televisions blaring Hindi movies. Overhead, Kang Nachugo showed its giant south face. To ease our trepidation, we imagined out loud what it would be like to be there, two insignificant dots in vertical waves of long snow flutings, making their way across the broad face, under a menacing overhanging cliffband. Just at the edge, we thought, of acceptable risk.

We set up our base camp next to a tiny shack. As we organized our gear, a voice spoke in accented English, "You'd better have at least 600 meters of fixed rope for that face." The colors of the Sherpa's clothing camouflaged him against the landscape. Old sun-bleached expedition garments suggested he'd once worked as a guide or a porter. "Yeah, the wall is over 1,800 vertical meters high," I said. The Sherpa frowned. "And we only have two seventy-meter ropes," I said. He nodded and smiled. Although the valley had been settled for hundreds of years, little was known about the singular peak that appeared through the mist above. People had shown up before, saying they'd climb it. No one had gotten anywhere.

Heavy snowfall ended our first attempt. We rapped down the unsheltered face in a mad panic. Back at base camp, we looked up: layers of fog obscured the peaks. A dusting of snow covered valley floor, bringing depth and contrast to the stone walls and huts.

I thought about the Sherpa who blended into the background before he spoke. David and I were so focused on our direct south face that we hadn't noticed anything else. This same mountain provided drinking water, irrigated crops, cleaned clothes, grazed yaks, offered materials to build homes and high perches to establish sacred places—chortens, mani stones and prayer flags. It felt like time to pause and take in that wider view.

Late evening, during a three-day festival in Beding, we watched older Sherpas perform their traditional line dance outside a temple. Younger men and women danced endlessly around a small, dank room to contemporary Nepali music with a techno beat. Fluorescent light flickered through thick smoke. Earth-fermented chaang flowed freely, and soon David and I were dancing and singing, too.

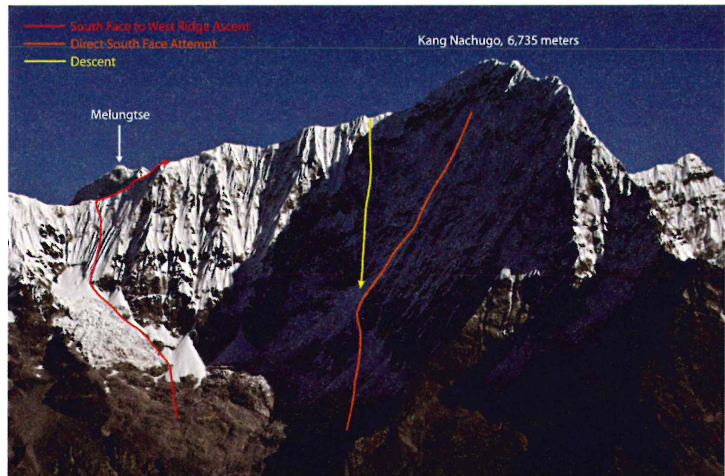
The next morning we shared rice porridge with the monks and town elders. They told us about crossing passes to trade in Tibet, guiding foreign clients up peaks like Parchamo and Ramdung, ascending to unknown high points for meditation. Their explorations of these mountains sounded like a broader way of life, not a story of extremes. No matter what they might have thought of our chances, with wide smiles and toasts of early mornig chaang, they gave us their blessing for a successful ascent.

To the West Ridge

Wispy Clouds rose and sank, revealing separate parts of our attempted route: a bivy, a crux rock section, a high point. We still desired it. But after spending time with the monks we saw more than just that one line. Winds shot banners of snow off the upper ridges, flowing like sun-bleached prayer flags. The west ridge caught our gaze. We'd be safer on a crest, however long, narrowed and heavily corniced it appeared.

We left at midnight. Partway up a snow bulge between us and the ridge, I placed a single screw. David simuled behind me in a deep runnel. Fifteen meters higher, my tools began to slide effortlessly through bhat-like snow. I carefully trenched out a foot platform, shoved in the tools up to my elbows, leaned my body against the snow for more friction and inched up slowly.

Thirty meters of unconsolidated steep nothingness. When I finally arrived on the crest, I sat crouched for



The South Face of Kang Nachugo. Lines indicates (L to R) are; the successful West Ridge, the descent route and the direct South Face attempt.

several moments, unable to move or belay, gazing north. For weeks in the valley we'd been surrounded by green and rain. At last we could see in all directions. My eyes readjusted to a desolate moonscape. Framed against the distant Tibetan plateau, Menlungtse appeared alone, an island of tumbling glaciers—raw, fresh and real, unlike anything I'd encountered before.

Our original objective would have been a cool direct line. But the south face would have contained us in its bowl until the top. During the entire climb we would have seen nothing except snow flutings and rock walls—then just a thirty-minute summit view. Climbing along this ridge instead, we could let our gaze linger over the whole landscape, slowly, for the next three days. For that 360-degree beauty alone, we'd made the right choice.

Midafternoon: one misplaced shovel stab, and I was looking down a in the snow thousands of feet toward Tibet. A small snowball fell into the void. A ten-meter section of cornice collapsed off the ridge, just inches from our one-picket anchor. "Well that sucks," David said. "Welcome to ridge climbing in the Himalaya," I said, half-stunned. "OK, no bivy here," David said, after a minute, "Let's roll."

Eventually we found a spot more comfortably away from the ridge. In the morning, we wove our two ropes in and out of ridge flutings and snow formations that twisted into ornate gargoyles. Across the wild landscape, more silver flutings rose gracefully to austere peaks. Jagged ridgelines interwined with precipitous rock cliffs. Churning glaciers carved at the valleys. Each intricate feature was unique, changing with time.

Mesmerized, I made a foot-deep through in the backside of one of these flutings, slotted the rope and pretended that this protection would hold. I came to the rim of an abyss. A large snow feature dropped off abruptly back to the ridgeline. As I down climbed, it got steeper and steeper, until there was no longer a place to step. I shoved my axes into sugar snow and lowered my body into the chasm. My crampons brushed against a small cornice. It fractured off, leaving my feet dangling in space. I pulled back up, thinking again about the balance of consequences and failure. About three meters down to my left a snow bench stuck out: How do I get there? I looked behind me. Plenty of slack in the rope. I turned slightly, pushed out—and leapt!

Approaching th Lunag Glacier to Jobo Rinjang.

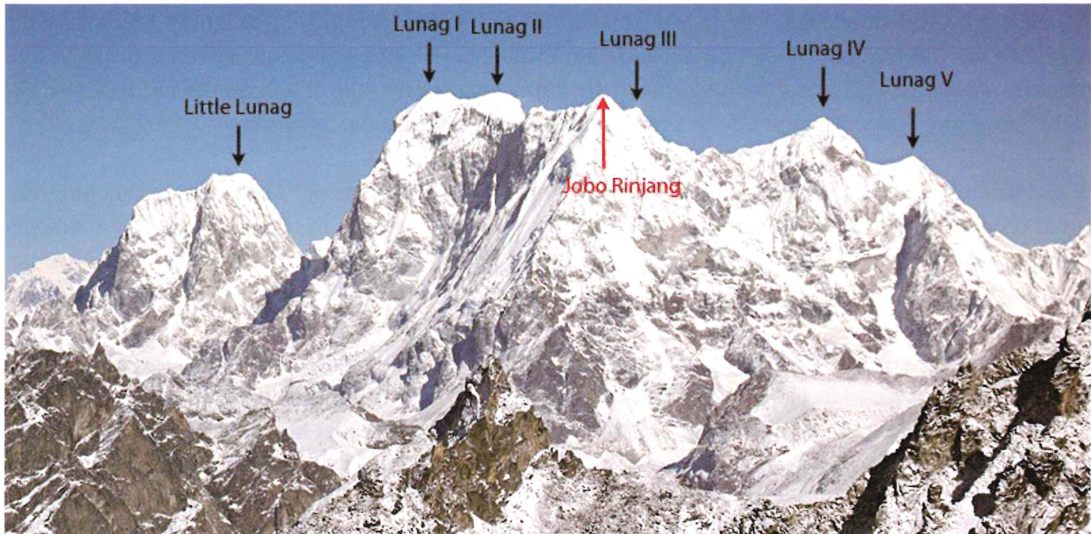
I kept going a little to let David have his own discovery, then I yelled a few hints at him. He deftly executed the same sequence. We said nothing about it, but we must have been thinking the same thing: How the hell are we going to get back up that? An endless array of snow flutings and snow walls. *We'll take them one at a time*. On the narrower sections, to avoid a sugar snow, we tried to pick the closest path to the cornice break-off point as possible.

David, now at ease with the Alaska-like terrain, took the lead. He casually shouted over his shoulder through his icy beard. "Heads up for a Fairbanks belay!" If you fall off one side, I'll jump off the other. "Do you think there's a word for it in the Himalaya?" I laughed.

Just shy of the apex, David coiled the rope. Hand in hand we walked the final thirty feet together. Northward, a giant massif rose out of the surrounding valleys: a series of forsaken peaks, pointy summits, terrifyingly steep facades. One had that classic pyramidal appearance, with a snow-capped summit and steep rock walls below. We both stared. I spoke up, "I wondered if that's been climbed?" David said, "I don't know, but if everything goes well, I'm all in for another adventure."

For the next twenty-four hours, high winds and a ground blizzard buffeted our tent. We were running out of food and fuel; we had to get off that ridge. There were no established rap anchors, fixed ropes or wanded descents. Only the certainly that we didn't want to climb down the way we'd come up. And all the unknown other sides from which to choose.

As we began rapelling down the south face, it soon became obvious we were over one of the large



Lunag Massif from the distant showing its unclimbed summits and Jobo Rinjang.

Jobo Rinjang from the east. The route takes the steep ice wall in the center of the photo.

A bivy on the summit of Jobo Rinjang with Everest, Lhotse and Makalu in the background.

cliffbands. *Oh well, have to make this work now.* Stacked blocks teetered, ready to slice our rope. Our single knifeblade gone, I welded a small Stopper into a tiny fracture with my ice tool, careful not to damage the delicate wire. A little bounce test: *This will have to do.*

Twenty rappels and some down climbing later, we dragged ourselves into base camp. During our hike out, a gap opened in the foreground peaks. Once more we sighted that distant summit to the north, comenting it into our consciousness.

Jobo Rinjang; a mysterious mountain

Jobo Rinjang was the name I found as I searched through Internet-land for the mysterious mountain. Mislabeled and with the wrong elevation on maps, it had nonetheless been attempted. How much longer would it stay unclimbed? Four and a half months later, March 2009, David and I were again boarding a plane to Nepal.

As the rocks slid down the ice, David kept climbing. It was comforting to know that whatever happened, he was the cool-headed person to whom I wanted to be attached. Snow and dusk began to fall, running into a dark whiteout. I found a spot to dig a tiny ledge in the side of a bergschrund. From below, a dim headlamp and slow, heavy footsteps revealed dreary and arduous breathing.

"I'd definitely register that as one of the harder days of my existence," David said, clutching the small propane stove for extra warmth. I nodded. My mind drifted back to those penultimate moments before summiting Mt. Dangou. It had taken every last bit of mental energy to get here, too, but this time, there were no second thoughts. The way had presented itself smoothly and without doubt.

In the morning, I approached David at one belay to see him simply standing on a small kicked-out ledge, diligently bracing, ice tools feebly pushed into useless snow. "Looks like just a couple more pitches before we crest over. I'll keep going if you don't mind," he said. I was happy to let him lead. His tall, wiry frame and large feet made climbing this type of terrain somewhat easier: longer reaches and a bigger platform to stand on the disintegrating snow crystals. Yet I marveled at something other than the landscape: David and I had just spent 100 of the last 200 days together, and we were still friends.

Drawing on last autumn's experience, we climbed quickly, without protection. We pitched our tent right on the summit of the 6,778-meter Jobo Rinjang. Evening alpengrow showed its full glory on the high peaks of Cho Oyu, Everest and Makalu. In my mind I made out the hordes of people clamoring up thousands of meters of fixed line to the well-trodden top of the world. I gazed toward other places around the range and pictured alpinists attempting hard lines and new terrain in all different styles.

My focus returned to where we were, and I felt that same rush of emotion I had experienced four years earlier. But now, bivying on the summit, I had much more time to immerse myself in that convergence of ever-accumulating experience, that culminating bird's-eye view.

The mountains around me were like living things, their elements growing and diminishing, dying and changing. Even the known ones renewed themselves over time. I thought about Charlie and Christine. About my wife and the river. About the longing that would awake, again, and lure me toward inevitable future climbs. All it takes is some imagination and a good climbing partner. The last seven months had only deepened my curiosity. I'd learned by now of many more unclimbed technical peaks. Each one unique. Each one, from a distance, not quite picturable. Each one a glimpse into the unknown.
I won't tell you their names or where you might trace a line. This blank spot in my story is my own gift, for you: things I've left invisible. To see. Look carefully, so you'll remember.

Compiled from the article of the same title, originally published in ALPINIST No. 28, Autumn 2009

Summary of Statistics
Mt. Dangou 5,465m, Qonglai Mountains, China, first ascent of the peak, 13 October 2005, Chad Kellog, Stoney Richards and Joe Puryear. The route was christened Savage Op (5.10d, 650m).
Pt. 5,965m, Shaluli Shan Mountains, China, first ascent of the peak, 22 October 2007, Peter Inglis and Puryear, mid-fifth class, 60 degree, 1,000m.
Kang Nachugo 6,735m, Rolwaling Himal, Nepal, first ascent of the peak, 12-17 October 2008, David Gottlieb and Puryear, West Ridge (85 degree, 1,900m).
Jobo Rinjang 6,778m, Rolwaling Himal, Nepal, first ascent of the peak, Gottlieb and Puryear, 20-25 April 2009, South Face (75 degree, 1,700m).