

DYLAN JOHNSON

## **First Ascent of Se'erdenpu 5592m, Qonglai Mountains, Sichuan**

### **Via Northeast Ridge – Route “Headwaters”**

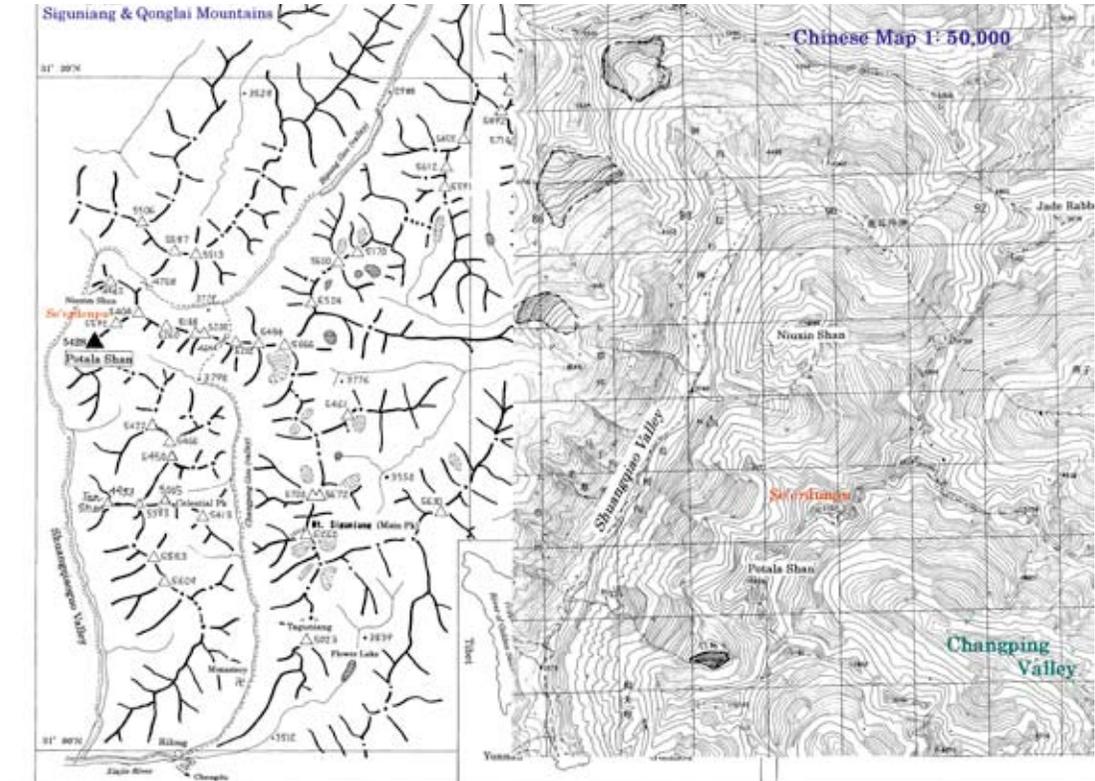
Funded in part by both a Mugs Stump Award and a Lyman Spitzer Award from the American Alpine Club, Chad Kellogg and I reached the unclimbed summit of China's Se'erdenpu on September 13th after three attempts during the expedition. The peak forms the high point above the heads of two river valleys; the Changping River flows out off its east and south faces, and the Shuanqiao River descends from its north and west flanks. The north and west faces form a 1,600m granite wall, and are remarkably accessible. One can take a public bus on a paved road to within a couple hours walk of the base. The much more remote south and east faces are some 1,200m high and are composed of a combination of alpine big walls and complex alpine mixed terrain.



Potala Shan 5,428m (left) E face & Se'erdenpu 5,592m (right) SE face (Tamotsu Nakamura)

Chad and I had been hoping to make an attempt on the iconic granite peak since we made a reconnaissance trip to the north face in 2008 after climbing Siguniang. Se'erdenpu, the Yeti - or “Savage Peak,” as it's translated, bears distinct resemblance from the north as the head and face of a “savage.” Our original plan was to ascend the unmistakable five thousand foot nose of the yeti. The compelling line and ease of access has attracted somewhere around a dozen expeditions over the past decade.

Upon our arrival, we learned that three expeditions were attempting the line in August and September alone. The first of the three teams, from Japan, had been rescued after incurring rock fall injuries the week prior to our arrival.



Our itinerary called for acclimatizing in the adjacent Changping Valley near Siguniang until mid September, and we promptly set to work establishing an advanced base camp at the head of the valley under the east face of Se'erdenpu. As we did so, our liaison officer informed us that a Polish team arrived at the base of the north face nose. The abandoned Japanese tent still remained a third of the way up the nose. Storms arrived and deposited the first autumn snowfall on the peaks during the first week of September.

The new snow and crowds on the north face encouraged us to remain focused on the mixed terrain on the east face. After much deliberation, we went to work on a line on the northeast ridge. On our first attempt, we found solid granite rock climbing, going free at 5.10 for the first 250m. At nightfall, we rapped back to our high camp, left a line fixed over the crux slabs and set the alarms for a predawn start. The skies deteriorated throughout the night and by 4 AM half a foot of new snow had fallen.

Four days later we returned amid marginal weather, but psyched to be pushing higher, gaining acclimatization if nothing else. As we gained the northeast ridge proper, Chad took the lead and we were pleasantly surprised to find straightforward passage up the ridge in a hidden gully, offering 300m of snow and mixed climbing up to M5. The weather was poor and visibility nearly nonexistent but we continued upward. At 5,200m the gully terminated at a small col and a series of complex



Se'erdenpu 5,592m E face with climbing line



Chad on treverse pitches

gendarmes guarded the upper mountain. In the waning daylight, I led up a steep gendarme drytooling a thin crack. While trying to clear snow and find some gear, my tool ripped and sent me hurling off backwards for my first real alpine whipper. A bit shaken up, discouraged and without any bivy gear, we decided to rap again and try tomorrow. For the second time in a row we awoke to several inches of new snow by morning. Again, we cached our food and fuel and made our way down the slippery talus back to base camp.

After one rest day in base camp, my wife Jenna called in a splitter forecast. We repacked the kit and set off at 1:30 PM up the fifteen miles of swamps and talus to the base of the route. As we approached the head of the valley, we agreed that we didn't want to risk getting stopped by a sudden storm again and thought the best strategy would be to simply begin climbing as soon as we reached the base. After a quick brew stop at our high camp we started up the route at 11:30 PM. The 5.10 slabs were running with snow melt, so I was forced to do some interesting A2 by headlamp instead. We had left a line fixed over a section of the second pitch, but nervous about the rope's integrity after the past storm, I free climbed most of the wet and snowy pitch "protected" by a Ropeman on the fixed line. Without a moon, the Tibetan skies were thick with starlight as we climbed through the rest of the rock walls and up the mixed gullies reaching our high point at dawn.

After breakfast we opted to traverse under the gendarmes to the left and completed four difficult 5.10 C2 horizontal pitches to reach more simul-climbing terrain on the upper mountain. The weather was holding and we completed the upper 300m to the summit ridge in a single pitch. The summit ridge offered spectacular cornice walking and easy mixed climbing accompanied by giant raptors flying below. Reaching the summit at 2:30 PM we enjoyed unmatched views of the entire range. For the first time I was able to organize the complex topography of the Quonglai mountains in my mind. It was my third summit in the area, Chad's seventh.

The descent went relatively smoothly, the traverses were difficult to reverse but we sorted them out with a few pendulums and sideways raps. Our lead line suffered two debilitating core shots, and on our final rap our tag line became hopelessly stuck behind a flake on an overhanging rappel. Despite our best efforts to retrieve it, we regretfully had to leave it behind. We arrived at our high camp at 11:30 PM, after 34 hours on the go.

We named the route "Headwaters" after its obvious position in the hydrology of the region, a gesture

to the Yeti himself, and as an acknowledgement of the alarming glacial recession underway here – a major threat to the crowded Chinese lowlands extending thousands of miles downriver.

A few days later, we (along with John Dickey), nearly made the first ascent of a stunning granite spire of 5,086m near Se'erdenpu. Unfortunately, in the dark, after 600m of absolutely classic free climbing, I had to turn back some 25m from the summit faced with steep, unprotectable arête climbing and no bolt kit. On the descent we destroyed our only remaining lead line.



P5,086m with climbing line



Se'erdenpu N face and climbing line on NE ridge

Chad and I broke down base camp and returned to Rilong, the village below the peaks, and learned that the Polish team was also hit with rock fall on the north face and was in a hospital in Chengdu. It sounds like they are okay, but have broken hands. Meanwhile, a Chinese team had replaced them and started up the north face nose route. We checked the weather and were discouraged to see that our windows appeared to have ended for the foreseeable future. The odds were stacking up against us; all our ropes were destroyed, another team was already on the north face objective, and the weather forecast was grim. With the first ascent behind us and piles of work awaiting us at home – we are both business owners in the building trades, Chad contracting and myself designing – we pulled the plug and came home a week early.

We would like to extend our sincere thanks to the American Alpine Club, the Mugs Stump and Lyman Spitzer climbing grant programs for their generous support of the expedition. For us, these exploratory trips in Asia would not be possible without the financial support of the grant programs. The expedition was also supported by the Four Sisters Film project; keep your eyes out for their impressive work.