

The first ascent of Ren Zhong Feng

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In November 2009 Carsten Cooper-Jensen, Martin Ploug and I went to Sichuan to attempt an ascent of the unclimbed mountain, Ren Zhong Feng.

Martin and I originally had other expedition plans, but one evening in the Danish Alpine Club Carsten came over to us and showed some photos from the Sichuan province in China taken by the Japanese explorer Tom Nakamura. Carsten told how easy the approach was for the many unclimbed peaks in the area and quickly persuaded us to change our plans. We were first looking at Xiarudoji but we could not get a climbing permit since it is a sacred mountain for the locals so we then looked at Ren Zhong Feng.

Two weeks before we were to travel from Denmark, I got a surprising e-mail with a link to a Hungarian expedition blog, which described in detail their ongoing ascent of “our” mountain!

Through a Chinese agency we had purchased an expensive “unclimbed mountain” climbing permit so initially we were pretty unhappy that we had not been told that this mountain had also been offered to another expedition. If the Hungarian expedition reached the summit, we would have spent a lot of unnecessary money, but nevertheless we agreed that it would not make any difference to our ascent of the mountain. Whether one is the first or team number one thousand takes nothing from the experience, assuming all previous expeditions have climbed in alpine style and therefore left no traces on the mountain.

One week before departure to China, the situation took a new turn when I received an

e-mail from a Hungarian journalist who asked me for some information and photos about the mountain for an article about the Hungarian expedition that was reported missing and assumed lost! I was stunned and quickly discussed the situation with Carsten and Martin. We agreed that we would continue no matter what had happened, but we could not know what the consequences of their disappearance would be for us before we were in Sichuan.

I had previous experience with climbers who had perished on routes shortly before I started up an ascent. This had happened on both the Eiger and Denali and I had also experienced losing a climbing partner while climbing a route in the Mont Blanc Massif. Repressed incidents came to mind and I went about in the following days contemplating things. In the end, there was no doubt that we would have to go and try the mountain. No mountaineer would ever ask other climbers to stop just because they experienced an accident, but we shouldn't expect understanding from non-climbers. The old question of why we expose ourselves to "unnecessary risk" would surely pop up among friends and family who heard about our trip. No matter how hard you try, you cannot explain to them how the challenges and experiences that come with mountain hazards actually make it worth the effort. It is one of the things that can only be understood by experiencing it for yourself.

We arrived in Chengdu in China and were greeted by our interpreter and liaison officer. The day was spent purchasing supplies and then we drove towards the mountains. Two days after we left Denmark we stood in the base camp at an altitude of 3200 metres. This was only possible because a huge dam was under construction at the foot of our mountain, so there was a very well-developed road system in addition to full mobile telephone coverage in base camp! The first few days were spent finding a route

up the valley to set up our first camp. This was, however, hampered by the verglas that covered everything in a thin layer of ice. This forced us to use crampons from day one in terrain that we otherwise should have been able to walk through in trainers. We found a small platform in the moraine at around 3900 metres and set up tents there. It had been snowing and fog since we arrived, but we had seen from Tom Nakamura's expedition report that the weather usually cleared by mid-November, so we were confident that the weather would improve. After a few days in the first camp, we continued to our second camp at 4500 metres altitude, which was located behind a small rock tower.



After a few days of acclimatisation we were ready to cut ourselves free of the camp and continue towards the top in pure alpine style using bivouacs. However, a quick count showed that we did not have enough gas for the rest of the trip, if consumption continued as it had thus far. We had based our calculations on how long new gas canisters would last, but we got refilled gas in China that did not last as long. We discussed the situation back and forth and finally Carsten said he thought that Martin and I should continue alone. He had felt that he was walking much slower than us the whole trip and did not want to hold us back.

There was no point in arguing about the

decision, because he was quite right that our chance of reaching the top would be significantly improved if we were only two with this amount of gas and we would move faster up the mountain. It was certainly a hard decision for Carsten, who had found the project in the first place, but it was the only solution if we wanted to climb the mountain. The following day Carsten left camp and went down to base camp, where the two locals had plenty of supplies, including two huge cylinders of gas, so at least they did not have to starve down there.

The weather was beginning to improve, so Martin and I started up the east face the following day. The first challenge was to cross a steep slope of frozen dirt that we had to climb with ice axes. Tired and dirty we came over on the other side and into the couloir we had chosen to lead us further up the east face. At the beginning the snow conditions were quite good, but the higher we got, the worse the conditions were with loose and unconsolidated snow. We had to dig our way through a thick cover of sugary snow, which made climbing slow and tiring. We climbed without using a rope to move faster and climbing was not harder than WI3 in a few sections.

When it began to get dark we scouted for a possible ledge for our small bivouac tent. Despite one and a half hour of digging, we did not managed to make room for more than half of the tent in the steep loose snow slope, so we had to squeeze together. We had climbed 700 meters in altitude in a day and we could feel the day's hardships. We chose to rest the following day, so we were better acclimatised for the upper mountain, which we suspected had the hardest climbing on the route.

After the rest day, we were well recovered and ready for whatever might come. The climbing was fairly hard from the day's first pitch. We took turns leading mixed terrain on

loose rock and we often climbed on shale that was so rotten that we could use our ice axes directly in the rock as if it were ice. The only problem with this was that it was completely impossible protect this type of climbing. At other times, however, there was sandstone with good cracks to put in protection.

After another full day of climbing the darkness crept up on us. We could not see anywhere that was suited to set up a bivouac and certainly no place that was large enough for our tent. We ended up half sitting in our sleeping bags with the rope tied to our anchor on some random ledge at around 5500 metres altitude.



The next day we climbed the last couloir on the east face and were now on the very exposed north ridge. The storm that met us on the ridge was overwhelming, so we had to try to find a sheltered bivouac on the east side. Luckily we found a good bivouac site after an hours scrambling along the ridge. There was a small ledge system a few meters below the ridge on the east side behind an obvious rock tower. Unfortunately the ledges were so



narrow that there was only space for one person in the tent, so Martin chose to sit on a small ledge in the wall. We were now on the ridge at around 5675 meters and had seen the summit ridge. It looked as if there were no more than 100 metres in height to the summit and we thought that we could reach the top in a few hours the following day. We could not quite make it fit the official height of the mountain of 6079 metres. We would have to follow the ridge for a mile to the summit, but cornices and bulletproof ice on the west face would make the climbing a slow affair. The first part of the climbing on the ridge consisted of easy scrambling on rock, but then we would have to traverse steep ice on the west face, because the top of ridge consisted of loose cornices.

We only had seven ice screws, so we used a running belay and placed protection for every 20-30 metres and swapped lead when we ran out of screws. We continued like this until we reached the first of two steep ice walls that bared the ridge and we had to belay properly on these. The first ice wall was only about 10

metres high, but consisted of a strange mixture of ice and snow, which made it very challenging to climb. Moreover, the wall was irregular and overhanging, so we had to traverse around the worst obstacles and put plenty of ice screws in, because it was impossible to know what could be trusted. The second ice wall that led up to the final summit ridge was also overhanging, but it consisted of closely packed styrofoam snow that made it easy to climb.



It was only after these last hurdles that it dawned on us that there was no longer anything that could stop us. After four days of climbing, poor bivouacs and constant stress over whether it was even possible to reach the summit by the route we had chosen, it was a liberating feeling to know that it is now just a matter of putting one foot in front of another and then we would be the first people to stand on the top of this mountain. First, however, we had to climb a couple of false summits from which we could see a new and higher peak behind every time, but eventually we could not go higher. The narrow ridge made it a challenge to get a summit photo, because the edge consisted of loose cornices which overhang to the east while the western side consisted of steep hard ice. We noted that our altimeters read 5820 metres and not 6079 metres, which was the official height of the mountain. We began the descent just as the sun was about to go down so we hurried, because the darkness would soon put



an end to our pace. We just managed to down climb the two ice walls and then had to put on the head torches and big parkas. It had blown all day, but now the wind picked up and the temperature was dropping fast.

We had to back climb every rope length of the ridge and the darkness and storm certainly was not making the front pointing any easier. After many hours of traversing steep ice fields we were back on easier terrain, where we could walk along the ridge. To save time we did not place any protection, but soon we reached another ice field and had to traverse it. Martin was just about to place the first ice screw for yet another monotonous traverse when he suddenly lost his balance in the wind and slid with full speed down the 1000 metre high west face. All I saw was that the beam from his head torch began to accelerate down to my left in the darkness. Instinctively I rolled off to the right on the opposite side of the ridge to counter the pull that would inevitably come when Martin's weight was caught by the rope. The impact force was not particularly hard, which might be because of

the rope dynamics and in part because Martin slid over some rocks which slowed him down a bit, but there was no doubt that I would have been pulled off the mountain together with Martin had I not acted as a counter weight on the opposite side of the ridge. I shouted to Martin that he should make an anchor, so I could down climb to where he was. Once I was down at his stance I asked how he was feeling and he ensured me that he was not about to go into shock. Apart from a trashed fibre jacket, some large bruises and strained tendons in one leg he seemed to be okay. We couldn't find any bivouac site in this place and did not have enough clothes with us to survive a night in the open, so we simply had to continue. After a couple of hours of climbing we were at last back at the previous bivouac site where we had left our sleeping bags. It was now three o'clock in the morning and after having melted some snow we fell into a deep sleep on our ledges.



Next day Martin's pain was too great to continue, so we took a rest day which we spent eating drinking and sleeping. The descent would take us a very long time, because we had only brought a single strand of 70 meter half rope, so we could only rappel 35 meters at a time. Martin was still feeling bad the following day, so he would descent on the full length of the rope and then I had to follow with two abseils or down climb after him when I could. However, this was further complicated by the fact that Martin had lost

his belay device and had to use an HMS-knot to descend. This belay method twisted the rope badly, so the descent was even slower. Additionally he had taken a lot of painkillers, which did not exactly make him faster. On one of my intermediate anchors, I ended up in shale which was almost impossible to protect and I eventually had to settle for a single piton in loose flakes that flexed under my body weight. I suddenly remembered why I hate to rappel. It is the only time where you must rely blindly on protection no matter how bad it may be.

Another memorable rappel was from an abalakov anchor made in 10 cm thick ice that started to crack under load. It was a huge relief when the last abseil was over and we were on ground that we could down climb. Our rack was largely used up and we had only 4 out of our original 15 pieces of protection left even though we had also used almost all of our slings for rappel anchors despite the fact that we had only placed one piece for each anchor. We found our tent at camp two long after sunset and could, for the first time in six days, sleep on a flat surface and did not have to keep the harnesses on.

The day after Carsten came up to help Martin down to base camp with his backpack and by the following day we had driven back to Chengdu from where we got on the first possible plan home. All in all we had had a fantastic trip. We had made a first ascent of a mountain by a challenging route, which we called "Lost to Ice" (M4, WI4, 1300m), and proved that real adventure still exists in an otherwise well mapped and explored world. What more can you ask for?