



AAC Publications

Himjung Style

The First Ascent of a Remote 7,000-meter Peak in Nepal

Himjung is located north of Annapurna and Manaslu in the Peri Himal range, and is nestled between Himlung Himal and the Nemjung peaks, surrounded by numerous 6,000-meter peaks with large glaciers and difficult approaches. Despite having been opened by the Nepali government in 2002, the 7,092-meter peak has been somewhat mysterious until now, not just to the Korean alpine community, but to the alpine world in general.

We had little information on how to reach the Himjung base camp, and simply relied on our map of the region and the locals of nearby Phugaon village to find our way. The journey from Kathmandu took 23 days. From the village of Besisahar, we hired a seven-donkey caravan to carry our 450 kilograms of gear and supplies. Base camp was roughly 16 kilometers straight up the Pangri Glacier. When we arrived on September 29, we were able to find traces of what appeared to be the base camps of two Japanese expeditions led by Osamu Tanabe (Gyajikang, AAJ 1995, and Nemjung, AAJ 2010). Here, Kim Chang-ho and I pitched our tents.

Measuring a direct line on our map, Himjung's southwest face appeared to be roughly eight kilometers from base camp; however, negotiating the moraine, glacial terrain, and the enormous, crevasse-laden ice plateau below Himjung and Nemjung added about four kilometers to the approach.

On October 4, we went out to inspect the wall and carry a load of gear and provisions up to advanced base camp. After passing through about three hours worth of moraine and lower glacier terrain, a 150-meter, boulder-filled couloir, and then more glacial terrain, we reached the midsection of the main glacier. We continued up the glacier to get a better view of our route. On this day, the weather was good, but sharp winds above smeared thin clouds across the sky, which seemed to be a sure sign of the Himalayan jet stream and winter season to come.

At 4 p.m. we were still slowly making our way through the rough confines of moraine and crevassed glacier. Realizing it would still take us much more time to reach the foot of the mountain, we decided to pitch our two-man tent for the night, using a shovel and ice axes to cut out a site among the fragmented rock and ice. The next day, October 5, we carefully crossed over jumbled and dizzying crevasses to advance to the upper section of the glacier. After two more hours of scrambling through a large snow basin, we probed the area where we would commence our climb, pitched the tent, and headed all the way back down to base camp.

Up until now things had more or less gone as planned. However, our intended route—up to the col between Himjung and Nemjung, then up the southwest ridge and southwest face to the summit and back the same way—now seemed much less efficient and safe than we'd hoped, because of a long row of rock pinnacles along the southwest ridge. Instead we opted for a more direct route up the southwest face.

After four days of rest at base camp, on October 9 we headed back up. This time it took us only a day to reach our bivy site (6,050m), where we packed up the two-man tent for the climb and replaced it with a three-man tent. We carefully chose our gear for the route, which included a 7mm, 50-meter Dyneema rope and a 6mm, 50-meter Kevlar rope. We planned to start climbing in the dark hours of morning, but that night the weather was not promising, with wind and snow throughout.

Clouds and fog made visibility difficult at best, and we decided to wait things out inside our tent.

We were up by 10 the following morning, and the weather seemed to have cleared a bit. As we prepared our gear we listened for falling rocks, trying to figure out the safest line. Finally the fog lifted enough that we could climb. "Let's get on with it!" we shouted. The lower section of Himjung's southwest face is mostly rock, and I began climbing with a tense body and racing heart, but gradually I regained my normal climbing composure and left the initial onslaught of emotions behind. The cracks were jammed with ice and snow, which made placing pro difficult. During our third pitch the fog returned, and as the visibility narrowed the difficulty of the climbing increased. By 2 p.m., frustrated but unable to continue, we retreated to our bivy site.

On October 11 we were up by 5, stirring up some Korean bean paste with veggies, yak meat, and alpha-meal protein drink. After reorganizing our gear to reduce even more volume and weight, we started out again, hoping for better weather. We zigzagged across the glacier basin to the wall, where we stepped into our crampons and I headed up again.

Although the average angle of the wall was about 80°, there were several overhangs to pass, but this time we found much better protection, using a lot of knifeblades and small cams. At one section, a wall of thin, fragile ice forced us left onto mixed ground. Occasional brief volleys of whizzing rocks passed by overhead, but the weather was improving. I had to sweep a lot of snow off the rock to find the right holds, and the gradual soaking of my gloves had become a worry, but luckily this was only a marginal concern in the end.

On the fourth pitch we encountered blue ice that was as hard as the front points we struggled to punch into it. This section ran to the end of the sixth pitch, and knowing it could rob us of an enormous amount of strength and energy, we tried to climb quickly. We had to use a lot of ice screws because we could not get them in deep enough, and we made our belay anchors in a rock wall on the left. Once we overcame this testy section of ice, we sped through the seventh pitch of mixed hard snow and rock, and then continued up a slope of hard snow. The wall was so calm and silent we could only hear the sounds of our breathing and the echoes of hammer on pitons.

A large cornice and wall of black and ash-gray rock wall guarded the way to the summit ridge. We planned to take a line that passed to the right of the cornice and followed hard snow up the middle of the rock wall. On the 13th pitch, only about a 60° slope, I heard the sound of falling rock from far above and peeked up to see a huge boulder headed straight for me. As the boulder hit the face above and fractured into pieces, I scurried in a panic about eight meters to my left to find some semblance of shelter and stuck my face into the wall, just as five half-body-size chunks whizzed by on both sides. An onslaught of smaller rocks pelted me and my pack, impossible to dodge. When the rope was struck, I felt certain it would yank me off the face. Afterward, I couldn't believe I was alive and essentially unharmed. I looked down at Chang-ho, who had been able to take shelter behind rocks at the anchor. "Are you okay?" I asked. He replied with a simple, "Yes," and we started climbing again with no need to say any more.

The wind blew, but now the skies were clear. To reduce our weight for this climb, we'd left our radios at the bivy site and we had to shout our signals. At times we used rope signals or just sensed from experience what the other person was doing.

We had planned to set camp just below a large cornice in the middle of the main wall; however the angle was very steep, and cutting out a platform would have been too exhausting and time consuming. We continued around to the right of the cornice, across an ice wall, and up an ice column to reach the cornice top, hoping to pitch camp there, but the position was not safe and so we continued upward.

Above the 14th pitch, Chang-ho took over the lead, and we simul-climbed about 300 meters above the cornice, until we spotted a long, horizontal crevasse. Here, at 6,770 meters, we pitched our two-

man tent in a 1.5-meter-high cave. We were able to anchor our tent to four snow pickets and stomp down snow for a platform, but we couldn't pitch the tent too deeply because of the unknown void inside the cave. There was only room for one person outside the tent, and we had to stay constantly attentive so as to not fall. A few snow showers slid our way along with a few falling rocks, but this site protected us very well. We melted icicles from the ceiling of the cave for water and could finally eat. The panoramic view included Manaslu, Annapurna, and Dhaulagiri, and gazing up the face we could see a faint indication of a saddle in the ridgeline.

The sun warmed our tent in late afternoon, and we soothed our exhausted bodies with a one-hour nap. Chang-ho and I cooked our freeze-dried rice and yak meat with Korean bean paste, and prepared ourselves for the night as the temperatures plunged. With a single sleeping bag to share, we shivered in discomfort as the winds raged outside and frost lined the thin tent walls. We were committed to each other, our single sleeping bag, and our will. We tried to sleep, curled up back to back to feed off each other's warmth, but to no avail. At 5 a.m., we boiled a basic soup and split a chocolate bar for breakfast. Space was tight, so Chang-ho went outside to gear up while I got dressed piece by piece inside.

By six o'clock we were off, with Chang-ho leading as we simul-climbed 25 meters apart. The dawn was bright, but no sunlight reached us yet, and it was extremely cold. For about 30 minutes I felt a nasty freezing pain in my left hand, and I put on a heavier glove only for that hand. I could hear Chang-ho's heavy breathing just ahead. From the ridge stretching up to the summit we could look past Himlung Himal to Ratna Chuli (7,128m) and other Himalayan peaks spread out to the north. Wind blew down the mountain into our faces. Just one pitch before the summit, we drank some warm water and divided another chocolate bar to eat.

Chang-ho handed the lead to me and prepared for the final belay. I postholed up to the summit, taking huge breaths, and finally straddled the knife-ridge top at 9:05 a.m. I hammered my axe into the summit snow and belayed Chang-ho up, and we cheered and embraced like little kids.

Summary

First ascent of Himjung (7,092m) by Ahn Chi-young and Kim Chang-ho (South Korea) via the southwest face, October 11-13, 2012. The difficulties were rated 5.10+ WI4 M6. They descended by the same route.

About the Climbers

Ahn Chi-young began his Himalayan climbing with the first ascent of the southwest face of Lobuje West (6,145m) in Nepal in 2005. A climbing instructor and guide, he has since joined many expeditions. Earlier in 2012 he climbed a new route on Teke-Tor in Kyrgyzstan with members of the Korean Alpine Club. Kim Chang-ho has climbed new routes in the Hindu Kush, Karakoram, and Himalaya, and has summited 13 of the 8,000-meter peaks without the aid of oxygen. He is the director of the Korean Student Alpine Federation and Seoul City University Alpine Club. For their first ascent of Himjung, Ahn and Kim received the seventh annual Asian Piolet d'Or.

Translated from Korean by Peter Jensen-Choi.

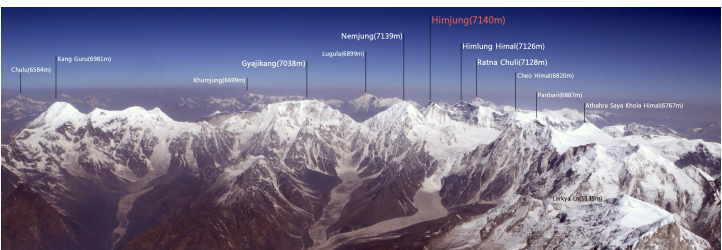
Images



Ahn Chi-young on the summit of Himjung. In the distance, under his right elbow, is Dhaulagiri. Farther to the left on the skyline are Annapurna, Gangapurna, and Annapurna III (right to left). In the foreground on the left is Gyaji Kang. The Damodar Himal is to his right.



Crevasse bivy high on the southwest face of Himjung.



A splendid panorama of the Peri Himal, looking northwest from the summit of Manaslu. The southwest face of Himjung, climbed by the Koreans in 2012, is out of view to the left. The official heights of certain peaks, as shown on the HMG–Finn map of the area, are: Khumjung (Khamjung), 6,759m; Gyajikang, 7,074m; Nemjung, 7,140m; Himjung, 7,092m; Ratna Chuli, 7,035m; Panbari, 6,905m.



Peaks above the Pangri Glacier. (A) Himlung Himal (7,126m), northwest ridge (Japanese route, 1992). (B) Himjung (7,092m), southwest face (Korean route, 2012). (C) Nemjung (7,140m), west face (Japanese route, 2009).

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