



## AAC Publications

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### **Kemailong (5,873m), South Ridge, Joining Hands**

China, Sichuan, Shaluli Shan

On October 1, Szu-ting Yi (Taiwan) and I climbed the ca 1,050m south ridge of Kemailong to make the first ascent of this striking granite tower in western Sichuan. [A photo of this mountain, labeled Peak 5,873m, was first published in *AAJ* 2011 p. 86. The south ridge faces the camera.]

Our expedition almost ground to a halt in the town of Lamaya, before we reached base camp, when horse packers discovered our climbing equipment. The problem was neither that of permit issues, nor the peak being considered sacred—it was about self-preservation. In 2006 Christine Boskoff and Charlie Fowler disappeared in this region, and before their bodies were discovered in avalanche debris on the slopes of Genyen, Chinese authorities imprisoned several Lamaya horse packers, merely on suspicion that they had somehow been involved with the Americans' disappearance. Six years later, horse packers were still fearful of helping climbers. To resolve the issue Yi and I wrote, signed, and fingerprinted a “waiver,” releasing the horse packers from any responsibility if we failed to return from Kemailong.

At base camp poor weather prevented us from seeing a route up the lower section of the peak, but when the clouds eventually parted, we pieced together a potential approach. Having already spent three weeks above 4,000m, while guiding in the area prior to the climb, we were able to make a quick ascent of a grueling boulder field and establish high camp at 5,200m to the south of Kemailong.

A midnight check revealed stars instead of the usual mist and hail, and at 7 a.m. on October 1 we began climbing three mixed pitches to the saddle at the base of Kemailong's south ridge. Moderate 5th class on the broad crest led upward for 270m, until the ridge narrowed and became more challenging. Featured granite kept the grade below 5.10 for the next four pitches. Above, we simul-climbed for another 360m on ground similar to the east ridge of Wolf's Head in the Cirque of the Towers. Mixed pitches, a false summit, and several rope lengths past a series of snow-covered gendarmes led to the final pitch, a stout overhanging hand crack (5.10) leading to unprotected but easier face climbing.

We summited at 5 p.m., the weather already deteriorating. Gusty winds, hail, and electrical discharges zapped us as we scrambled from the top. We had planned to descend the route, but with all our metalwork humming, we opted for the steep, unknown east face. Heavy snow compounded the difficulty of finding rappel anchors on the 700m face, but after several stuck ropes and leaving most of our rack on the 13 rappels, we stumbled into high camp at 1 a.m. on October 2. We named the route Joining Hands (V 5.10 M5), because it was our combined logistical and climbing skills that allowed us to succeed.

This was my third expedition to the Shaluli Shan in the last six years, and I was amazed at the changes. New roads and electrical lines now crisscross this remote region, which had previously been the domain only of nomads and their yaks. Improved roads and new airports have dramatically shortened approach times, but weaving through the bureaucracy, nationalism, and social and cultural diversity of China remains challenging. We would like to thank the AAC for providing financial assistance with a Lyman Spitzer Cutting Edge Award.

Dave Anderson, AAC



## Images



The south ridge of Kemailong, showing the line of Joining Hands.



Szu-ting Yi leading on the blocky granite of Kemailong's south ridge.



Szu-ting Yi on the south ridge of Kemailong.



Szu-ting Yi low on the south ridge of Kemailong.

## Article Details

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