



Linzhou Taihang Canyon, Merry Christmas

China, Henan Province

OVER CHRISTMAS OF 2016, pictures of a large icefall strongly resembling a Christmas tree circulated on Wechat (a free messaging and calling app widely used throughout China). It took He Chuan and Liu Yang five days to determine the location of this formation, and when they finally arrived on January 7, 2017, they discovered the icefall had collapsed.

The once-frozen waterfall was some 700km from Beijing, southeast of the town of Linzhou in Henan Province (36°06'N, 113°49'E). Together with photographer Lie Feng, the climbers scoured the Taihang Range to the north and west of Linzhou but found no solidly frozen icefalls, due to the warm winter temperatures and the haze covering the east and center of China. However, during their drive back to Beijing, they found a 110m icefall that they climbed at WI4, and then, close to Beijing, a 100m mixed route, which they graded M8 WI5+

On January 26 a picture of the Christmas-tree icefall appeared once again on Wechat, along with a message that two Chinese climbers were off to attempt it the next day. These climbers failed on the first pitch due to a huge flow of water between the ice and rock.

He, Liu, and filmmaker Lie Feng were back in Linzhou the very next day, and they decided to make their attempt on the 31st, at the end of a four-day period of cold weather.

The start of the climb featured a pillar only 2m in diameter, but the most dangerous part was discovered 5m above the belay at the end of the first pitch: a large window in the ice revealing the waterfall underneath. "I was shocked when I saw the gap and the amount of water flowing behind the window," He said. "There was no solid ice [there], so I moved to the 'branches' that grew onto the rock and helped to keep the whole tree standing. These afforded good ice for protection, but there were many icicles dangling from cauliflowers on the second and third pitches."

Liu led the 50m third pitch, showering blocks of ice toward He. A 10m section of overhanging thin ice below a large cauliflower formed the crux. The fourth pitch, also 50m, was a 3m pillar—an amazing and sustained lead. There was no solid ice at the top, where the waterfall flows from a deep valley, but He was lucky to find a small tree growing from a crack to use as an anchor.

Once on top, the two climbers walked up the valley for 500m until they could exit and descend for 45 minutes to return to the car. He Chuan has spent the last three winters ice climbing in Norway and Canada, and says that Merry Christmas (140m, WI6) is the most beautiful climb he has seen, and also the most fun to climb. [Editor's note: In early 2018, Canadians Will Gadd and Sarah Hueniken repeated this climb.]

Lindsay Griffin, with information from Xia Zhongming, Germany

Searching for Christmas Tree from Lie Feng on Vimeo.

Images



A high aerial view of the vertical ice formation in the Linzhou Taihang Canyon area, climbed in January 2017 and named Merry Christmas (140m, WI6).



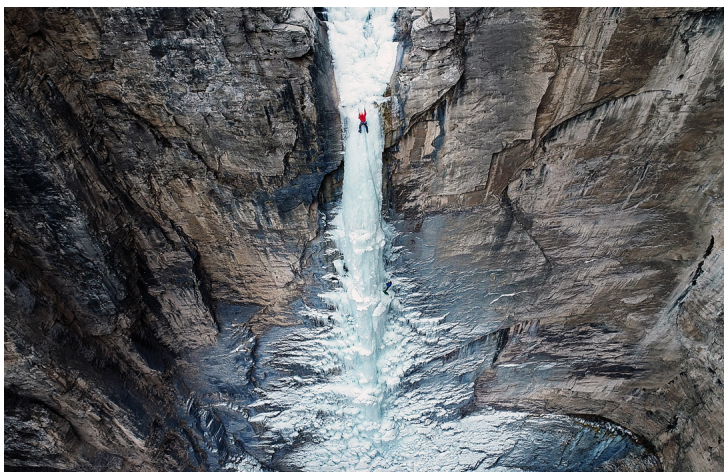
An aerial view of Merry Christmas (140m, WI6) in the area of the Linzhou Taihang Canyon.



He Chuan on the top pillar (pitch four) of Merry Christmas (140m, WI6) in the Linzhou area.



He Chuan, belayed by Liu Yang, on pitch two during the first ascent of Merry Christmas (140m, WI6) in the Linzhou area.



He Chuan leading the fourth and last pitch of Merry Christmas (140m, WI6) in the Linzhou area.



Spot the climbers in the aptly named "Christmas tree" ice formation in the Linzhou area of Hennan Province. The first ascent of this 140m route took place in January 2017; it was named Merry Christmas and graded WI6. (The climbers are right in the middle, above the snow slope.)



Incredible Ice in China

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