



Minya Konka, Alpine-Style: A New Route from the North

China, Sichuan, Daxue Shan

Success often leads us to ignore many potential problems. Failures amplify our mistakes. — Li Zongli

In 2016, Li Zongli and Xiao Hai (China) attempted the north spur and northeast ridge of Minya Konka (a.k.a. Gongga Shan, 7,556m). Their planned route was significantly independent of the 1998 Korean ascent of the northeast ridge. The Korean expedition approached from the southeast up the Hailuoguo Glacier, climbed a steep, rocky headwall to reach the northeast ridge at 5,800m, and then continued up the ridge to the summit. The two Chinese approached first from the east and then the north up the Yanzigou Glacier, from which they reached the crest of the northeast ridge a little above 6,700m.

In 2016 they were more or less blown away by fierce winds at their 6,700m top camp, but learned a lot from this failure. In 2017 they went to neighboring Zhongshan Feng (6,886m), from which they could study their prospective route on Minya Konka. In 2018 they underwent a strict training regime: two months of strength training, two months of endurance, and finally two months of altitude preparation that culminated in sleeping on the summit of a 6,000m peak. Soon after, on October 12, Li and Xiao left Chengdu for Minya Konka. Accompanying them were Achu and Shi Wei, who would carry loads up to Camp 1 at 5,050m, then return to a lower camp at 4,200m, where they would remain throughout the climb.

After rebuilding a footbridge over a river, the team reached Haizi base camp (3,700m) on the 14th. On the 15th it was a long day to reach Camp 1, where they arrived at 7 p.m. It was misty and dark, so it was unclear whether they were in the same location as 2016. Li's sleeping bag and other warm clothing had become wet at lower altitudes, and he was worried there would not be an opportunity to dry them. He and Xiao left at 6 a.m. the next day and climbed a steep 800m slope onto a plateau below the north spur, where they pitched Camp 2 at 5,800m. They arrived by 11:30 a.m., and it was sunny—both were relieved to be able to dry all their gear.

Next day they left at 5 a.m. and spent 11.5 hours climbing a north-facing spur to 6,700m. This is generally a steep snow slope [quoted as up to 75°]. In 2016 they had found a flat section that allowed them to pitch a tent relatively easily, but in 2018 it was gone, and they had to construct a platform out of a 50° slope. They dug more than a meter into the slope before securing the tent with snow and ice gear.

Leaving at 5 a.m., they cut up to the northeast ridge, where they met intermittent wind and snow. At 1 p.m. the weather became more unstable, and at 2 p.m., in difficult visibility and high wind, their will began to waver. They persevered, and at around 4:45 p.m., by which time the visibility had dropped to less than 10m, the slope ahead became flat. Soon there was no higher place to go.

Anxious about navigating down the ridge in such poor visibility, the pair set off quickly. The descent became a struggle, and toward the end Li was resting almost 10 minutes every five steps. His eyesight began to fail, and at some stage in the night, when they thought they were close to camp but couldn't find it, they had to take shelter from the intense wind. They found a couple of large

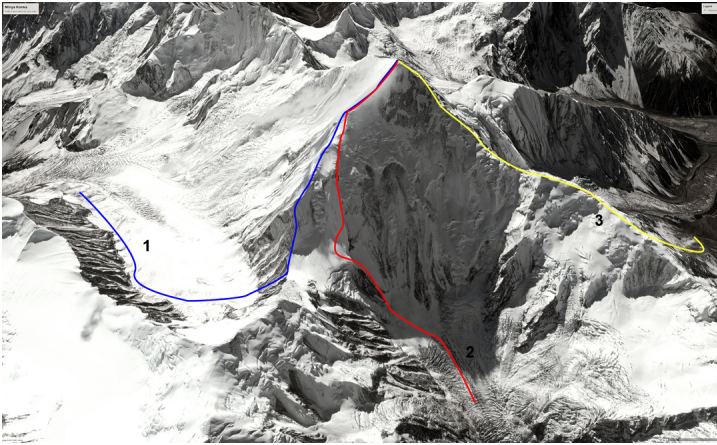
rocks at around 6,800m and sat behind them until the morning. When dawn finally broke, Xiao found the tent surprisingly quickly. He escorted Li down to the tent and the pair spent the remainder of the day resting, eating, and drinking.

At 8 a.m. on the 20th the two continued the descent with some difficulty. Fortunately, Li's eyesight began to improve, but they still managed to drop a pack before reaching Camp 2 at 5 p.m. The two had hoped to make it all the way down to Camp 1, but, too exhausted to continue, they spent the night at Camp 2 and then reached the lower camp after dark the next day, met by their two friends. On return to base camp Li Zongli had lost 6kg of body weight.

This was likely the ninth ascent of the mountain, seven of which have been via the northwest ridge, the route followed by the American team that made the first ascent of the mountain in 1932. While it is not clear if any ascents of the northwest ridge have been achieved in pure alpine style (perhaps one or two), the 2018 Chinese ascent is certainly the first alpine-style new route climbed on Minya Konka.

– Lindsay Griffin, with information from Li Zongli, China, and Xia Zhongming, Germany

Images



Minya Konka (7,556m), showing: (1) 1998 Korean Route up the northeast ridge, approached by the Hailuogou Glacier; (2) 2018 Chinese Route up the north-facing spur and northeast ridge, approached via the Yanzigou Glacier; and (3) 1932 American Route on the northwest ridge.



Xiao Hai a little above Camp 3, close to the crest of the northeast ridge on summit day.



Xiao Hai on steep snow between Camps 2 and 3 on the north spur of Minya Konka.



Minya Konka from the north, showing the Chinese Route up a spur to the northeast ridge. Camp 2 was at 5,800 meters and Camp 3 at 6,700 meters. The right skyline is the northwest ridge, followed by the American team that made the first ascent of the mountain in 1932.



Looking up the north spur of Minya Konka, with Camp 3 (6,700m) marked. The summit is the dome-shaped top up to the right.



The 1998 Korean expedition's Camp 3 at 5,300m on the upper plateau of the Hailuogou Glacier. The Korean expedition climbed to the broad col on the northeast ridge directly above the tent via difficult

ice and mixed terrain. Supplied by Kim Dongsoo



Korean climbers during the first ascent of the northeast ridge of Minya Konka in 1998.

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