Rowaling Kang Shar, First Ascent, Via Southeast Ridge

Nepal, Rolwaling Himal

Our expedition reminded me of the beginning of the 1990s project "The Russian Way: Walls of the World." This was not so much in terms of events but how its mood and energy resonated in my heart. As with that previous project, during which we aimed for a series of big-wall first ascents, the Rolwaling expedition was our own idea. Ten years ago, I started studying painting, and it was thanks to a commission that I was able to organize the expedition. Someone ordered a painting, and my fee for that 60x90 cm work, painted in oil, became our basic fund to cover expenses for the ascent. My partner, Aleksei Lonchinsky, also scraped a bit of money together and brought new ropes, slings, and carabiners.

My friend and former trainer Aleksandr Pogorelov once let me have a look at his dissertation, which studied how the level of risk in mountaineering relates to motives and to the overall synergy of the expedition. He used the expeditions of well-known mountaineers as examples. Different motives corresponded with different levels of risk. The lowest risk was found in expeditions with good synergy and a well-thought-out idea, even if the ascent was extremely difficult. Good motives included a keen interest in the project and, in the process of climbing, integration with one's surroundings and intense concentration, without irrelevant, mundane thoughts. Inconsistent and inadequate motives and preparation, and especially doubts, can lead to accidents and even tragedy.

The idea of climbing the southeast buttress of Rolwaling Kang Shar (6,645m; 27°53'53.57"N, 86°31'29.51"E) came to me a long time ago. I knew from AAJ 2018 that a Japanese team had previously climbed Rolwaling Kang (6,664m), the west (main) summit, in 2016, by its south face.

This mountain reminded me of the double peak of Menlungtse. I climbed the north side in 2005 with Carlos Buhler and Nikolai Totmyanin. Although we missed the summit by 300m, it remains one of the outstanding achievements in my life. We spent five days on that route, climbing alpine style, and on the sixth descended toward the base. Menlungtse is also in the Rolwaling but on the Tibetan side of the border. I hadn't been to the Nepalese side.

What attracts me to mountaineering most of all is the feeling of presence that comes with high-risk situations, and the escape from a trivial, discursive way of thinking created by iterations of the "algorithm's" tired thought-forms.

Of course, with whom you go to the mountain is also very important. Aleksei and I had already made the first ascent of Phungi (6,538m; AAJ 2018). He's a good, dependable friend on the mountain. Our motives were similar: We climb because of our interest in new discoveries.

The entire expedition took 20 days, with a challenging approach across several Himalayan glaciers, followed by the ascent along the southeast buttress. Alpine style and free climbing were our top priorities. We had a careful look at the buttress in advance, mapped out our proposed bivouac spots, and put together a tactical plan that we managed to follow to the letter.

We started from base camp on October 19 with everything we needed for advanced base and the route above, and crossed the Drolambo Glacier in eight hours. On the 20th, we overcame a rocky barrier on the lower part of the Rolwaling Glacier, then found a way through some crevasses and

started ascending steep snow to the foot of the ridge. We made Camp 1 that evening. The next two days were difficult but interesting. Aleksei led on rock and mixed terrain, I on the ice and snowy are tes. The rock was loose and broken, but generally frozen together. We didn't fix lines or use ascenders, and we were able to free climb the entire route.

On October 22, we bivouacked at 6,550m in a cave below an ice column on a snow are te. The next morning, we reached the summit of Rolwaling Kang Shar after following a sharp, mushroom-shaped are te of untrustworthy snow. The final ridge leading to the summit was curved like a samurai sword.

We had two choices for the descent. Plan A was to follow the route of ascent; plan B was to traverse the ridge to the west summit and go down the Japanese route. The latter turned out to be really bad right away: narrow with overhanging cornices on both sides. It would have been easy to fall off the ridge, and after crossing the initial section we turned back and started down the southeast ridge instead, at first along the line of ascent, then more to the right. We reached advanced base camp that evening. The route had given around 1,800m of climbing with difficulties of 5/5+ M5.

After a great ascent that has kept you in the flow, feeling all the ups and downs, and if your mind has not yet dried out from high-altitude dementia, new thoughts always appear on what is most important. In fact, these are more like sensations, such as when you no longer need an explanation of a sacred text but learn to understand it instinctively. A kind of highly concentrated spiritual practice.

In Rose of the World, drafted in a Soviet prison in the mid-20th century, Daniil Andreev writes, "Snow-covered mountain ranges, lifeless, inhospitable, and barren in their sterile magnificence, represent but one of two hemispheres, or one of two closely integrated planes. The other plane...is a land of embodied spirits of stunning majesty, the monarchs of snowy peaks. This plane is called Orliontana. It is Orliontana radiating through the three-dimensional rock and ice that evokes the feeling of august calm, power, and resplendence. Snow-covered mountains evoke these feelings in all who are even slightly susceptible...."

It is the beauty and cosmic magnitude of the worlds described by Andreev that help our perception to expand, and the primordial "unshadowed" aspect of our consciousness to appear.

— Yuri Koshelenko, Russia, translated by Kat Tancock

Images

Aleksei Lonchinsky on Rolwaling Kang Shar, the east top of Rolwaling Kang. Behind and left is the northeast face of Chobutse.

On the southeast ridge of Rolwaling Kang Shar.

Rolwaling Kang and the 2023 Russian route to the east summit.

Rolwaling Kang from the south and approximate line of the route to the east summit.

Looking east from Rolwaling Kang Shan over the Drolambu Glacier to the distant Everest-Lhotse Massif. The double-topped rocky peak center is Pamalka (6,344m) and to the left the snowy Raungsiyar (6,224m).

Rolwaling Kang from the southeast. (1) Top section of the 2016 Japanese route to the main summit.

(2) The 2023 Russian route to Rolwaling Kang Shar.

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