Unclimbed peaks of Ganggeqiaji immediate south of Yushu town, Qinghai Province

Unknown mountains massif Ganggeqiaji
Qinghai Province in China

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Ganggeqiaji (5,752m) is the highest peak within the county of Yushu in Qinghai Province and has not been summited. It lies on the convergence of the Tanggula Mountain’s southeastern extent and northwestern edge of the Hengduan Mountains along the Batang Fault in very close proximity to the larger Ganzi-Yushu Fault where the infamously tragic 2010 Yushu earthquake occurred. It is part of the larger Jiangjiaduode Massif just south of the Batang Fault and Yushu airport, and divides watersheds feeding the upper reaches of the Mekong River to the south and upper reaches of the Yangtze River in the north.

The origins of the name Ganggeqiaji are from the writings of a local Tibetan Rinpoche lama who describes the peak in a book about local beliefs, koras, and customs in the area. The name Ganggeqiaji means “Eight Peaked Mountain” in Tibetan, supposedly from the many sharp peaks congregated together which makes the true summit hard to discern. Local herders in the area have different names depending where they live in relation to the summit. Tibetan herders below the south face call the peak “Zhalongbao” and on the northern side call it “Rigaode”.

Directly 10km to the southeast lies another prominent glaciated peak over 5,500m believed to be the brother peak of Ganggeqiaji. This peak is much more well known by locals around Yushu and called Jiangjiaduode. For local Tibetan Buddhists, Jiangjiaduode holds an
important spot in local tradition and holy Saiwencuo lake below the south face attracts groups of Tibetans every year to do a holy kora around the lake. Some even preform a kora around the peak of Jiangjiaduode itself, taking a complete day from dawn to dusk nearly entirely above 5000m on rocky terrain. While Ganggeqiaji’s is taller, because of Jiangjiaduode’s importance to local tradition it seems fitting that this massif, which unmistakably protrudes from the Batang plans rising higher than anything else in sight, be called the Jiangjiaduode Massif.

There is one Chinese map that marks the peak Ganggeqiaji as “Baosuose”, but the origin of this name is unclear, and it is not known or recognized by any of the locals. Therefore for the purpose of this expedition and respect for the locals who helped us along the way, we decided to use the local names and to the best of our knowledge were the first time these names were recorded in Mandarin or English.

The total kora route was 70km with 3,300m of elevation gain over six days.

Ganggeqiaji Kora Route

Day 1: Dirt Road – Suoercuo Lake, 10km +548m

After hiring a car and driver from Yushu, we made the over hour’s drive from our hotel out past the airport and onto dirt roads that lead into steep mountain valleys to the south. Following raging rivers and passing tents of nomads we finally turned into the valley that would start our trek and the initial ascent to towards Jiangjiaduode.

It was just Phillip and I, my childhood friend from the US who had just graduated from law school and was looking for an adventure. I had lived in China 3 years by then and was beginning a year-long photography project throughout China’s greater Hengduan mountains. I had set my eyes on the peaks of the Jiangjiaduode Massif swirling in the clouds from far off
a year ago while travelling with a friend and hiking the hills of Yushu. Now, after days of meticulous planning on Google Earth and acclimatization day hikes – most of which Phillip had to miss for having an upset stomach after drinking raw yak milk in a herders tent soon on his arrival – we were ready to go.

Yushu (Jekungdo) Jeku Monastery

Once in the main valley directly to the east of Jiangjiaduode we bid farewell to our driver and set off for Suoecuo, the higher of two lakes at the end of the valley that we were planning to camp at that evening. The weather was fair, classic Qinghai summer weather that threatened to hail as much as it did beat down the sun’s rays through thin atmosphere burning any exposed skin. We past a few nomads tents and approached the first lake, Kanzhaocuo, which to our surprise had a series of incredible cliffs and waterfalls on the far end. After some photos we skirted around on the more navigable northern side to gain a few hundred meters of elevation for our first test of ascending with packs on and quickly reached over 4800m and the first boulder field of many to come.

Out before us stretched the beautiful milky turquoise Suoersuo with a small island in the middle, surrounded by a few small grassy pastures dotted with late yellow flowers. We navigated over the boulder field and set up camp on the near end of Suoersuo, looking across the lake to the ridges that adjoined to the massive hanging glacier off Jiangjiaduode. We studied the ridges as we cooked dinner, trying to plan our route for the next day and spot the pass we would take – we eventually decided on a small notch with a prominent rock spire
protruding in the middle of it above a small glacier on an adjacent peak next to Jiangjiaduode that we guessed to be around 5400m.

Day 1 – Kanzhaocuo (1) above (2) below
Day 1 – Suoercuo (2)

Day 1 – Dir Road valley
Day 2: Suoercuo Lake – Witch’s Spire Pass – Yak Pass – South Face Camp, 14.5km +790m

Day 2 – Dawn (above) South face camp (1) (below)
Day 2 – South face camp (2) (above) To Yak Pass (below) To Yak Pass (below)
Day 2 – Witch’s Spire (1) (above) Spire (2) (below)
We woke up and left before dawn with the knowledge that it would perhaps be our longest day and we needed stable morning weather to navigate and get over the first pass. In the dark we navigated with headlamps around the south side of Suoercuo, and the sun rose as we left the grass for the rocky scree terrain scattered around the foot of Jiangjiaduode. Slowly we picked our way up a boulder field to the terminus of the small glacier we had seen the night before at around 5100m to find another small lake that had been iced over on Google Earth. We skirted to the right of the glacial lake, and although we didn’t have crampons the glacier’s grade was not steep and we opted to hike up the glacier rather than take on more boulders. Finally, at around 5200m we left the glacier and scrambled up the last of the boulders up to the pass and spire we had seen before.

We measured the pass at 5230m, and although we were excited to have our first climb behind us and discover that there indeed was a path down the backside, our hearts sank at the sight of more boulders. The scree was not easy, fun, nor “soft”, there was no easy way down but to pick a slow route down to the bottom of the valley. The rock spire we had seen the day before was a clear marker for the pass, but ominous sticking out in the grey sky resembling a witch’s hat made of rock, so we named the pass “Witch’s Spire Pass.” After a quick lunch and rainstorm we made it back down into the next valley on the west face of Jiangjiaduode and slowly climbed up to a low, grassy pass of 5010m that showed clear signs of many yak tails being herder across this terrain.

Finally, as we crossed Yak Pass we left the valleys of Jiangjiaduode and got our first sights of Ganggejiaqi’s stone south face. The south face was sheer, with some very steep glaciers hanging to the cliffs, but it was mostly dark grey cliffs against an even darker sky as afternoon thunderstorms brewed overhead. We made our way across bumpy fields broken by multiple boulder patches, setting up camp at 4850m below Ganggejiaqi’s south face just as a hail began to fall.

Day 3: South Face Camp – Blue Sheep Pass – West Valley Camp, 15.4km +588m

We woke up to a brilliant sunrise and clear sky. Hastening to pack up and move out towards our next pass before the afternoon storms built again, we headed off early towards a forebodingly steep granite ridge with a few dips that could hardly be called “passes” but would have to service. This pass looked the most challenging on Google Earth, but it was the only way to avoid a massive detour around a 50km valley to the north side of Ganggejiaqi.

As we approached the pass we saw several white-lipped dear and group of blue sheep jumping along the cliffs above us. Blue sheep are the favorite prey of snow leopards and with the rocky terrain we speculated there might be several in the region. As we approached the pass it quickly became apparent that these would be the biggest boulders of them all and it was slow climbing, often requiring both hands to navigate up, over, and around large rocks. Finally, after hours of scrambling like this with heavy packs we reached the pass at 5271m. Upon reaching the pass we were dismayed to realized we had actually climbed to the wrong one – we had originally intended to go to one more pass to the north but in the boulders we had somehow mixed up our direction and climbed to a higher pass which dropped down into a curving valley that would add a few more kilometers to an already long day.
Day 3 – Blue Sheep Pass (1) (above) (2) (below)
Day 3 – Blue Sheep Pass (3) (above) To Blue Sheep Pass (below)
We had little choice, however, and picked our way down the treacherously steep scree on the backside through more rain and hail, and finally reached the swampy valley bottom that was grassy and soft but mired by bog and mounds of protruding grass that threatened to sprain our ankles or soak our shoes at every step. Finally, after hoping through the mounds and swamp we saw our first Tibetans since we started at a small summer camp with a dirt road! We pitched camp around 4520m.

**Day 4: West Valley Camp – Jipucuo Holy Lake, 7km +200m**

This was a welcome easy day after the last three days of climbing. With the road right outside our camp all we needed to do was follow it to the main valley to the north of Ganggejiaqi and turn back in towards the east to begin the final stretch of the kora. Unfortunately, I thought we could take a short cut and cut through some bushes and over a small rise which ended in nothing but a bunch of scrapes, wet clothes, wasted time, and more marshy terrain. After that mistake we still managed to get back on the main road, trek past some bewildered Tibetan camps, and finally reach the end of the road that drifted off towards the large lake at the end of the valley at the foot of Gangejiaqi.

Initially, we were shocked to find that the last local Tibetan family before the lake wanted us to turn around and refused to let us pass. However after a lot of bargaining, explaining, showing of route maps and past articles about my expeditions and work they finally let us through and we were able to continue to the lake without being turned back so close to our goal. The lake was a gorgeous turquoise color, and we passed to it to make camp at 4508m at the end of the valley below Ganggejiaqi’s dwindling glaciers and at the foot of the beginning to our last ascent the next day.
Day 4 – To Jipicuo Holy Lake (2) (above) (3) (below)
Day 5: Jipucuo Holy Lake – The Notch – Glacier Peak – Red Rock Pass – NE Valley Camp, 8.3km +861m

We originally planned to wake up well before dawn to attempt the last pass ahead of us that we could barely make out form our camp. Instead, we woke up to thunder and rain in the dark. The terrain above looked too unknown to do in poor weather, so we went back to sleep hoping for better luck in a few hours.

When we next woke we found that the rain had gone, but fog was covering the peak and glacier around the pass that we had seen the day before. Not wanting to turn back or test our rations, we decided to try to make for the pass and see if we could cross.

Slowly the thick shrubs and bushes of the low elevation that concealed the threat of bears gave away again to scree slopes – this time the rock with a notable red tinge. The slopes here looked much more unstable than the others around the kora, and it seemed that they had likely all significantly collapsed during the 2010 earthquake. All of the scree was wet and slippery from the rain, and below the scree seemed to be a layer of slippery dirt and sand that made the slope even more dangerous and unstable.

We ended up ascending up a small but cascading stream, soaking our shoes in the process, but we found that the stream bed held the most stable rock of the slope.

Following the cascade we eventually reached the huge white glacier and ice sheet that we could see on Google Earth which spread out at around 5100m. However in the fog and spitting rain we could only see its terminus and decided to make for the ridgeline directly above it to the northeast as it looked like safer terrain that would lead us to a possible peak and way down. After another short rocky climb we reached a notable rocky notch surrounded by cliffs and rock spires that marked the beginning of the ridge which lead off into the fog. The notch was already at 5290m, our highest point yet on the kora.

We followed the ridge upwards and to the east, and eventually found ourselves on the narrow summit of an unclimbed peak at around 5421m. As luck would have it, the clouds soon began to part and much to our elation we soon got views of the whole ice sheet, one of Ganggejiaqi’s knife sharp glaciated peaks, and even a navigable route down to the next valley (in the fog all the routes down had seemed impossible).

After spending a good amount of time celebrating and bathing in the views on top of this high point, we descended the peak to the eastern extent of the glacier, cutting along the top of the glacier to reach the small pass we had witnessed in the fog break. This was the steepest scree drop yet, and below lay a sea of red rocks that spread down into the green valley far below. The red rocks were no easier to descend than the days before, but we knew at last we had done it an accomplished the last challenge of the kora.

It took longer than expected to descend to the valley, complicated that much of the slope we were on suddenly ended in cliffs, but when we finally reached grass we collapsed in our tent at 4727m just as another hail storm rolled in over Ganggeqiaji once more.
Day 5 – Red Rock Pass (above) To the Notch and Glacier Peak (below)
Day 5 – To the Notch and Glacier Peak (1) (above) and (2) (below)
Day 5 – To the Notch and Glacier Peak (3)

Day 5 – View of the Surrounding Mountains from Glacier Peak
The final day of our route was an uneventful slog down the last long valley back out to the east with the hopes of finding a Tibetan with spare motorbikes, driver, cell service, or whatever came first. Along the way we passed the entrance into another small valley at the base of Ganggeqiaji that seemed to hold another incredible lake worthy of exploring.

Half way down the valley we also passed some incredible natural hot springs on both sides of the valley that the Tibetans made pools of for bathing. Out of tired foolishness, or hunger, we skipped these, and it remains a great regret! Finally, after 15km of single track we reached a dirt road with a Tibetan camp who had a van that would take us back to Yushu for a few hundred RMB. We gratefully hopped in the van, and after a long bumpy ride back to civilization found ourselves back in the bustling and lit up lights of Yushu once more, a seeming metropolis compared to the stunning and fierce mountain wilderness that lay only less than 50km away.
Day 6 – Looking back towards Unknown Mountains (above) Valley Out (below)
Supplements by Tom Nakamura

Nakamura visited south of Yushu, Qinghai Province, three times, first in summer of 2018, and then in Autumn of 2018, in summer of 2019. He accessed to the Ganggeqiaji massif from west and east but could not reach the heart of the mountain massif where unknown and unclimbed peaks are clustered. These were unveiled by Kyle Obermann. Photos taken by Nakamura are shown in the following pages at random.
Aerial views of snow cladded 5000~5700m Ganggeqiaji S face south of Yushu, late November
Aerial views of snow cladded 5000~5700m Ganggeqiaji S face south of Yushu in summer

Center of Yushu town
Newly refurbished historical Jeku Monastery in Yushu

King Kesal statue in Yushu
Yushu Batang Airport at 3850m

Tibetan mastiffs in breading house near Nangqen
Road to Ganggeqiaji from Yushu

Ganggeqiaji massif north face
Meconopsis – Blue poppies