### Seasonal Stories for the Nepalese Himalaya

2010

by Elizabeth Hawley

## Spring 2010: First Woman to Summit All 8000ers Was Korean or Spanish? First Ascents of Two 6000ers and New Routes on Two 8000ers

Exactly who was the first woman to summit all 8000-meter mountains? A controversy erupted this spring over whether it was a South Korean or a Spanish Basque. Was it Miss Oh Eun-Sun, who scaled Annapurna I this spring after having claimed the summit of Kangchenjunga in May 2009, or was it Miss Edurne Pasaban who reached the summits of Annapurna I and Xixabangma this spring?

Miss Oh is sincerely convinced that she summited Kangchenjunga on 6 May 2009, and she produces a picture of herself standing on a rocky formation that shows more rock somewhat above her. She says she and her three Sherpas were perhaps ten linear meters or five vertical meters from the top, and she relies completely on the expertise of her head Sherpa, Dawa Wangchuk, who had summited the mountain three times before and led her to this point. If he says, as he does, that they were on top, then she has no doubt that that's where they were.

But there were debates in Korea last year about her Kangchenjunga summit claim at two meetings in Seoul last November and December. It was here in Korea that the controversy first arose—before the issue burst into a matter of worldwide interest this spring, when both she and Edurne Pasaban said they had now "conquered" all eight-thousanders. The first discussion was organized by three Korean mountaineering journals, which took no decision, and the second by the Corean Alpine Club, and after some discussion, the meeting also came to no conclusion.

However this August, after Miss Oh's success on her "last" eight-thousander, the CAC's chairman stated that "there is no evidence that she did not reach the summit. Accordingly, the Corean Alpine Club acknowledges she had successfully reached the summit."

But this decision is by no means universally supported. Her rival for the record, Miss Edurne Pasaban, also led an expedition to Kangchenjunga in the same season, and she is certain that not enough time elapsed between the time she saw Miss Oh's summit party battling strong wind to reach about 8450m (perhaps 136 meters below the top) and then move out of sight behind a buttress, and the time at which they reappeared. Others who were also on the mountain at the same time agree with Miss Pasaban, and a well known Korean, who does not want to be named, told me that her claimed rate of climbing that final day up the most difficult section of the route was "impossible."

The leader of another Korean team on Kangchenjunga at the same time as Miss Oh, Kim Jae-Soo, as early as June 2009, when his team had just returned to Kathmandu from a successful climb of Dhaulagiri I, produced two contrasting photos: a picture of his star member, Miss Go Mi-Sun, sitting in good snow, and Miss Oh's best evidence of her Kangchenjunga success, standing on rock with a

little snow scattered on it; the background is blurred, but some rock appears to be behind and above her.

Even one of Miss Oh's "summit" Sherpas, Nurbu, has disputed her claim. He told me in June this year that the summit party stopped about 150 meters below the top while, he himself climbed ten meters above them but was then called back to where they were, and they all descended from there. Why? He doesn't know. He said he had taken no photograph of his high point.

But Nurbu's testimony cannot be fully relied on: Miss Pasaban made a special trip to Kathmandu to receive some photos which she understood he would make available to her, but when she met him, she says he asked one million euros for his pictures. She paid him nothing and went home empty-handed. But Nurbu told Miss Oh's trekking agent that he had said to Miss Pasaban that even if she gave him a million euros he would not support her.

What would appear to be the most serious blow to Miss Oh, on 26 August this year the Korean Alpine Federation, the nation's largest climbing association, concluded that Miss Oh had not reached the top of Kangchenjunga. Following KAF's meeting in Seoul of six leading Koreans who had scaled the mountain (including Kim Jae-Soo), KAF's secretary general told the Korean press that "all of the participants shared the view that the landscape shown in Miss Oh's alleged photo shots throughout the entire ascent doesn't seem to match the actual landscape. They also agreed that Oh's previous explanations on the process of her ascent are unreliable."

One principal cause of their doubts was the timetable she presented about her progress in ascent on the final day. They judged her claimed rate of ascent to have been very unlikely given the bad weather and the greater difficulty of the route as she and her Sherpas moved ever higher, plus her the fact that she was using no supplemental oxygen.

Miss Oh's reported response: "It's a unilateral opinion." Miss Pasaban is quoted as saying, "This confirmation eases my mind."

The latest dispute raised by Korean journalists arose in late August, when it became general knowledge that Miss Oh carried in her pocket on summit day the flag or banner of her university. It was seen carefully placed on the route by a Norwegian summiter and also by Kim Jae-Soo, who picked it up and brought it down with him. Kim said he saw it during his own descent from the top on the same day as Miss Oh's claimed success; he judges it might have been about 150 meters below the top.

Could this mean that Nurbu Sherpa was correct about Miss Oh's having stopped at that altitude? If so, why did her head Sherpa, Dawa Wangchuk, who had summited the mountain three times before, tell her they were at the top? Was it because she had been climbing without oxygen and was clearly extremely tired, as she herself later said, and he feared she might totally collapse if she forced herself to push on higher?

So the questions remains, who was the first woman to summit all eight-thousanders? Doubt about Miss Oh's sincerely believed Kangchenjunga summit claim may never be dispelled.

Elsewhere in the Nepalese Himalaya this spring, while large numbers of inexperienced climbers guided by highly experienced Sherpas and professional expedition leaders, aided by supplemental oxygen, and lots of fixed ropes on well known climbing routes with three or four fixed camps, trooped up Everest and other 8000m giants, two small teams with no Sherpas, no oxygen, no fixed ropes and no one to guide them, tackled a pair of 6000ers that had never been summited before. They were two Americans on Takargo, a mountain in the Rolwaling area near Gaurishankar east of Kathmandu, and five Japanese on a peak called Kojichuwa Chuli, in the Kanti Himal range in northwestern Nepal. They accomplished the first ascents of their obscure mountains.

The Americans, David Gottlieb and Joe Puryear, had very little information about 6771m Takargo (shown on some maps as Dragkar-Go). No foreigners had been there before, no previous attempts had been made to scale it. They had a Google overview picture, and that was about all.

They had liked the looks of a rib on the west face, but when they got close to it, they rejected the face for its bare and unstable rock and unpleasant rockfall. They went round to the east side and chose a line up the east face of mixed rock and snow to the south ridge. After three successively higher bivouacs (they had no fixed camps) on various features of the face, they joined the summit ridge at about 6755m and navigated its series of sharp cornices to the three highest of them to make sure they stood on the very highest one. They had achieved the first success on the first ever attempt. It was 12 March.

The season's other first ascent was accomplished by five Japanese led by Michihira Honda on 6489m Kojichuwa Chuli. The mountain is in the northern Dolpo area on the border with Tibet, so they began their approach to it by a scheduled flight westwards to Nepalgunj and a chartered plane north to a new airfield near Rara Lake. From Tolcha airfield, they trekked east to Gamadhi and onwards to the Mugu Karnali River, east along the river to its junction with the Mugu Khola, and finally north along the khola (small river) to their base camp on the west side of the khola.

They moved eastward to the Nepal-Tibet border and down the east face of the north-south border ridge. From their last camp on the east (Tibetan) side of this face, three members traversed diagonally northwards to the summit, which was on the ridge. They had accomplished the first ascent of the mountain after the failure in previous years of two Spanish teams and one Japanese team, and had been aided by the experience and route advice of their compatriots, who had been there in the previous summer on a different route.

All of Nepal's 8000m mountains have been summited many times since 1950, but still some climbers are finding new routes to the summits, and new routes on two 8000ers were successfully climbed this spring.

One of Kazakhstan's leading mountaineers, Denis Urubko, made the first ascent of Lhotse via its north ridge. It is normally climbed up its west face out of the Western Cwm, the deep valley between Everest and Lhotse; it has been attempted occasionally via its formidable south face, south ridge or southeast ridge.

But Urubko pioneered a new approach to the upper reaches of the west face on 16 May by climbing for 600 meters along the north ridge from the South Col, which separates Everest from Lhotse and is 7900m above sea level. He then traversed for 1.5 km. below the ridge, avoiding the pinnacles on the crest of the ridge, to 8300m, where he entered the couloir on the west face. He reached the couloir in slightly less than four hours, and finished his climb up the normal route through the couloir an hour and a half later. He did this climb from col to summit solo, without fixed ropes or oxygen. He ended the day by descending the normal west-face route to the Cwm that afternoon.

Makalu is normally scaled by its northwest ridge. This spring a Ukrainian expedition led by Mstislav Gorbenko forged a complex new route via the south face, the southwest face, the west pillar and finally the northwest ridge. It combined the autumn 1975 Yugoslavian south-face route to 6600m, a new line up diagonally left to 7500m, and the spring 1971 French west-pillar-to-northwest-ridge route from 7600m.

The members divided into three climbing teams; there were no Sherpas helping them, and they used no supplemental oxygen. Each team worked on the route in 5-to-7 day shifts; while one group was pushing the upper end of the 3000 meters of fixed ropes (which they installed from 6000m to 7800m) farther, the other two were busy carrying loads to the high camps. Each group had 2-3 days' rest in base camp after each working shift. Just one of the teams succeeded in reaching the top; they were Sergei Bublik, Dmitri Venslavosky and Vladimir Roshko.

The principal technical challenge came at 6200m on a slabby part of the face to 7600m, a section that had never been climbed before. The rock is polished, protection is generally bad, and there are no ledges suitable for camps except for one tiny place at 7000m, where they put their camp 3 and where they fixed the only bolt used anywhere on the mountain. They also found the pitch up a 30-meter rock wall after joining the west pillar at 7700m presented difficulty.

A footnote to history: the Ukrainians found the body of an American who perished when beginning his descent from the summit via the west pillar route in the spring of 2004. Jay Sieger's body was discovered hanging from a rope at 7800m. At the time, it was believed that he had been killed when he fell and struck his head on a rock.

Chinese citizens started climbing in Nepal in the early 1990s, when a team of Tibetans came repeatedly to scale all 8000ers. They even climbed two border mountains, Makalu and Lhotse, from the Nepalese rather than their much more difficult Chinese sides. And a handful of Taiwanese and Hong Kong Chinese have come in the past decade. But mainland Chinese from the dominant Han ethnic group have been much newer arrivals to Nepal.

This spring they had definitely arrived. Six joined a team on the Nepalese side of Everest organized by a reputed European commercial enterprise and four of them summited, each with a Sherpa to assist him. An independent Chinese also reached Everest's summit from Nepal; he had two Sherpas with him.

But on Dhaulagiri I, an all-Chinese team met disaster. Three members died, two others had frostbitten feet, and all five survivors, including the leader, Yang Chin-Fang, were so completely exhausted that they had to be evacuated by helicopter.

Eight members, including their leader, and an equal number of Sherpas, summited Dhaulagiri about midday on 13 May by its normal northeast-ridge climbing route. When they set out from their highest camp at 7500m at 1:00 a.m., the weather was good, but it took them eleven hours to climb the final 670 meters to the top, and by that time it had become cloudy. During their descent, a snowstorm blew up and white-out conditions developed.

Apparently it was now each man for himself, and they scattered as they descended independently. One member and three Sherpas got back to their high camp between 5:00 and 6:00 p.m. Another member returned somewhat after 6:00 p.m., a third one got in after midnight, and two arrived only the next day with three Sherpas helping them.

Three members never reappeared. Two were seen falling to their deaths; the third could no longer walk and may have fallen too, or simply collapsed and never gotten up. Their bodies were not seen. It is likely that all of them were suffering from acute altitude sickness. Their leading Sherpa, also exhausted, was temporarily paralysed on one side, and he, too, flew from BC to Kathmandu by helicopter. The remaining Sherpas got back by their own efforts.

The team's leader, Yang Chin-Fang, had scaled Everest twice and Cho Oyu once, both from Tibet, and Manaslu in Nepal once, in the autumn of 2009. He was the leader of these teams, and there were no fatalities on any of them.

Just why his Dhaulagiri expedition came to grief is a matter for speculation, but they had climbed in their final push for the summit faster than most other Dhaulagiri I teams in recent years, and it would seem that if they were suffering from the altitude, they did not realize how extremely tired they were and so failed to turn around before the top as prudence would have suggested. Were they obsessed with a determination to reach the top on the 50th anniversary of the mountain's first ascent, 13 May, 1960?.

# Autumn 2010: Don't Want to Trek to and from BC? Just Hire a Helicopter Avalanching Took Lives of Several Experienced Japanese and Sherpas An Italian Fell on Rarely Attempted Route on Cho Oyu

A helicopter whirling overhead on a flight to an expedition's base camp area is no longer only the rare event of a serious emergency situation. This autumn helicopters evacuated:

- (1) climbers who had failed to factor into their schedules the time probably needed because of periods of bad weather and avalanching, or required to climb a slightly different line to ascend or descend their mountain, found their inflexible time limit was up, and simply had to catch their previously booked flights home;
  - (2) climbers who had serious (but some not so serious) medical problems;
- (3) a leader who was in a great hurry to go from base camp to the village of a Sherpa who had had a fatal accident in order to break the tragic news to his wife as soon as possible:
- (4) two mountaineers who had gotten to a tough spot on their seldom-climbed route and had no means of getting themselves down to base camp since they had neither brought the equipment or prepared the escape route necessary to get them off the mountain when the route ahead had become impassable;
  - (5) expedition members who just didn't want to walk when they could ride.

Next spring a prominent organizer of commercial expeditions is changing hotels. He will no longer book his groups at a friendly comfortable hotel in central Kathmandu, but will switch to a huge impersonal establishment belonging to an international chain far from the city center. He explained that this is the only hotel with a helipad; his clients are wealthy, and choppers taking them close to their mountain and back is what they want.

Don't walk when you can ride means one can't be bothered to trek in or doesn't want to "waste" perhaps five days' time. But surely one loses a bit of acclimatization and a lot of local atmosphere that way.

Perhaps one day high-altitude helicopters will be brought to Nepal to whisk people to Everest's summit, touch down for a few minutes while passengers take great photographs, and then deliver them to a spot where they can resume a pleasant trek in the area.

Some day, will the next step in making climbs as convenient as possible be to carry people through the nerve-wracking labyrinth of Everest's Khumbu Icefall? Or rig aerial ropeways to avoid the great effort of surmounting and descending Everest's final obstacles, the Hillary Step on the Nepalese side and the Second Step on the Tibetan side? Will this trend eventually lead to uphill and downhill tourism on the most popular mountains?

#### Dramatic and tragic Ama Dablam evacuation

David Goettler, a German, and Kazuya Hiraide, Japanese, both experienced and talented climbers, found themselves in a very tight spot in early November when they attempted to ascend Ama Dablam by their own variation of an unusual route up the north face to the north ridge instead of the standard southwest-ridge route. They climbed in alpine style with no fixed camps, no Sherpa helpers and a minimum amount of gear.

They crossed the north face diagonally to the left and onto the north ridge at 6400m on 6 November. They continued up the ridge for 100 meters, but at 10:15 a.m. a snow avalanche hit them and carried them down ten meters. Snow conditions on the ridge made it impossible to go higher. But the snow was very loose on the east face and on the north face the snow was like sugar.

They did start down the north ridge, but at 6300m they encountered cornices and seracs. It was impossible to descend the ridge any farther. They did not have the equipment to fix ropes to rappel down the face. "We were trapped," said Goettler. They could neither retreat nor advance.

They bivouacked here at a small col on the ridge and phoned their Kathmandu agent to send a helicopter. They worried that night that a chopper might not be able to reach them because a strong wind was blowing from the west. Luckily, however, the wind dropped the next morning. Above and below their bivouac there were tall seracs, and Hiraide moved to the top the serac below them to fix one of their two 50-meter ropes with a snow bar for their rescue. They decided that Goettler would be taken off first and all their gear, including tent, food, fuel, the two ropes, medical kit and phone, would be left with Hiraide.

A helicopter circled them from the east in a light breeze at about 9:00 a.m., and its skids touched down on the top of the serac. It carried Goettler to a nearby village, Chhukung. David had been rescued.

Now Hiraide waited at the top of the serac for his turn. The chopper came 30 centimeters from him, but his instinct told him that it would be too dangerous for him to board. At the moment when he was hesitating, the helicopter slid onto a col very close to him "with a bang and a roar." Black smoke billowed out, and there was a strong smell of oil. (Hiraide did not actually see the chopper's rotor touch the serac because he was crouching in the snow.) The crew, pilot Sabin Basnet and engineer Purna Awale, were killed.

On the following day, the 8th, Hiraide was successfully plucked off the mountain. At 7:00 a.m. he heard another helicopter's engine, and as it approached, he gestured to the pilot that the top of the serac was a danger to the rotor; the pilot flew in several circles to check conditions and informed Hiraide that they could not pick him up where he was on the serac. He gestured that he would climb down 50 meters to a flat place. He was rescued 15 minutes later and, with all their gear, flown to Lukla. His thumb was slightly frostbitten. Two men had lost their lives.

#### First ascents

The season saw first ascents of three 6000m mountains widely scattered across Nepal. Mt. Changla (6563m) is in northwest Nepal, northeast of Mt. Saipal and on the border with Tibet. In the middle, in Mustang district, is Yakawa Kang (6482m), at the Thorong Pass near Muktinath. And in the far northeast is another border mountain, which the tourism ministry calls Pabuk Kang (6244m): it is unnamed on many maps but probably is actually named Yangma or Yanma.

#### Pabuk Kang

An eight-member Australian team led by Tim Macartney-Snape trekked a long way to get to their remote 6244m mountain and to climb it in strict alpine style: no Sherpas, no fixed camps above ABC, no bottled oxygen. After they had arrived at base camp at 5185m, there were several days of snowfall, but on the 2nd of November six climbers began their summit push by returning to ABC. On the 3rd they made their first bivouac at 5850m south of the south ridge. They continued their climb the next day with another bivouac at 5900m at the foot of the ridge, a recce up the ridge to 6050m and return to the second bivouac to sleep.

On 5 November at 4:00 a.m. the aspiring summiters left their second bivouac, but only two climbed all the way to the top. David Barton and Macartney-Snape followed the south ridge to a steep rock step at 6100m, which was very technical; the two managed to turn the step on the left. Above it was "perfect classic deep snow." They were on the summit at 2:00 p.m., and then descended to a saddle at 6050m at 3:45 p.m. and, while they were in the area, climbed a small-unnamed peak (Pt. 6128m) that the step led to. Finally they rappelled down steep rock to rejoin the others in their high bivouac.

#### Changla

Four Japanese, leader Hirofumi Kobayashi, Seiya Nakasukasa, Yuta Shibayama and Naoki Yamaguchi, were not certain about which line would be the best for them to follow to reach their 6563m summit, so after approaching Changla from the west, they made a reconnaissance to find a good climbing route. They stayed in a temporary camp for four or five days while observing the southwest face. Their decision was to get onto the north ridge, which delineates the border with Tibet, from the southwest face of this ridge. (The face is on the Tibetan side of the border.) Their temporary camp was actually at the bottom of this face.

They returned to base camp at 4700m, and after a period of rain and snow kept them in camp until 21 September, they began their attack on the mountain without Sherpas by climbing to 5500m on the ridge and made their first high camp. On the 22nd they began the job of making the route along the ridge on mixed rock and ice from camp 1. At last, they were able to establish camp 2 on the 26th at a col on the ridge at 6090m.

The following day, 27 September, the four men made their final push for the summit from camp 2. They left the camp at 4:00 a.m. on "a beautiful day, no wind,

no clouds." After having surmounted a 300-meters-high icefall that was just above camp 2 from 6100m to 6400m, where they fixed the only rope on the mountain, they gained the top at 11:40 a.m. They got back to camp 2 at 11:30 p.m.

Their return to camp 2 was very slow because they decided they should descend via the long fluted north ridge into Tibet and down to the glacier at the foot of the ridge. They walked along the glacier and finally climbed back onto the ridge to camp 2.

#### Yakawa Kang

A two-member Japanese expedition to Mustang district's Mt. Yakawa Kang was actually a one-member effort: the second member did not intend to climb above BC. On the first days, Hidenobu Tsuji, leader and the only climbing member, also stayed in BC while their three Sherpas spent two days fixing the route up the south face from 5700m to 6300m, at which point their supply of rope for fixing was used up.

The Sherpas, Dawa Norbu (known as Ang Danu), Dawa Tshering and Tshering Tashi, had a rest day, and then Tsuji and they went for the 6482m summit on 7 November. They left base at 5416m on the Thorong La at 1:45 a.m. From 6300m to the summit, they roped together, and in steep places used climbing ropes, which they fixed and then pulled up behind them. Parts of the route were steep (70 degrees) and parts gentle slopes. It was exposed rock to 6050m, then mixed snow and ice. In the section where they were rock climbing, they encountered some rock fall but were protected by their helmets and were not injured. They gained the summit at 1:00 p.m. By the time they returned to base camp, 6:30 p.m., they were "very tired" by the long day's climb and rested for a full day before leaving.

#### Deaths of Italian, Japanese and Nepalese

This autumn was quite a safe season considering the hundreds of climbers in the mountains and the avalanching after numerous days of snowfall. The toll was one Italian, three Japanese and two Nepalese.

The **Italian** was Walter Nones, a 38-year-old professional climber who led a team of two other Italians (with no Sherpas) in a bid to scale Cho Oyu by its southwest face, the side of the mountain which is close to the east side of the Nangpa La, the pass favored by Tibetans fleeing their country. This was only the fourth attempt ever to be made on the face.

It ended in tragedy on 3 November when Nones plunged to his death, apparently blown off his feet by strong wind just as he emerged from his tent at 7000m. He had not yet had time to put on his crampons when the wind knocked him over. He somersaulted as he fell, and his badly smashed body landed 700 meters below.

Three **Japanese** were killed on Dhaulagiri I by a devastating avalanche and the blast of wind it created while they were in the early stage of their climb via the standard route up the northeast ridge. The leader of the four-member (no Sherpa)

team, who was one of those who died, was Osamu Tanabe. He was 49 and had already summited nine 8000m mountains, including Everest, plus numerous lower Nepalese peaks, some in first ascents, over a long period of time.

Now, on 28 September, he and his teammates were slightly scattered between 5150m and 5400m as they were making their way from base camp up to the northeast col when Tanabe suddenly radioed to a teammate below him, "Look up—avalanche!" He was then engulfed by it.

One of the four survived: Kazuaki Shimada, who was carrying a pair of skis on his back, was pushed by the blast of wind 200 meters into soft snow. He got a mouthful of snow and a lot of painful bruises but was otherwise uninjured. He quickly wielded snow bars and his skis to probe and dig for the others. He found no traces, and after hours of effort despite his pain, when it was getting dark, he returned alone to base camp.

One of their bodies, that of Daisuke Honda, was discovered eleven days later by two experts who brought special equipment from Japan. It was 50 meters under the snow.

A **Nepalese** Sherpa with a less experienced team of Japanese climbers, who were climbing in support of Tanabe's party, was also killed by the avalanche. Pasang Gelu, 47, five times Everest summiter, once atop Dhaulagiri and Cho Oyu each, was fixing rope at 6700m when he was swept 2100 meters down the mountain. He completely disappeared.

The other Nepalese who died was an even more highly experienced Sherpa, Chhuwang Nima, 43 years old. He had been summiting Everest very nearly every year since May 1994 with climbers from around the world, including numerous Americans and Japanese, and had even summited it twice from bottom to top last May to give him a total of 18 ascents.

Now he was on Baruntse with one American, Ms. Melissa Arnot. On 23 October he and another Sherpa from an Iranian expedition went up from camp 2 (6500m) to break trail and fix rope to the summit. Chhuwang Nima was ahead, at slightly more than 7000m at a large crevasse on the southeast ridge with a big cornice at one end, and was standing on the top of the cornice hammering in a picket, when the ice beneath him collapsed onto the steep east face of fluted snow and rock. The cornice carried him down with it. Then a snow avalanche came along and buried him further. Later the same day at least three more avalanches piled on top of him. It was impossible to recover his body.