

Perspective

A Tibetan Porter's View of the 1960 Chinese Everest Expedition

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A couple of years ago, Freddie Wilkinson posted an article on National Geographic's website titled, "He's the last surviving member of the first expedition to summit Everest."¹ Kanchha Sherpa, 86 years old, recalled what it was like to work on the expedition, the help he received from Tenzing Norgay, and how mountaineering transformed Sherpa society. The article took us back more than a decade to the time when we were interviewing elderly people in rural Tibet, investigating the impacts of rapid socioeconomic changes and labor mobility on the family-based care system for the elderly.² During the first round of interviews, we asked people a few questions about their personal histories. Pemba Hritar, born in 1930, told us,

I was a city resident [in Shigatse] in the past and had to do corvée labor. In my case, I had to sew clothing. Around 1951, I moved here [to a village outside Shigatse] and then got land at Democratic Reform (1959).³ I went to Jomolangma (Everest), came back home, was sent to do road construction, and then came home again.

Pemba Hritar's reference to Everest piqued our interest, but with 150 in-depth interviews to complete in a short time, we lacked the capacity to explore tangential topics. So, we took a mental note to follow up when time permitted.

During our third round of research in the summer of 2007, Pemba Hritar was among a narrower sample of interviewees. With the stiff gait common to those who have toiled in the fields over a lifetime, he strode into our courtyard at the appointed interview time. His lanky physique and thin, taut muscles hinted at a once powerful frame. Pemba Hritar told us that family members advised him against talking to us researchers and that nothing good could come of it. "I ignored them," he stated with a nod of defiance. Like many elderly Tibetans, he was usually sequestered at home, tending to the animals and grandchildren while other family members went outside to

work. Pemba Hritar enjoyed a break from domestic confinement, especially when it entailed chatting with interested listeners.

We welcomed him into the house we had rented and offered him tea. As our cook Döndrup fussed about in the makeshift kitchen, Pemba Hritar stroked his long, wispy beard while we engaged in small talk about health and family. When Döndrup served the tea, we got straight to the point by asking Pemba Hritar to tell us why he had gone to Everest. Here is what he said.

I went on the expedition with Gonpo and the Chinese climbers.⁴ I had heard of *Injis*⁵ going before that time.

[In the 1950s] I was a tailor. I was a subject of the *labrang* (the Panchen Lama's religious estate).⁶ Then Shigatse Dzong (the government administration) became more powerful, so I had to pay an additional tax to the *dzong*. I was a subject of the *labrang*, so I didn't want to work for the *dzong* and the aristocrats. But I had to sew for the rich people. If I had been sewing for the *labrang*, I felt I was sewing for the Panchen Lama.⁷ It didn't matter how hard I worked, I did it willingly.

Later I was enrolled in the Shigatse Chitso Labtra (Shigatse Society School). I started there just before Democratic Reforms (1959). They picked the stronger students. We got one month of special training. We would carry backpacks loaded with rocks up a mountain and leave them at the top. We also went jogging. Nobody told me the purpose, and nobody knew what we were doing. We got red suits and every day carried rocks up mountains. In Shigatse, many people were saying that a war was coming and that we would be sent to the front line. There were sixteen of us in the team. One of them said he was ill, so he left. I didn't know the purpose of what we were doing but nevertheless wanted

to do it. Before, the landlord made me suffer a lot. I didn't have food and didn't get any support from the wealthy people. The Communist Party came, supported the poor, so we got a better life.⁸ To show thanks, deep in my heart, I decided to do it, whatever the purpose was. If it were a war, I would kill others or be killed. If it were a mountain, I can't kill the mountain, but it can kill me. At the time, I wanted to work successfully and had visions of meeting Chairman Mao. But that never came true.

I sold my bicycle, gave the money to my wife, and said, "Use this for yourself. I'm going to do it, whatever it is." Then we left Shigatse for Jomolangma. There were fifty to sixty of us porters from all over.⁹ We went by truck from Shigatse to Lhatse in one day, then to old Tingri the next day, then to Dza Rongbuk [Monastery],¹⁰ then one more day to a base camp. We stayed there for three to four days before starting to carry stuff up higher.

This was the first Chinese expedition. There were many soldiers from the Panchen Lama's bodyguard regiment. There was Gonpo, the first to climb, and two Chinese climbers. The climbers stayed at Rongbuk while we stayed at the base camp. Our job was to carry food and oxygen up the mountain. We didn't use oxygen. The tanks were small, so we carried three or four at a time. They told us to set them down carefully; otherwise, they may explode. We followed their advice. But, when we got tired, we sat down suddenly, and the tanks bumped against rocks. Nothing happened.

A few porters got almost up to 8,000 meters. They promised that I could go to 7,000 meters, but I didn't get that high. When leaving and returning to camp each time they gave us a

physical exam. I got headaches and snow blindness. I was not weak, but they didn't send me higher. No porters went above 8,000 meters because that required technical climbing. We received 22 yuan per day in salary. I brought home 300 yuan. They gave us free food—good food and all we could eat—but at that altitude, I couldn't eat much. We had access to high-quality cigarettes that we had to pay for. We smoked. A Chinese man charged us for the cigarettes.

Two Chinese died on the expedition. They were part of the support staff. One manned the radio; he climbed to 6,600 meters and died of altitude sickness. I don't know how the other one died. Some other porters and I found his body buried beneath some stones. We wondered if somebody had killed him.

After Gonpo and two Chinese climbers reached the summit, we had a big celebration together in the base camp. Rongbuk sent gifts of meat and *tsampa* (parched barley flour), and the Chinese government sent gifts, including ten baskets of tea, rice, and flour. After returning to Shigatse, I got prizes, and the government arranged jobs for those of us who made up the expedition's support crew. I was appointed to go to Lhasa but had wanted to go to China. I thought it is useless to go unless I went to China, so I didn't take the job.

That was the extent of Pemba Hritar's recollections of the Everest expedition nearly five decades before—or at least the sum of what he could tell us under time constraints. He mentioned that he needed to return home soon to continue his chores, so we switched to our normal interview questions on aging and household relations. We learned that Pemba Hritar eventually settled in his wife's village. They had no children of their own but adopted an orphaned boy. As Pemba

Hritar explained, “He never even had a spoonful of his own mother’s milk. We raised him from infancy.” At the time of our interview, Pemba Hritar was a widower living with his son, daughter-in-law, and grandchildren, who all treated him with kindness and respect.

Pemba Hritar’s story is a very minor contribution to the history of Himalayan mountaineering. Nevertheless, it is worthwhile to share because eyewitness accounts of the first successful expeditions have by now faded with the passing of the last remaining participants.

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Endnotes

1. <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/adventure/2019/05/first-everest-expedition-kanchha-sherpa-nepal/>, accessed May 31, 2019.
2. The project, titled Economic Development and Intergenerational Relations in the Tibet Autonomous Region of China, was supported by a grant from the National Science Foundation (# SES 0527500).
3. Democratic Reform refers to China’s dismantling of the Tibetan system of governance together with land and class reforms following the flight of the Dalai Lama into exile in 1959.
4. The three team members who reached the summit on May 25, 1960, were Gonpo, a Tibetan, and the Chinese climbers Wang Fuzhou and Qu Yinhua. For the first English-language description of the expedition, see Shih Chan-Chun’s “The Conquest of Mount Everest by the Chinese Mountaineering Team” in *The Himalayan Journal* Volume 23, 1961. The article was followed by a lengthy treatise pointing to evidence that potentially contradicts the summit claim, including the lack of a photograph from the top.

5. Literally “English people,” the term is generally used by Tibetans to describe any foreigner of European descent.

6. In pre-1959 Tibet, most commoners were hereditarily bound to an estate to which they owed various tax obligations. The three major landowners were monasteries, aristocrats, and the government centered in Lhasa, with *dzong* (forts) as administrative centers across the land. Social mobility was limited, and labor exploitation was common.

7. The head of a large group of estates and of Tashilhunpo Monastery in Shigatse. He was also one of the most revered lamas in Tibet.

8. Many Tibetans at the lower end of the socioeconomic spectrum supported the Communist Party of China because it promised to create a more equitable society and end all corvée labor obligations to lords. At the time of democratic reforms, the poor peasants also typically received fields and some possessions that had been confiscated from the upper classes.

9. This is consistent with Shih’s report in *The Himalayan Journal* (1961), which states that the expedition comprised “214 men and women, one-third of them being of Tibetan nationality.” Shih also writes that among these were “serfs who had just been freed from serfdom in Tibet,” a description that conforms to China’s official description of Pemba Hritar’s pre-1959 social status.

10. Rongbuk Monastery sits on the north side of Everest and has played an interesting role in mountaineering history. See, for example, Alexander Macdonald’s article “The Lama and the General” (1973, *Kailash* Volume 1), in which he compares C. G. Bruce’s notes from a 1922 expedition on his interactions with Rongbuk’s abbot, Ngawang Tenzin Norbu (1867-1940), with the lama’s own recollections recorded in his Tibetan-language biography.