

The ‘invisible summit’ and the blind Chinese climber who scaled it



Zhang Hong at Camp IV, the last stop on the way to the summit — Photos / Ti Gong

Lu Feiran

The exhilarating moment of standing on the top of the world wasn't quite how Chinese climber Zhang Hong had envisioned it. Then again, as the first blind Asian to reach the summit of Mount Everest, he couldn't see it at all.

"I had imagined what I would do when the moment came," Zhang told Shanghai Daily in recounting the 2021 ascent. "I thought I might cheer or I might yell out something enlightening, but at that moment, I didn't know how much oxygen was left and I knew that most fatal accidents on Everest happened to climbers on the way down. So I told my Sherpa guide, 'Let's get out of here!'"

Despite the memories of standing there, with gales and snow swirling around him and fear in his heart, Zhang's experience whetted his appetite for adventure. He now nurtures plans to scale the highest peaks of every continent and trek to the north and south poles.

Zhang was born in Chongqing and grew up in Chengdu, capital of Sichuan Province. In 1996, when he was 21, he lost his eyesight to inherited glaucoma, which had earlier afflicted his father and uncle.

"I remember one night I could still figure out the headlines on a newspaper," he said. "And the next day, I woke up and asked my girlfriend, now wife, 'Is it still dark?' She replied, 'No, it's morning already.' I knew at that moment that I had completely lost my eyesight."

His wife Xia Qiong resisted pressure from her family to call off any marriage plans and she stuck by him.

The first couple of years of blindness were so miserable that Zhang wanted to give up. Xia refused to let him sink in self-pity. She became his "eyes on the world," managing his daily life and giving him encouragement.

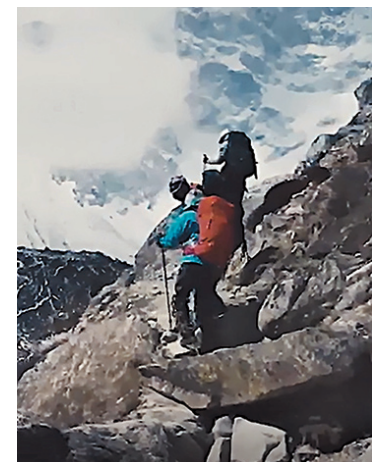
"I love soccer, so she read me soccer news from newspapers to cheer me up, and when she

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It was really tough. I sustained many injuries and sometimes felt on the verge of a fatal accident. I often asked myself why I was doing what I was doing, but the goal of conquering Everest was overpowering.

Zhang Hong

The first blind Asian to reach the summit of Mount Everest



Zhang Hong on his way up to the summit.

couldn't be with me, she would record them on tapes," Zhang said. "She raised me up from the darkness."

Zhang, like so many visually impaired people in China, became a masseur, but he was restless.

"I had actually tried different jobs, even starting my own business," he said. "But I always felt that I wasn't doing what I wanted."

He found his calling in 2012 when he went to work as a masseur at a hospital in