172 runners started this ultramarathon—21 of them never came back.

Racers started their 100K through the stark and steep landscape of the Yellow River Stone Forest in China’s Gansu Province.
When lockdown ended in China, in April 2020, Yan returned to running. By the fall, races were being held again, and Yan set off for marathons around the country. A friend recommended the Yellow River Stone Forest 100K, just off the Tibetan Plateau near the Gobi Desert.

The region where the race was held consisted of vast expanses of high desert, filled with rocky sections of mountains and dry washes. Heading into its fourth year, the race climbed rugged hills and mountains about China’s Yellow River, named for its brownish, earthy color. Yan had never seen the Yellow River in such a stark landscape, and the novelty was exciting.

On WeChat, at 8:12 p.m. on the night before the race, Yan posted eight photos—seven of the desert landscape and one of her registration. “Competing with the Yellow River, chase the Stone Forest throne,” she wrote. “Why not finish the race safely?”

The morning of the race, Yan woke at 6 a.m. to blue skies. Temperatures were in the mid-50s. She threw on long pants, gloves, and arm warmers, and then packed her bag with fuel—electrolyte tablets, energy gels, Snickers bars, and a liter of water. By 7 a.m., the sun was still shining, and wisps of stratus clouds hung in the sky. Temperatures were hovering just under 60 degrees. For sun protection, she wore a bandana around her neck and a sun hat, its large brim and side flaps protecting her cheeks.

On the shuttle bus to the starting line, at about 5,000 feet, Yan snapped more photos of the desert. The sky was still clear. But by the time Yan arrived in the park, wind gusts had grown strong enough to blow over signs and race flags. She lined up for the start, alongside 171 other runners.

The weather had been dropping consistently since the race began, and the wind was blowing colder the higher she climbed. Yan was still going up.

Most of the runners were wearing shorts and T-shirts. Racers had been encouraged to stow their warm clothes in a drop bag, which they could pick up at mile 39, at the sixth checkpoint.

“Let’s try to stay on the top at the third checkpoint,” one cautioned Yan.

The temperature was dropping consistently, so much so that Yan’s gear, laid out on the hotel balcony, was steamy. “The higher she climbed, the colder she climbed. Yan was still going up.”

Most of the runners were wearing shorts and T-shirts. Racers had been encouraged to stow their warm clothes in a drop bag, which they could pick up at mile 39, at the sixth checkpoint.

But few had expected they would need extra layers: the Yellow River Stone Forest 100K took place in a desert, and in previous years runners had battled heatstroke, not hypothermia. The race, the Yellow River Stone Forest 100K, was competing for what he expected to be a selling desert temperatures, he ran during early afternoons, for up to two hours, until he felt hints of heatstroke. By the time the race rolled around, he felt prepared for heat, and he was hoping to finish with prize money. The night before the race, as wind blazed at his hotel room windows, he thought little of it.

At the race briefing a few hours earlier, the organizing committee had cautioned racers of nothing more than heatstroke and sunburns.

“Storms and chills were the last thing to ever come across my mind,” Zhang says.

In April, to prepare for what he expected to be a selling desert temperatures, he ran during early afternoons, for up to two hours, until he felt hints of heatstroke. By the time the race rolled around, he felt prepared for heat, and he was hoping to finish with prize money. The night before the race, as wind blazed at his hotel room windows, he thought little of it. At the race briefing a few hours earlier, the organizing committee had cautioned racers of nothing more than heatstroke and sunburns.

“Storms and chills were the last thing to ever come across my mind,” Zhang says.

Zhang passed through the second checkpoint, 15 miles in, well ahead of Yan. A few miles behind him, even before the climb, he was beginning to feel the storm’s power. Gusts of wind whipped dirt into her mouth. Hard rain began falling. She slowed down. She stopped to rest for a moment at the second checkpoint. She’d heard that the next checkpoint wouldn’t have any food—just two volunteers punching race cards. Yan decided...
half were now ahead of her, starting the climb.

were soaked through, and sand and gravel had

Along its banks, the loess soil was loose and

her, the river was raging a deep brown yellow.

challenging ascent.

miles up the 2,900-foot climb, the race's most

to fuel up, eating cherry tomatoes, water, and

The rain was drenching now, and far below

hanging on to each other side-by-side. The wind

too slippery and not wide enough for two people

on the verge of hypothermia. Zhang tried helping

raindrops, slamming into Zhang, numbing his

halfway up to CP3, hail began to mix with the

Zhang had just come across two racers in trou-

Meanwhile, the lead runners were barely

moving. Wind and freezing rain were pummeling

them, slowing their progress to a shuffle. About

halfway up CP1, had begun to mix with the

raindrops, slamming into Zhang, numbing his

face and blurring his vision.

High air banks, the loess soil was tamped and

thick. Yan took out her jacket. Her other layers

were soaked through, and sand and gravel had

filled her shoes. More runners passed. At least

half were now ahead of her, starting the climb.

ten minutes later, around 12:00, she set out, head

down against the gale.

Shepherd Zhu.

Keming shows

the cave where he

sheltered six runners.

On May 25th, the

night before the race—

when the race briefing

was held—the county’s

Meteorological Adminis-

tration issued a warning

that sustained winds between 25 and 32 mph were

possible over the next 24 hours, along with large

temperature drops possible across the province.

That afternoon, however, temperatures in

Jingtai county, where the race was being held,

reached almost 80 degrees.

By the race’s start, the edge of the cold front

was just starting to descend on the course—per-

fectly timed to meet runners head-on as they

climbed to CP3. Heat and pressure differentials

across the front’s edge were causing strong

winds, and by 8 a.m., gusts were reaching 25

mph. Temperatures began dropping steadily.

But those changes had only just begun as higher

elevations, their extremities hadn’t yet moved down

into the lower parts of the Yellow River Valley,

where the race began.

By 10:30 a.m., an hour and a half after the race

started, thick clouds had begun forming as warm,

high-pressure air from the desert floor rushed

into the sky and cold, low-pressure air from the

vortex plummeted down the mountainsides.

The winds and rain grew stronger between

CP2 and CP3, as runners climbed higher, into

the descending cold front. At this point, as the

lead runners were climbing to CP3, temperatures

were dropping as much as 7 degrees Fahrenheit

per hour. In Jingtai county’s lower elevations—

5,200 feet, about the elevation of Denver—tem-

peratures reached about 64 degrees. But at the

race’s higher altitudes, during the climb to CP3,

which reached 7,200 feet, temperatures

approached freezing. As warm and cold air

rushed against each other, a dramatic pressure

and temperature gradient developed, winds grew

wider, and gusts grew stronger. By 1 p.m., as

runners pushed above 9,000 feet, winds were

gusting so hard that they kept falling. Eventually

they decided to separate.

Gazing up the mountains ahead of him, Zhang

tried to scramble up. Keep your head, get over the

mountain, and everything will be fine, he thought

to himself.

He didn’t make it far. Wrestling the wind, Zhang

fell at least 10 more times. With the two

runners he’d tried to help behind him, Zhang was

sitting in fourth place—higher and farther back

than anyone else. His felt his limbs growing stiff,

and hypothermia began settling in as the fog thickened.

Soon, he lost control of his

body. He fell once more and couldn’t get up. In

his last moments of consciousness, he managed

to pull out a space blanket and wrap it around

his body, and send out an SOS signal on his GPS.

To fuel up, eating cherry tomatoes, water, and

bread. Ahead of her lay the third checkpoint, five

miles up the 2,900-foot climb, the race’s most

challenging ascent.

The rain was drenching now, and far below her,

the river was raging a deep brown yellow.

High air banks, the loess soil was tamped and

thick. Yan took out her jacket. Her other layers

were soaked through, and sand and gravel had

filled her shoes. More runners passed. At least

half were now ahead of her, starting the climb.

ten minutes later, around 12:00, she set out, head

down against the gale.

Meanwhile, the lead runners were barely

moving. Wind and freezing rain were pummeling

them, slowing their progress to a shuffle. About

halfway up CP1, had begun to mix with the

raindrops, slamming into Zhang, numbing his

face and blurring his vision.

High air banks, the loess soil was tamped and

thick. Yan took out her jacket. Her other layers

were soaked through, and sand and gravel had

filled her shoes. More runners passed. At least

half were now ahead of her, starting the climb.

ten minutes later, around 12:00, she set out, head

down against the gale.

Meanwhile, the lead runners were barely

moving. Wind and freezing rain were pummeling

them, slowing their progress to a shuffle. About

halfway up CP1, had begun to mix with the

raindrops, slamming into Zhang, numbing his

face and blurring his vision.

High air banks, the loess soil was tamped and

thick. Yan took out her jacket. Her other layers

were soaked through, and sand and gravel had

filled her shoes. More runners passed. At least

half were now ahead of her, starting the climb.

ten minutes later, around 12:00, she set out, head

down against the gale.

Meanwhile, the lead runners were barely

moving. Wind and freezing rain were pummeling

them, slowing their progress to a shuffle. About

halfway up CP1, had begun to mix with the

raindrops, slamming into Zhang, numbing his

face and blurring his vision.

High air banks, the loess soil was tamped and

thick. Yan took out her jacket. Her other layers

were soaked through, and sand and gravel had

filled her shoes. More runners passed. At least

half were now ahead of her, starting the climb.

ten minutes later, around 12:00, she set out, head

down against the gale.

Meanwhile, the lead runners were barely

moving. Wind and freezing rain were pummeling

them, slowing their progress to a shuffle. About

halfway up CP1, had begun to mix with the

raindrops, slamming into Zhang, numbing his

face and blurring his vision.

High air banks, the loess soil was tamped and

thick. Yan took out her jacket. Her other layers

were soaked through, and sand and gravel had

filled her shoes. More runners passed. At least

half were now ahead of her, starting the climb.

ten minutes later, around 12:00, she set out, head

down against the gale.

Meanwhile, the lead runners were barely

moving. Wind and freezing rain were pummeling

them, slowing their progress to a shuffle. About

halfway up CP1, had begun to mix with the

raindrops, slamming into Zhang, numbing his

face and blurring his vision.

High air banks, the loess soil was tamped and

thick. Yan took out her jacket. Her other layers

were soaked through, and sand and gravel had

filled her shoes. More runners passed. At least

half were now ahead of her, starting the climb.

ten minutes later, around 12:00, she set out, head

down against the gale.

Meanwhile, the lead runners were barely

moving. Wind and freezing rain were pummeling

them, slowing their progress to a shuffle. About

halfway up CP1, had begun to mix with the

raindrops, slamming into Zhang, numbing his

face and blurring his vision.

High air banks, the loess soil was tamped and

thick. Yan took out her jacket. Her other layers

were soaked through, and sand and gravel had

filled her shoes. More runners passed. At least

half were now ahead of her, starting the climb.

ten minutes later, around 12:00, she set out, head

down against the gale.

Meanwhile, the lead runners were barely

moving. Wind and freezing rain were pummeling

them, slowing their progress to a shuffle. About

halfway up CP1, had begun to mix with the

raindrops, slamming into Zhang, numbing his

face and blurring his vision.

High air banks, the loess soil was tamped and

thick. Yan took out her jacket. Her other layers

were soaked through, and sand and gravel had

filled her shoes. More runners passed. At least

half were now ahead of her, starting the climb.

ten minutes later, around 12:00, she set out, head

down against the gale.

Meanwhile, the lead runners were barely

moving. Wind and freezing rain were pummeling

them, slowing their progress to a shuffle. About

halfway up CP1, had begun to mix with the

raindrops, slamming into Zhang, numbing his

face and blurring his vision.

High air banks, the loess soil was tamped and

thick. Yan took out her jacket. Her other layers

were soaked through, and sand and gravel had

filled her shoes. More runners passed. At least

half were now ahead of her, starting the climb.

ten minutes later, around 12:00, she set out, head

down against the gale.

Meanwhile, the lead runners were barely

moving. Wind and freezing rain were pummeling

them, slowing their progress to a shuffle. About

halfway up CP1, had begun to mix with the

raindrops, slamming into Zhang, numbing his

face and blurring his vision.
Zhang was still dizzy, fixated on the competition. "I'm in fourth place," he repeated. "I fell seven or eight times. I want to race." With the others' help, Yan removed Zhang's wet clothes and placed them near the fire. She ordered others not to put his hands and feet too close to the flames, or massage his limbs. Yan worried cold blood might circulate to his heart and kill him. She pulled out water, an unopened Snickers bar, and some energy gels. Slowly, Zhang sized it was a matter of life or death. He was so worried cold blood might circulate to his heart and convinced him to drop out. "Then I realized it was a matter of life or death. I was so muddled." At around 5 p.m., local villagers arrived at the cave with quilts, thermos bottles, and paper cups, but Yan sent them back outside, to search for runners on the hillsides. A half hour later, the group wrapped towels from the villagers around themselves, and decided to head down the mountain before nightfall. The storm had died down. Thick clouds remained, but it felt much warmer than usual before nightfall. The storm had died down. At around 5 p.m., local villagers arrived at the cave with quilts, thermos bottles, and paper cups, but Yan sent them back outside, to search for runners on the hillsides. A half hour later, the group wrapped towels from the villagers around themselves, and decided to head down the mountain before nightfall. The storm had died down. Thick clouds remained, but it felt much warmer than usual before nightfall. The storm had died down.

MONTHS LATER, THE runners are still working through traumas and injuries from the storm. Zhang’s left index finger is still numb from nerve damage, preventing him from helping his family with their harvest. He prefers not to talk much about the race’s psychological aftermath. After he published an account of the competition, commenters began harassing him on social media, and Zhang suspended his account. Since then, he’s kept in touch with the cave-dwelling crew, as well as Zhu Keming, the shepherd, who led them down a shortcut off the hillsides, following a goat trail.

"Mentally, I was still just carrying on in the race," Zhang recalls of recovering in the cave. Eventually, though, runners calmed him down, and convinced him to drop out. "Then I realized it was a matter of life or death. I was so muddled.

Around China, race organizers were chilled. So far, 27 officials have been punished or charged, with sentences not yet rendered, while the magistrate of Jingtai county was fired. Other organizers are watching closely, some leaving the industry altogether.

"They are no longer running in this world. They are no longer running in this world. "I'll carry on, keep running, love everyone besides me, and shoulder their unrealized dreams," Zhang says. "I'll dwell on little details in the past. But eventually, you feel that just being alive is good. Really good."

Back in his hometown, in Heman, Zhang had taken even less time off. Just 10 days after returning from Gaoni, with the blessing of his doctor, he put his running shoes back on. On a bright, 85-degree evening, he donned a white, zip-up long-sleeve hoodie, and set out running through the countryside. Three miles later, his life was feeling intact again. "I get carry on, keep running, love everyone besides me, and shoulder their unrealized dreams," Zhang says. "I'll dwell on little details in the past. But eventually, you feel that just being alive is good. Really good."

The trek downhill took over an hour. Along the way, they saw villagers carrying more quilts and hot water uphill. A group of doctors and nurses passed with first-aid kits. A bulldozer followed, clearing a route to deliver medical supplies up the mountain, with all-wheel-drive vehicles behind it. Yan arrived back at her hotel after 9 p.m. and went to dinner with other runners who had made it back. The meal was somber, filled with speculation about who had survived. Liang Jing, the top ultrarunner, hadn’t been found yet. Others were missing as well.

By the next morning, 10 were confirmed dead. Three were missing. Headlines were spreading worldwide. Of the 172 runners who set off in the race, 21 died and eight were seriously injured. Most if not all the deaths were from hypothermia. In the lead group of six, only Zhang had survived. Liang Jing’s death was especially unnerving. He was no stranger to extreme races—he won the Ultra Gobi 400K in 2013, took place in another corner of the Gansu Desert with extreme temperature fluctuations. The break from exercise made her pace slower than usual, but speed was the last thing on her mind. The reserve was her favorite place to run in Chengdu, and soon the happiness the sport brought her came flooding back. And partly, she explained, she was running for the spirits of the deceased.