CHINA EXPLORERS
CHINA EXPLORATION AND RESEARCH SOCIETY

VOLUME 12 NO. 1               SPRING 2010

3  A Land Where Time Stood Still
8  Tattoo Women of Myanmar’s Chin State
11 When China Had Few Friends
14 Emerging Suzhou’s Disappearing Act
16 Bearded Vulture of the Himalayas
18 Economic Boom - Another World Heritage Site Turned Tourist Mecca
22 Quiet Border of Laos with Myanmar
25 Flying into the Storm During 60th National Day
28 Leave It or Fix It
30 Inthar Heritage House
34 CERS in the Field
35 News/CERS in the Media

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP:
Spice girl at Mrauk-u market;
Kuchong girl at Laos-Myanmar border;
Children of Li minority village in Hainan;
Students and professors from Singapore
President’s Message

The end of a decade and the start of a new one is always a special time. In this issue, we usher in the New Year of 2010 with a piece from faraway Mrauk-u in Myanmar. We also reminisce about times past, with articles about my early visits to China more than 30 years ago.

One particular article about the Bearded Vulture went back even further, chronicling the early description of this stately bird in 1930 when a German ornithologist mounted an expedition to study it in the Himalayas, as well as my own encounter with it over the course of many expeditions.

We also bring you an updated report from our most recent project site on Hainan Island. As is often the case, the aspiration of a people to modernize, change and become homogenized with mainstream society is directly at odds with what is considered attractive to tourists - who are interested in indigenous culture and traditional lifestyle. How to moderate with innovation and build upon both the traditional and modern is an issue CERS takes up as a challenge with the Hainan model.

Our exploration continues to take us beyond the frontiers of China into its neighboring countries, in this case Laos and Myanmar. Much of what we hold precious in natural and cultural heritage along the fringes of China has no real political border. Neither nature nor culture observes a man-made line of demarcation. A national border does not confine our knowledge, nor does it restrict the penetration of wildlife and culture. They are usually common to both sides of a frontier, and at times offer the safest sanctuary for such heritage.

So it is with such beliefs that CERS expanded our work to include all neighboring countries with a common border with China. Should such interest and concern help CERS to become an ambassador of peace between China and its neighbors, we would indeed be very pleased.

Yesterday’s sunset was perfect, the last one for the year 2009, and the last one for the first decade of the 21st century. The sun disappeared under the tropical plain at 7:45pm local time. At the same time, the moon had already risen in the east, almost at a 10-degree angle to the horizon. It was a perfect moonrise, as it was a full moon. It was also a perfect moment for me, appreciating a sunset while enjoying a moonrise.

Today, the first sunrise for a new year and a new decade must also be special. That is why I came to this distant land, that promises to be a very special place. Maybe I am a romantic. But my romance is with the land and the people, and everything that dwells under the sun and the moon.

My wake-up call came at 5 am. The Mrauk Oo Princess Resort is owned by Ohn Maung, my Burmese friend who also owns the Inle Princess Resort. An open Jeep was already waiting. In the chill morning air, we drove for 15 minutes to a nearby monastery. The Jeep’s coughing engine. An occasional rooster call was the only other sound besides our eatery stalls were already open, barely lit by candles or oil lamps. Ignited along the street to keep the early risers warm. A handful of fires ignited along the street to keep the early risers warm. A handful of fires

Along the way, everything was still dark, except a few fires
We stopped at the bottom of a hill and climbed to the top where an old pagoda stands. From this vantage point, I had an unobstructed view over the plain below and far into the distant hills. Three pagodas cast a silhouette as the mist rose in this twilight hour. In the vast jungle below, I could just make out a few isolated houses and tiny villages.

A paradise unfolded as the sky gradually changed from dark gray to bluish, then light pink to orange and red. I was a spectator in nature’s theater, quietly observing its grandiose performance for over a full hour. Finally the sun peeked through the hills as a tiny sparkle. It grew in size as if removing its veil of shyness, until suddenly it showed its full face and its brightness shone over the entire land. It was a most satisfying feeling as I took in this exhilarating first sunrise of a new year.

Since the demise of the earlier kingdom, time has stood still in this land sandwiched between Bangladesh and the Burmese mainland. The only remnant of its glorious past is perhaps the old palace walls and the many Buddhist pagodas which dot the peaks above the undulating plain. But in nearby villages, rice mills continue to husk the grain and churn out sacks upon sacks of rice which are sent off eastward to faraway Yangon (Rangoon) or westward into Bangladesh. Mrauk Oo is indeed the rice bowl of Myanmar. Another former item for export, the elephant, is no longer seen. Transport is mainly by boat, so shipbuilding remains an important vocation.

Even in these modern times, the town of Mrauk Oo provides only two hours of on-and-off electricity each day. A walk along the village path in the evening or early...
morning reveals lighting, heating and cooking are accomplished with candles, oil lamps and firewood. Morning markets are most colorful and “organic”, if I can borrow that modern and rather cliché word. I love the fishmongers at the marketplace. From tiny shrimp to tiger prawns and small minnows to sea bass, this corner of the market is most alive, in a sense that the buyers, sellers, and even the objects to be sold are all moving. Water beetles are also on sale. A high protein delicacy, they come in different sizes and varieties. Fish and shrimp that are not sold fresh are dried and sold at other specialty stalls.

Tiger prawns half a kilo in size sell for 3,000 kyats, a huge sum for the locals but for us a meager US$3. Prawns can be bought for 300 kyats. Other seafood items are fractions of those prices. The old banknotes changing hands are all worn and torn almost to threads. Circulation of such tattered notes reminds us of what currencies were originally printed and intended for - as a substitute for bartering and to assist as a medium for transaction, rather than to be saved up or invested.

The Thainkanadi River where Mrauk Oo is located has a few motorized riverboats, but row boats and canoes are more common. Along the Kaladen River where I boarded a slow riverboat from the coastal town of Sittwe to Mrauk Oo, the delta is still filled with small boats with colorful patchwork sails. Even some larger boats have multiple rowers working the oars as they cruise up and down the widening river. Occasionally, schools of river dolphins swim alongside and flocks of parrots fly overhead. The natural scenery is idyllic and the setting has changed little over the centuries.

For those of us in the modern and fast-paced world, a retreat in Mrauk Oo would be therapeutic, offering a journey back to an age when life is simple and basic. Those who find life boring here are likely infected with a malady of the modern city. Here in Mrauk Oo, “back to basics” is not a slogan or a cliché. It is how life is and has always been. But like many other such places in the world, in time the river may get polluted and the people corrupted. I however will certainly be back before too long, hopefully for another perfect sunrise and sunset.
Passing out new 1,000 kyat banknotes to each of the five tattoo ladies seems quite inconsequential for us: The exchange rate is one US dollar to 1,000 kyat. But one woman checked the note over carefully before putting it in a pocket under her blouse. Indeed it is very unusual for new banknotes to get this far inland, into the most remote corner of the Chin State, bordering Bangladesh in western Myanmar.

The primitive setting is somewhat consistent with the people of the Chin State, being isolated and preserved as it has always been. Women in their 50s and above mostly had full tattoos on their faces. These circular and geometric designs left deep marks on them as a sign of beauty and recognition. Ear lobes were pierced and ear plugs inserted to further enhance their elegance. Unlike other places where people may feel embarrassed about their ancient practice, here the women display themselves and welcome visitors’ adoration. If I raise my camera, they quickly come up with a smile or tidy up for a fine portrait. Above all, these elder women carry themselves gracefully and tend to be confident, assertive and dominate over village affairs. It was the most pleasant visit to a hide-away village I can remember.

Our journey here has taken many legs, not unlike a long distance marathon with many check points. From Hong Kong, we journeyed through Bangkok to Yangon before taking a 90-minute flight to Sittwe by the coast adjoining the Bangladesh delta. From there a four-hour riverboat took us to Maruk Oo. Yet another four hours in a motorized canoe cutting through a network of waterways took us up river, from murky water to finally clear stream. At last, we arrived at the first enclave of the Chin People, right at the border of the Arakan State with that of the Chin State.

Many of the Chins, especially their children, are of fairer skin, not unlike the Burmese or Chinese. Along the river villages, the people resemble more the Indian and Bangladesh stock with much darker complexion. The villages are filled with children and infants, and many young women walked around with big bellies, in different stages of pregnancy. The children also looked a little pregnant, with protruded stomachs as well, likely from malnutrition, beriberi, or some infestation of tapeworm. Pigs and chickens roamed about freely.

At a make-shift primary school, one single room seemed to house two classes, one on each side. The long bench desks were less than a foot high, suggesting the students must sit or kneel on the floor when they attend class. As it was Saturday, no one was inside except the curious children following us.

Outside on a balcony, I caught sight of a wooden block on the floor, with six small holes which could be clamped shut with lockable hinges on both ends. It looked like restraining devices I had seen in old pictures, used for captive slaves or prisoners. I was told matter of factly that it was indeed used for restraining disobedient students. Such Dark Ages punitive measures seemed to be still in practice in this remote area.

We had left our hotel right after breakfast and now it was well past noon. After a quick lunch of the sandwiches we had brought along, we had to head back to return before darkness fell.
WHEN CHINA HAD FEW FRIENDS
Wong How Man
Shanghai – November 10, 2009

At the end of December and early January the days are the shortest and the sun sets before 6pm. So my visit with the Chin people was necessarily brief. After all, such villages are only de facto open and our hotel would occasionally bring in visitors incognito. The government seems to turn a blind eye to it. More visitors mean additional income beyond the only export items the area has - rice and bamboo.

On our return, we passed many bamboo rafts, slowing rowing toward Maruk Oo where they would be disassembled and sold. As our canoe passed one of the water channels, a large flock of bats flew overhead. They were of such gigantic size that for a moment I took them as some large black birds. I judged their wingspan to be two to three feet across. They circled above us in formation rather than the unsystematic twist and turn flight path of regular bats. To see them around 4 in the afternoon was quite a surprise. I was fortunate to record them with my long lens before our boat sped off towards home.

Tattooed women, kids punished like slaves, gigantic bats, bamboo rafts and canoeing under the canopy of a deep jungle, all conjured up the movie Tarzan of the Apes I saw as a child, or The Adventures of Tin Tin comics which accompanied me into adulthood. But this is all in today’s real world, waiting to be explored.
Now, let me get back to the China scene. To quip that my invitation in 1979 was because China had few friends was not all correct. In the hype of the Cultural Revolution and immediately afterward, China had always boasted in slogans and propaganda signs that “We have friends all over the world”. This was particularly true with its comrades in Eastern Europe, and nominal nations of Africa and the “underdeveloped” world. As for friends from the “First World”, there were indeed few.

China and the Chinese have a long memory. It remembers its old friends, while making new ones. My connection to China, and thus an invitation to both the 30th and 60th anniversary, is likely based on my long years of work among minorities of China, and staying with my convictions through thick and thin. I remember being the only soul on a plane flying into China soon after June 1989 when everyone avoided having any connection to the discredited government.

The place of honor above Tian An Men Square during the 60th celebration given to Prince Norodom Sihanouk of Cambodia, an ageing friend of Mao, Chou En-lai and the country, reaffirmed the above statement. The current leaders of China, though two to three generations apart from the old guards, maintained that much-valued heritage of respect. It is for the same reason that Kissinger always has a special place in China’s inner circle.

The year of the 30th anniversary of the PRC, I spent time inside the US Embassy in Beijing, the first year of normalization of the relationship between the two giants. I was preparing a potential story for Architectural Digest about the Ambassador’s new residence. Leonard Woodcock was the first ambassador to China during Carter’s administration. It was a political appointment as Woodcock was former President of the United Auto Workers. Someone used to heading a workers union perhaps has more common language with a communist regime.

Woodcock was also crucial in the negotiations leading up to normalization. He remained a confidante of China until his death in 2001. The Leonard Woodcock Legacy Business Seminar established at Oakland University’s Business School continued to attract Chinese scholars as well as those focused on China. Had the UAW’s former president have lived another decade to see China’s auto industry rising to surpass that of America, and the near-demise of GM and other Detroit giants, he might have been greatly surprised.

An infant who started with few friends would pick up more friends as he grew older, or more friends if he were to mature successfully. An old man would have fewer friends during the twilight of his years. As for countries, in general a corrupt country would have corrupt friends who would dissipate when the going gets tough. A clean country would have more clean friends who may stay for the long haul. The choice for China is obvious.

Perhaps when China turns 90, like me - I, too, was born in 1949 - I will again be one of the few friends who go celebrate the ageing of a nation, especially if an exodus like that in 1949 or 1989 should occur again. The rise and fall of empires, like a person’s ascending and descending age, is no different from the ebb and flow of coastal tide.

Perhaps in another few centuries, China, as in many epochs past, will rise again. But for now, while the country is riding high, let’s heed history and be prepared for its inevitable dip. For those who don’t study history and only look to Wall Street, perhaps the market would also provide some parallel.
Above there is heaven, and below there is Suzhou and Hangzhou.” For centuries, this adage has circulated widely, reflecting the two cities’ serene beauty.

I first visited Suzhou in 1974 and again in 1977, 1986 and 1988. I am back again after a 20-year absence. In 1988, I was disappointed at the fast-changing scene which dulled many of my earlier memories of this unique city with its myriad canals and bridges.

This time, I was totally disillusioned by the emergence of a new city that seems to have erased all traces of its cultural past. I mustered the courage to visit a few places that boasted of the scenic beauty of an ancient city; I was dismayed by the commercialism and their overrated beauty. The few remaining stretches of ancient houses are used as shops and restaurants, with occasional exhibits and boutique museums that again are quite commercial. The innumerable red lanterns hung out in day time and lit at night added only crude touches to its touristy image.

The former outskirts of the city with rice fields, canals and bridges is nowhere to be seen. In its place is the new IT and industrial town with modern buildings and facilities. Even with a bird’s eye view from the high floor of the 23-storey Kempinski Hotel where I am staying, one cannot see even a tiny glimpse of any farm. Emerging modern Suzhou has totally replaced the ancient city I once knew.

In those early days, I used to visit numerous historic gardens and had written many articles introducing such architectural and landscaping wonders to Western readers. Back then, the local community and its architecture were a complement to these gardens. Today, the gardens remain but the neighborhood has been transformed.

Shi Zi Yuan, or Lion’s Garden, was part of the family property of famed Chinese American architect IM Pei. In it were rock decorations which resemble countless lions in various postures, at play or at rest. The constant flow of tourists flooding these sites makes it difficult to appreciate the peace and tranquility for which these gardens were originally designed.

The only consolation to Suzhou’s former architectural beauty is perhaps IM Pei’s latest creation and modern interpretation of the nearby vernacular buildings with white walls, geometric lines and black-tiled roofs. It is reflected fully and gracefully in the Suzhou Museum which he designed. Above all, as an exception to the highly commercialized Suzhou, the admission to the museum is free. Beyond this experience, my impression of Suzhou is best left to memories from over three decades ago.
The classic description of the stately Bearded Vulture came from Crown Prince Rudolph of Austria. “The Gypaetus barbatus is a clan unto himself; no other Bird of Prey has a real similarity with it...the head with the black circles around the eyes, a hard brush-like beard can be seen from very far, the long horizontal shape in flight, the wedge-form long and pointed tail...the color a mixture of ice-grey, black and light yellow, all these give the bird an unusual, I almost want to say, dragon-like form.”

The Crown Prince retired in the Sierra Nevada and went to Granada to see this bird for the first time. That was in the 1890s and the Lammergeier, as the Europeans called it, had long become a saga in the district. By the 1930s, the bird as a pet, hiding it inside the sleeves of their robes – giving rise to the name “sleeve dog”.

Nothing, however, rivals the ancient legend of the demise of the Greek playwright Aeschylus. He was said to have been killed in 456 BC by a tortoise, dropped by an eagle which mistook his bald head for a stone. As the Lammergeier is known to drop its prey on rocks to break the bones to get at the egg, a rarety as they usually pair up but not flock together. Golden head gleaming and the beard protruding distinctly, I successfully captured images of them frozen in flight. Since then I have been waiting to return to the site, just to view and photograph this majestic bird.

Today the Lammergeier is only making a gradual come-back in Europe. However, within the bird’s range in Asia, it survives relatively well in the high mountains of Tibet and some parts of Nepal and northern India. In and around the region of Yushu of the Tibetan plateau, there is a local belief that the last egg laid by this vulture each year is a “dog bird”, rather than a vulture chick. If left alone, this tiny dog would starve when the other birds eventually left the nest. So the nomads would collect this dog bird to raise it. High lamas prize this bird as a pet, hiding it inside the sleeves of their robes – giving rise to the name “sleeve dog”.

On many of my expeditions throughout the plateau in the last 30 years, I have seen them hovering at extreme elevation. On one Everest expedition, mountaineers reported seeing the bird soaring as high as 24,000 feet or close to 8,000 meters. While photographing the bird in flight was extremely difficult, I caught them on the ground a few times, once at an elevation of 5,000 meters in the western part of the Arjin Mountain Nature Reserve in Xinjiang bordering western Tibet.

In July 2004, my team saw them near our project site of Tumu Monastery in northwestern Sichuan. High up at a mountain pass, there must have been over a dozen of them circling above us, a rarity as they usually pair up but not flock together. Golden head gleaming and the beard protruding distinctly, I successfully captured images of them frozen in flight. Since then I have been waiting to return to the site, just to view and photograph this majestic bird.

Once, only once, I saw this golden bird hovering above Napahai in Zhongdian, just a kilometer or so from the CERS Center as I drove across a 3,500-meter high pass. That chance meeting confirmed to me that all three types of vultures – Himalayan Griffon (Gyps himalayensis), Cinereous Vulture (Aegypius monachus), and Bearded Vulture (Gypaetus barbatus), are all wintering in the high plateau of Yunnan. While the first species is still abundant throughout the plateau, the other two are rare and endangered.

The German ornithologist Bengt Berg went to the Himalayas in search of the gigantic bird around 1930, calling the journey a pilgrimage. With help from an old hunter, he found a nest of the Bearded Vulture high up among some ravines. Limitations with his camera and equipment stopped him from recording his discovery. He returned to Europe to procure a better camera and equipment. When he returned to the ravine and the nest, Berg suspended himself in a balloon basket using airplane cables, and successfully brought back some of the rarest pictures of the Bearded Vulture up close with newborn chicks. Using glass plates refilled inside his camera, he squatted for hours just a couple of meters away from the nest up high and in a precarious position until the mother bird returned with fresh meat to feed its young.

Today’s digital photography puts us in better control of such situations and rewards us with instantaneous gratification. At the same time, it deprives us of the anxiety of suspense and the satisfaction of a hard-won battle. Science and technology have indeed changed forever our value and appreciation of photography. The final words in Berg’s book revealed the excitement and anxiety during this chance meeting of a lifetime with the Lammergeier. It is a statement about the bird, as much as about photography and human dedication of the time.

“In made two shots of fifteen seconds, which is as long as I could dip the plates. One of them, shown here (in the book) is sharp. In the other one, the bird’s head was blurred. It was like a trashy romance – I swayed between fear and sorrow. Was the image there on the plate, or did I forget to close the cassette cover or any one of the things that one only notices when it is too late? I perspired completely with excitement, as we developed the film overnight and waited outside the make-shift dark room.”

“In the end, my film developer with the plates in a tray came out and seeing his peaceful expression, a heavy weight was lifted from my heart. That I knew, with what I had seen above (on the cliff), and had sworn in these hours of waiting, that in case not one of those plates were good, that I would never hold a camera again.”

On one Everest expedition, mountaineers reported seeing the bird soaring as high as 24,000 feet or close to 8,000 meters. While photographing the bird in flight was extremely difficult, I caught them on the ground a few times, once at an elevation of 5,000 meters in the western part of the Arjin Mountain Nature Reserve in Xinjiang bordering western Tibet.

T
Lightning flashed through the pre-morning sky, followed by a huge roar of thunder. Within a few seconds, a tropical rainstorm pummeled this quiet town of Luang Prabang, the ancient capital of Laos.

Quiet perhaps only because this was the unworldly hour of 5:30 am when most tourists at this UNESCO heritage site were still asleep. But enough of us were awake and gathered near a number of large monasteries in the north part of town. In fact, a couple of large buses had just dropped off their load of tourists who now lined the other side of the street, waiting to observe a ritualistic daily parade of the monks.

On this particular morning, everyone had to seek cover under shallow eave lines to shield themselves from the pouring rain. I stood across the street from a line-up of local supplicants. Baskets or flower pots in front of them, these were mainly local men and women on their knees, waiting for the arrival of monks to collect their daily alms. Unlike the tourists, they came prepared. As now they all had their umbrellas out to shield both themselves and the food they were about to dispense. Likewise the vendors came prepared. They went among the tourists to proffer a small basketful of rice, or a bouquet of flowers, so that these visitors could also participate in the alms giving.

The vendors must have been successful as suddenly I saw among the kneeling supplicants a few foreigners, drenched by the rain, also preparing to give alms. The rain subsided a bit. As soon as the first row of monks in their saffron robes with hoisted umbrellas began marching down the sidewalk, a few other tourists braved the rain and ran to the middle of the street to catch the scene with their cameras. I felt relaxed as I had witnessed such a ritual in a more original state more than 10 years ago during my first visit to Luang Prabang. Similar routines have been taking place in neighboring countries such as Thailand and Myanmar, probably for hundreds of years.

In 1999 and 2000, I had stayed at the Maison Souvannaphoum Hotel, a former private villa for a prince, at a modest price of US$40. Today this boutique hotel with 24 rooms has become the Angsana, a part of the famed Banyan Tree group of resorts and hotels. Just a week ago, the Amantaka Resort opened its door here, charging a staggering US$1,000 a night. Many homes were converted into hotels and hostels. Quaint and well decked out in local style, these places cost between $40 and $60, a great value for tourists while bolstering the local economy.

Richard Neo, the Angsana’s General Manager, is an old acquaintance who used to manage the Shangri-la Banyan Tree more than three years ago. We got a substantially discounted rate from him and stayed again at this well appointed villa. I asked Richard about the large number of recently arrived Chinese in town, much in evidence by the flood of business signs and the many Chinese restaurants. “These are all the ‘Nans’. From China, it seems peculiar that here in Laos, the Chinese all come from Hunan, Henan, Yunnan and even some from Hainan,” Richard said, throwing up his hands in a familiar grand gesture.

Richard was from Singapore and always spoke with much comical mimicking movements and facial expressions. In slightly over three years of being posted here, he had seen much growth in tourism. Even his boutique hotel had hosted celebrities including Mick Jagger, many big-time movie and sports stars, business tycoons and government high officials. Luang Prabang has become one of those “must-see” places for the rich and famous.
In fact, the boom within the tourism industry had had an obvious effect on the local population. What used to be a small plot of open ground for local vendors selling hill-tribe handicrafts and T-shirts had now become a long procession of street vendors extending for over half a kilometer as the main road is closed to traffic after dark to accommodate a pedestrian walk for tourists. Beyond this line-up of vendors are cafés and restaurants, antique and art stores, travel agents and upstairs hostels. Massage parlors were also plentiful in the side streets.

One small but significant sign of the changing economy is reflected in the popular use of mobile phones. Richard showed me the new cell phone he bought just two days ago. It was a small black Samsung model. “I paid only 190,000 Kips for it. That is equivalent to US$20,” Richard said. “Such things are becoming so cheap at the entry level as the phone makers have figured out that users are generally loyal to a brand and the functions of a phone.” They are counting on people who start to use their brand to eventually upgrade into their more pricey products, he said, explaining the business strategy behind the inexpensive phone.

“Christmas is coming up and I will go home for my vacation. So I have bought quite a few just to give away as gifts. Imagine, giving your friend a mobile phone like it’s no big deal. Of course I would not reveal the price I acquired them for,” Richard said with a laugh. I pestered him to take me to the phone store, and it turned out it was only a few steps from his hotel. My colleagues and I soon parted with a million or so Kips, but loaded up with new cell phones.

The current exchange rate for Laos Kips is 1,250 to one renminbi, or US15 cents. As we drove across the Yunnan border into Laos a few days ago, we exchanged Rmb 4,000 and had more than 5 million Kips to share among us.

I discovered that national boundaries here can be somewhat elastic, also. The Mekong which flows past Luang Prabang is an important lifeline and transport artery for the country. Slightly further upstream from where I was, the river defines the national border between Laos and Thailand: The east bank belongs to Laos and the west to Thailand. As with many borders divided by a river, the middle of the river becomes the national border.

At one large bend of the Mekong, there was an island which was marginally situated on the Laos side and thus belonged to Laos. But as the east bank of the river kept eroding it and land was lost to the water, the river became much widened. Suddenly the middle line had shifted enough that today the island fell within the Thai side and would effectively be considered Thai territory. This is perhaps one rare case in which erosion alone could change a national border. A Finnish group recently published this scenario as a case study.

The first night I stayed in Luang Prabang, CNN broadcast the Norwegian announcement of the latest Nobel Peace Prize laureate: the US President. As I listened, I felt that even important and respected awards are ‘fuzzy’ in Laos. For Luang Prabang, receiving the World Heritage designation would force the government to preserve its important cultural wealth. Perhaps the Peace Prize would likewise grease the wheels for the recipient to bring peace initiatives to troubled areas of the world, some of which were of their making in the first place. Barack Obama saying he felt humbled when he heard the news of the award was a good start. Perhaps giving the award based on hope is as important as recognizing results.
Namtha is a faraway province of Laos in the country’s northwestern corner. The capital of the province by the same name is less than 40 kilometers from the border of China. Tourists come here to visit some of the colorful hill tribes, or head west towards the infamous Golden Triangle where Laos, Myanmar and Thailand come together at a place that was once known as the opium capital of the world.

At a friend’s recommendation I stayed in an isolated hotel called Boat Landing. It was supposed to be an eco-friendly operator, in line with the new trend. Having few amenities, no air-conditioning and a non-flushing toilet suddenly became great selling points to jack up the prices a notch. A few bamboo shacks which housed half a dozen guest rooms and a few individual villas set among a wooded lot by the river attracted many young backpackers. We managed to book three rooms for one night, as the next day they were full to capacity.

Nearby was a makeshift pier for small boats, motorized or human powered, that went up and down the Namtha River, but mainly down toward the Mekong two days’ away. After checking in and relaxing in the porch overlooking the river, I strolled towards the restaurant as I saw over a dozen young Western tourists all cheering inside the restaurant/bar. I told my colleagues that it must be Happy Hour and we should hurry.

Soon I realized that it was a special meeting of the other hotel guests, obviously into some self-realization and team-building exercise with their facilitator. A “trainer” and a second “facilitator” were watching on the sideline quietly. The camaraderie reminded me of one such week-long event I was once inducted into in Hong Kong. I had walked out during a critical moment and got a full refund, and a letter of apology from the operator. With that, I ruined the fun and the gradually-built fulfillment and confidence for the rest of the group.

I rather like complimenting myself for that act of defiance, as only real leaders rather than good followers could have pulled it off. Nonetheless Namtha deep inside Laos seemed an unlikely place to see such a program being rehearsed and enacted. Maybe the available customers in big cities were running out, or we must be in an age of acute globalization. Namtha may be just part of the global village.

The next morning, I decided to go explore a section of the Mekong River which defines the national border between Laos and Myanmar. Very little was known about this region. As I had explored the source and the mouth of the Mekong which cuts through six countries, seeing this short mid-section where the river flows pass Myanmar is of utmost importance.

We drove for 58 kilometers to reach the town of Maung Sing. At a small local museum exhibiting costumes and pictures of the hill tribes, we asked about the direction and road to Maung Kar Nang, an Akha (Hani) village at the very end of a road by the bank of the Mekong. The museum keeper said the road was in disrepair and could not be negotiated. Especially during the rainy season, poor drainage gutted the roads and cars could not climb up. I defied her advice and began our journey right after lunch.

After driving 90 kilometers on dirt and rough roads, we arrived at the Mekong. Here was the tiny town of Xuen Ku, where we ran into a middle-aged lady from neighboring Mengla in China. Li Yingju came here seven years ago alone to manage a tiny hotel with wooden bungalows overlooking the Mekong. She had catered to the large corps of loggers coming in from China to chop down the forests and truck the timber back to China. She had catered to the large corps of loggers coming in from China to chop down the forests and truck the timber back to China. Recently, the Laos government terminated all such contracts and the loggers had returned home. Prior to this, even Laotian prostitutes would travel all the way to this remote town to serve a burgeoning business community.
“For a businessman meeting with the local officials over a banquet, these call-girls came along as part of the service and negotiation,” said Li. “Without such amenities, you can never close a deal.” But today the town was very quiet as everyone had long left when businesses were closed down. She told me six Chinese families live in town, and four owned sundry shops and two were restaurant owners – including herself. She had recently planted rubber and hired local helpers to tend to them. But, she lamented, one Chinese worker can do the same work as three locals.

Li was not busy and offered to take us across the river to a village on the Burmese side. We went to the local police to acquire the paperwork. But the official explained that the situation on the Burmese side recently had been turbulent, and the Laotian government did want to be responsible for Chinese nationals who visited Myanmar. For locals on either side, however, such visits were routine. I had to be satisfied with merely observing the somewhat murky water of the Mekong running by.

Li then escorted us to two villages along the bank of the Mekong. The first one belonged to the Kuchong people, similar in name to a very small minority group in Yunnan. Their bamboo houses on stilts with thatched roofs were basic. Everyone had abandoned their traditional clothing and dressed like any Chinese. I was surprised that they had one communal tap of running water. Some villagers were bathing as we stopped by to look. It turned out three years ago, a French non-governmental organization had installed plumbing in all nearby villages. This was a welcome change as the villagers no longer have to head down to the river to fetch water for drinking or cooking.

The Akha village had houses similar to those of the Kuchong, but their clothing was very different. Women wore elaborate silver headdresses and embroidered dresses. Also called Hani on the Chinese side, they had moved from the upland to the riverfront within the last few years. Many women, young or old, went about topless, with little children clinging on. It seemed all hard work was left to the women while the men were ‘busy’ drinking or taking a nap.

Opium, the former cash crop, had now been mostly eradicated, and former addicts were ushered into correctional centers. Today the Akha were learning to grow other cash crops but the competition with lowland Lao or Dai people for land and water for irrigation remain a major challenge. Obviously tourism must have penetrated even this remote village. With a mouthful of betel nuts and bloodied gum and teeth, the women put out their hands for money when I began taking a few pictures.

I would soon return to China and whatever remaining Kips we had with us would be useless. So this was a great photo session opportunity, and we generously unloaded several hundred thousand Kips as a tip.

The Akha village had houses similar to those of the Kuchong, but their clothing was very different. Women wore elaborate silver headdresses and embroidered dresses. Also called Hani on the Chinese side, they had moved from the upland to the riverfront within the last few years. Many women, young or old, went about topless, with little children clinging on. It seemed all hard work was left to the women while the men were ‘busy’ drinking or taking a nap.

Opium, the former cash crop, had now been mostly eradicated, and former addicts were ushered into correctional centers. Today the Akha were learning to grow other cash crops but the competition with lowland Lao or Dai people for land and water for irrigation remain a major challenge. Obviously tourism must have penetrated even this remote village. With a mouthful of betel nuts and bloodied gum and teeth, the women put out their hands for money when I began taking a few pictures.

I would soon return to China and whatever remaining Kips we had with us would be useless. So this was a great photo session opportunity, and we generously unloaded several hundred thousand Kips as a tip. **UPPER: An Akha young lady**  **LOWER: An Akha family at border village**
In fact, it wasn’t too painful to decline it as I did not even know who my real host was. It would have been like going to a wedding without knowing the host. The invitation had come from the State Council, and I personally do not know anyone in this important ruling branch of the government. I suspect the government must have noticed my quiet presence through numerous projects in the minority regions of China over the last 35 years. Regardless, it was an honor to have been invited and acknowledged. (I had attended the 30th Anniversary in Beijing in 1979).

I recalled World War II history, when General Stilwell was criticized by some military brass for leading his retreating army from Burma to India. Many strategists did not condone a high commander relegating himself to escorting soldiers on a march through the jungle when the General could have been airlifted out. As head of CERS, I could hardly be compared to a High Commander of a theater of War. Nonetheless, I felt strongly that the students could not be left unattended, especially when they needed logistic and moral support, as well as supervision.

At that moment, everything seemed calm at Haikou airport as I waited for the students to arrive from Singapore. But that might have been because I was sitting in the eye of the storm. At the next table in this coffee shop, another storm was brewing. A young woman dressed in a lace mini skirt had been holding her phone to her ear for a long time, never saying a word. The way she exhibited herself seemed to mean “business”. When she started looking my way, I dialed Bill Bleisch and chatted about CERS’ own domestic matters. Paul, our field biologist, was heading to Tokyo to meet his amorous friend, a Japanese professor who couldn’t get on the same flight and had to detour through Haikou. In between I greeted three students flying in from Singapore, when floodwater recedes. Thus began my foray for the eighth time in two years into this mountain enclave. In fact, my planned presence was short as I had to return to Hong Kong by October 2 for a wedding, and I knew the host well. My job would be to inspect the flooded bridge and see the student group settle in to wait out the situation. Fortunately, right after lunch, Wang Jian arrived in our Land Rover and informed me that the water had receded quite a bit, though it was still almost waist-high. The villagers managed to get a tractor, loaded with stones to weigh itself against the current, across the bridge. So he also braved the water and got across.

Today, I maneuvered and acquired a 4x4 vehicle, delivering us to the most forward position at Wang Xia Village, still 10 kilometers from Hong Shui. My intention was to inspect the flooded bridge and see the student group settle in to wait out the situation. Unfortunately, right after lunch, Wang Jian arrived in our Land Rover and informed me that the water had receded quite a bit, though it was still almost waist-high. The villagers managed to get a tractor, loaded with stones to weigh itself against the current, across the bridge. So he also braved the water and got across.

I escorted everyone to the bridge just in time to observe villagers, four or more to a team, hauling their motorcycles across the torrent. School children were being let off today for the long holidays of National Day and Mid-autumn Festival. Long lines of them were forming at the bridgehead as parents and volunteers chaperoned them, on backs or clinging to each other, across the still-flooded bridge. After recording the scene, I urged Wang Jian to quickly transfer the luggage and get on their way. I waved good-bye to the students as I watched our Land Rover cross the overflowing river precariously. Once they were safely across, I turned around and headed back to Changjiang County for my long night journey back to Haikou.

Back at another street restaurant in Haikou and over a bottle of beer, I enjoyed my quiet dinner of fried crab and clams. I recalled my first trip here 25 years ago when two lobsters cost me five renminbi, less than 75 cents US; today, my crab costs RMB75, nearly US$11. Back then, five renminbi would be a worker’s wages for a week. Today most people could afford the same dinner I had.

10:00 Friday Oct 1: Glued to the big screen TV in front of me at the hotel coffee shop in Haikou, I have been watching the preparation of the parade at Tian An Men Square. There is a bit of regret that I was not there in person, having declined the invitation to attend. My consolation is that the students and professors were now safely at my project site, deep inside the mountain with the Li minority to make a film about the last vestige of their fading culture.

The TV flashed back to 60 years ago with scenes of the first military parade in 1949. During that National Day parade, some of the cannons were pulled by mules as they passed through Tian An Men, a reflection of the primitive state of the army corps. Seventeen planes flew past, but spectators thought there were more as some planes turned around and did a second fly-by to inflate the size of the fledgling air fleet. The situation was still so precarious in the country that the planes had to carry full armament during the parade in case of a surprise attack. The difference between then and now was like night and day given today’s superior and multi-function jet task force.

The military marching songs filled the TV screen as a poem came to mind.

“Alone in the tower I gazed at the imperial capital, the distance would take a bird half a year to travel....”

These were words of Li Deyu, China’s prime minister during the Tang Dynasty in the 9th Century. Li wrote this poem while banished to Hainan as a political exile from the central court. I, however, came by choice. For the moment, my thoughts, like Li, stayed with Beijing in the capital. Perhaps, if invited again, I would join the celebration 30 years hence, when China – and I – turn 90.
W hen you come across a dilapidated village clinging to the last vestige of its past, a wise person will choose to leave it alone. Few would choose to fix it as there would be a long string of hurdles to overcome, including finding the time and resources. CERS, unfortunately, is cursed with many such unwise individuals.

My team and I first set eyes on Hong Shui Village in March 2007. The village’s fate was almost sealed with the demolition of the entire village scheduled within two weeks. It was to be replaced by cement and brick houses which the government encouraged as substitutes for the traditional “makeshift” architecture. I could have lamented the demise of yet another icon of a unique ethnic group, written about it, and mourned its departure. I could have documented its passing with a few photographs and some video footage. That would have saved my colleagues and I heaps of trouble over the next few years, and most people would have chosen that route.

Instead, CERS sprang into action. Numerous calls were made to important government officials to stall the imminent bulldozing of the last intact traditional village of the indigenous Li people of Hainan. This minority has a population of 1.2 million people. Our appeal got a moratorium on the demolition from the government for a few weeks. By the end of March I returned with a proposal to preserve at least a dozen or so of these thatch-roofed houses. At the end, our appeal found the right ears and the government decided to preserve the entire village of over 70 houses. CERS would spearhead the preservation and restoration effort by developing alternative uses for up to 20 houses.

Fast-forward two years and many return trips. The first phase is finished with nine houses restored, including three done quite nicely, turning traditional sheds into resort-like villa models. A large team of student interns came during the summer and collected objects for our future museum exhibits, to be created as a second phase by modifying five to six thatch-roofed houses.

One of these houses would become a small theater showing documentary films which focus on a number of topics, from eclipsing culture and tradition to documenting the socio-economic changes’ impacts on the villagers. With me on this trip are 11 film students from Singapore and their professors. They are here for a second time to put together a number of short films for future use in the intended theater.

As is often the case, a people’s aspiration to modernize, change and become homogenized with mainstream society is directly opposite to what tourists interested in indigenous culture and traditional lifestyles consider attractive. How to moderate with innovation and build upon both tradition and modernity is an issue CERS takes up as a challenge with the Hainan model.

We have also successfully attracted media attention from the US (Wall Street Journal), the UK (Royal Geographical Society Journal), Singapore (Straits Times), Hong Kong (TVB), Taiwan (Rhythms Magazine), and from within China (Hainan Daily). On this trip, a producer from Beijing CCTV is also here to discuss a future story.

But the real hard work is still ahead of us. Our third phase would be most challenging: how to maintain some select activities and keep some cultural aspects alive, and be at the same time economically sustainable. This calls for a well integrated approach including a management plan, as well as training locals to be custodians of their own cultural heritage. Ideally we would create a model that would meet the needs of the outside market, be it a select tourism market niche, or merchandising of arts and crafts, providing the village and the villagers with a new lease on life that has a linkage to their past.

The outcome is what I call “equitable conservation”. In a few years, we may know whether we can reach that destiny. In the mean time, there is little time to dream about it as we work hard to move towards the next stage.

As I look at the highest peak across the river from Hong Shui Village, I can see a new tower being erected. Once activated, it will provide mobile telephone service for the village. For now, each day we must drive or hike to a high point where our phone or Blackberry can receive one or two bars of signal from some distant tower.

With finishing touches being put to a paved road, television antennas saturating each home, electricity and water being assured, Hong Shui is embarking on a milestone journey into the modern world. While villagers march into a promising future, perhaps in another generation or two, they will also come to appreciate the remnants of their past we are preserving.
Here I am at Inle Lake in the midst of a tropical winter. Cooled by the surrounding lake, this is a rather chilly morning for a habitual visitor who came leisurely unprepared with only summer clothes. While the air is crisp and fresh, I brace myself with a wool blanket and take to the balcony as the morning mist drifts above the water channels and in between tree lines.

As the first ray of sun rises above the distant hills, the silhouette of a column of black-colored Glossy Ibis glides in front of me. They make a circular fly-by before gracefully landing in a harvested field. Another flock of white egrets have already taken up their position in the same plot and started a new day with a hearty breakfast of small fish and crustaceans in the marshy field.

The smell of burned grass permeates the air as a breeze carries smoke from a nearby burned field my way. Farmers are preparing their next season’s planting by scorching the harvested sugarcane field to fertilize it for the next crop. Such rotation has been practiced for generations. The Inthar Heritage House in which I am staying, rebuilt in its original style with old timber, must have witnessed such routines throughout the ages.

I take a sip of coffee from my mug and add an occasional shot of liquor to spice it up. On this particular morning, that tint of whisky is slightly intoxicating as I behold the dream-like setting surrounding this isolated house with open fields on all sides.

Just as I am carried away by this pristine and rural paradise of remote Myanmar, a cat’s meow from the floor below reminds me of the purpose of my visit. Twenty-four cats, including two newborn kittens, are housemates sharing these quarters with me. In fact they are the masters of this house, whereas I am just an overnight boarder.
My partner at Inle Lake has turned this historical and traditional Burmese house into a Burmese Cat Café. My close friend Ohn Maung and his daughter Misuu restored the house to its original shape to create a permanent home for these regal Burmese cats.

The Burmese cat had become obsolete within its homeland for almost a century and CERS set out to source pedigree Burmese cats from around the world and return some breeding stock to the country. The Burmese cats’ long journey home had taken almost three years of collaborating and coordinating efforts. Now, together with our local partner, we are enjoying some early success.

With this elegant traditional house of the Inthar people of Inle Lake as quarters, the Burmese cat can again grace the land of its origin and complement the integrity and pride of an ancient kingdom. Many visitors have come within a month of the inauguration of the Inthar Heritage House and the Burmese Cat Café. Locals from the lake area and as far away as the old capital of Yangon have heard about it. Word of mouth spread quickly and even a high monk asked to have one of these cats, once revered as temple cats, as his companion. Recently even the London Times published a special feature about our reintroduction of Burmese Cats to Myanmar.

At nearby Inle Princess Resort where our breeding farm is located, we have an additional 17 cats. Several others are already in private homes including two repatriated to Yangon. A spacious room at the Inthar Heritage House was specially outfitted as a bedroom in case I wanted to spend time with our cats. I took up the first opportunity with no hesitation, and am now enjoying this morning with the felines.

On the huge deck above the cat’s quarters, I have a sumptuous breakfast of Shan noodles while catching the warmth of a winter sun. I have to hurry just a little as soon boatloads of visitors would begin arriving. The Cat Café has become a must-stop for tourists arriving at Inle Lake. Pamphlets inform visitors from all over the world that these are the regal Burmese cats to whom they should pay respect. Tribute in donation is welcome, but signs posted warn visitors from feeding our Burmese cats, as pets they are not.

There is ample space for visitors to sip tea, enjoy light snacks, or even watch a documentary film about the evolution of this unusual project. A library and reading room is stocked with books on Myanmar including many history and antiquity books. Many books on cats from around the world are secured inside a bookcase. There are many comic books with cats as the main theme, including a Garfield Webster Dictionary.

Satisfied with a night at the Inthar Heritage House with the Burmese cats, I go back to the Inle Princess Resort and drive up the hill to a local monastery. I have to make a prayer thanking the gods for allowing us the opportunity to successfully execute such a wonderful project, with demonstrated results within a rather short time.

Driving this old Willys Jeep, the uneven and curvy road offers a rather bumpy ride as the car was made before the era of coil-spring suspension and shock absorbers. My daughter Audrey calls out from the back seat, “Let the real car pass”. A white Toyota sedan was coming up behind. It looked like a model from the 1970s and the Jeep I am driving is of 1949 vintage, the same as me.

I suddenly feel as though the clock has been turned back many decades to the days when the Burmese cats reigned supreme in temples and royal palaces. With the Inthar Heritage House now in place, those days could soon return.
CERS IN THE FIELD

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: Barry Lam and How Man at Khawakarpo; CERS team packing in the snow; How Man with daughter Audrey in 1949 Jeep; CERS Associate Filmmaker Chris Dickinson demonstrating to students; How Man readying for the cranes.

NEWS NEWS NEWS

CERS launched a winter expedition to observe the Wild Yak of the Qilian Mountains in northwest China, then skirted Inner Mongolia’s Gobi Desert. CERS Associate Filmmaker Chris Dickinson documents the trip on film. This trek occurs during one of the worst winter seasons in recent years.

Following the Inthar Heritage House inauguration - where the Burmese Cat Café at Inle Lake is located - CERS continues exploring Myanmar, a country largely unknown to the outside.

Singapore’s Nanyang Technological University sent a group of film, photography and design students and professors to CERS project site on Hainan Island where they recorded the last intact Li minority village in film and photographs.

Land Rover and CERS extended their partnership for another two years.

CERS IN THE MEDIA

- London’s The Times published an article about the Burmese cat project conducted by CERS and its partner in Myanmar. Another version of this article was posted online at Times.com.
- Al Jazeera TV has made a regular promo film using the interview Riz Khan had done with How Man.
- The original half-hour interview aired on its One on One program.
- CCTV of Beijing replayed many of their features on CERS, including a special on caving and a program on the sources of three great rivers.

The original half-hour interview from the Asian Geographic Magazine based on its story on Tibet.

LEFT: Students and professors of Singapore Technological University
RIGHT: Moon Chin speaking of his HUMP flying days in San Francisco
After two years, three new Land Rover Defenders finally landed in China. We thank Patrick Wang for his generous support, and also Land Rover UK for providing major conversions to these vehicles for expedition use.

Judith Corrente made a major donation to CERS following her attendance at the CERS annual dinner in Hong Kong.

Anish Lalvani became a new patron of CERS. Audrey Lo and Christabel Lee have renewed their CERS patronage.

CERS received from Omega a select number of the limited edition China Explorer watches for our fundraising use.

Rockefeller Philanthropic Advisors which provides services for our donors in the US has made special provision in support of CERS.

Quanta Computers donated computer equipment for CERS archival project.

Shun Hing donated two LCD TVs for the Inthar Heritage House to show the Burmese cat film.

Jebsen & Company donated photographic equipment for CERS archival needs.

FreePlay donated a number of hand-wind lighting devices for CERS field use.

Canon Singapore donated a color printer for our field use.

CERS thank all supporters of our 13th annual dinner who provided table gifts and lucky draw items. They include Coca-Cola China, William E. Connor & Associates, Cultures by Toni P Ltd, Esquel Group, Estee Lauder Companies, Eu Yan Sang Intl Ltd, Jebsen & Co, Omega, Oregon Scientific, Lee Kum Kee Co. Ltd., Luxasia (HK) Ltd., Mainland Sewing Headwear Mfg. Ltd., Shanghai Tang, Shun Hing Group, Toppan Vite Limited, Tiffany & Co., “Valentine Bijoux” – Italy Precious Fashion Jewellery and Yan Seng Factory Limited. Omega generously provided a Speedmaster Professional Moonwatch Apollo 11 “40th Anniversary” limited edition watch for auction. We also thank Nury Vittachi, the Master of Ceremonies, and thank those who volunteered their services before and during the dinner.