C H I N A
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CLOCKWISE FROM TOP:
Street market by the lower Mekong in Vietnam, Palace gate of Phnom Penh in Cambodia, the CNAC and CATC pilots and crew who defected to China in 1949, Tibetans on motorcycles.
As we wrapped up the end of the year, I took inventory of CERS’ accomplishments: three documentary films; two animation films; three new books; publication in scientific journals; public and private lectures; several education and internship programs; the opening of an archival office; upgrades to our theme museums; and progress in several projects and scientific research.

CERS is a small and intimate organisation - some may even say we pretend to be small. Being big may catch the eye, while being small may touch the heart. I’m not only proud of how many projects we accomplished with efficiency and results, but that they required only limited human and financial resources. This principal will remain one of CERS core values.

It is the first day of 2011 and it seems appropriate that I am at our Burmese Cat Café, deep inside Myanmar’s Shan State. What started as a simple idea and a “pet project” has become reality, bearing figurative as well as literal results. Perhaps that is what differentiates a vision from a dream.

We succeeded in returning an important heritage to Myanmar. Before our reintroduction of the cats, this pedigree had disappeared from this country which has gone through some turbulent times in recent history. A breeding stock of four cats has multiplied to more than 50, now being kept and cared for in some of the most distinguished homes in the country, including one with Aung San Suu Kyi. As these cats continue to breed, they will eventually be found in regular homes.

Few projects within the CERS stable can be called “pet” projects; the Tibetan Mastiff kennel is another. Most projects we take on have a conservation and research focus, vital to nature or culture, especially urgent in these times of massive change and break-neck development.

Just as the “Made in China” label is ubiquitous around the world and the renminbi is on its way to becoming convertible, CERS has been exploring beyond the confines of China’s geographic, political and cultural borders. We have explored the Mekong River within China. It is imperative and logical that we expand our knowledge and attempt to understand the other five countries through which this important international river flows. Two of the main articles in this issue address the river’s lower reaches.

This year CERS turns 25. Our exploration spirit has always permeated everything we do, and continues to keep us young and youthful. Championing that spirit and the legacy of our first quarter-century will remain high on our agenda for 2011.
Jiulong is one of eighteen counties within Ganzi Tibetan Prefecture of western Sichuan. Because of its location, neither along the northern or southern route into Tibet, few people visit this spectacular county. The Yalong River, one of the four rivers which make up the name Sichuan (Four Rivers), flows through Jiulong. Because of its close proximity to Mt Gongga (7556 meters), the northeastern flank of the county is of very high elevation, producing one of the biggest domestic yaks within the Tibetan plateau.

Wong How Man
Jiulong, Sichuan – December 15, 2010

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: Prayer flags and defense towers in fortified village, Frosted trees of Jiuling, Stupas guarding entrance to a village.
MAIN: Mountain pass in Jiulong before the descent into the Yalong River.
TOP: Winter landscape with monastery.
BOTTOM: Farm houses of Jiulong.
This place is secretive like a missile base. Maybe our work is as important as the atomic bomb,” Cai Yonghua said wryly. Cai is Director of the Dujiangyan Musk Deer Breeding Research Institute. “For us to be able to sell the musk, we need approval stamps from up to six ministries, and only to a few approved client recipients.

“The panda is world-famous as an endangered animal. The Musk Deer, likewise, is Class One protected. The Panda, however, is only good for appreciation, whereas this deer can save a lot of lives. That is, if the government would deregulate and allow us to use market forces to grow this into an industry,” Cai said, revealing his thoughts about the “research institute” over which he is in charge.

Today, a group of Koreans are here, not to discuss purchases, but trying to learn more about the research results and secrets of this project. Russians and Japanese have also eagerly sought information. Over the years, many have come and gone, empty handed. The government heavily censors and restricts any leaks of information regarding the keeping, domesticating, breeding, raising and harvesting of the Musk Deer.

Such secrecy is understandable, given the high price of the musk, used for centuries by leading perfumeries, and as key ingredient of many remedies in Chinese and other Asian traditional medicines. The supply has progressively become smaller and smaller while demand is getting bigger all the time. The perfume industry has long been cut out of the deal and largely uses artificial or synthetic fragrance as a substitute. But traditional medicine has yet to find a worthy replacement for the musk. “Over 400 important medicinal remedies require musk as a key ingredient in traditional medicine, but there is so little we can produce,” Cai said.

The Musk Deer’s natural habitat has shrunken dramatically, leading to a huge decrease in animals in the wild. Hunting is now prohibited, further diminishing the musk supply in the open market. But whenever there is a huge supply shortage, someone will work, or kill, to meet the demand. So poaching by using snares and traps has gone up within the Musk Deer’s range. Almost in all cases, animals caught by such methods die. Only male deer produce musk, and only for part of the year. The indiscriminate capturing method is a huge waste, significantly reducing Musk Deers numbers - including the females which are crucial for species regeneration.

At any point in recent history, musk has sold at a much higher price than gold, ounce for ounce. Currently, it is quoted at
around twice that of gold, that is, after a 23% hike in gold prices in 2010 to more than US$45,000 a kilogram. The Government controlled and depressed prices, putting musk at RMB600,000 a kilogram. This amount is already twice that of 2002 when the government began prohibiting the use of musk derived from wild Musk Deer. At the three sites this institute administers, only about 8kg are harvested each year. Would-be buyers must be extremely well connected to get the actual commodity in their hands. It is one of those hot items for which there is a price, but no product available to deliver, even after one agrees to pay an exorbitant price.

A small amount of this high-priced commodity seems to circulate among a close circle of select high cadres within China. During the height of the SARS outbreak in Asia, my close friend Qijala, then Party Secretary of Diqing Tibetan Prefecture in Yunnan, gave me a tiny packet. He whispered that it contained musk powder and that it was the best preventative from catching the contagious disease. Myth or hearsay, I kept it in my pocket throughout that ordeal.
Due perhaps to Japan’s occupation of northern China and Manchuria in northeastern China in the past, musk derived from the Forest Musk and Siberian Musk from these regions had traditionally been exported to Japan. Before China’s recent economic boom and privatization provided new impetus to more enterprising trading practices, up to 80% of China’s musk went straight to Japan. Even century-old traditional Chinese medicine companies like Eu Yan Sang had to acquire their quota of musk through Japanese sources. Today, almost all legally produced musk is sold within the China market as the internal demand out-paced and out-priced foreign markets. In fact, there is little means to calculate yearly musk yields. After local consumption began to escalate, there has been no accurate data collection. Transactions are conducted quietly before the product reaches the open market.

Despite the mysterious legends surrounding the Musk Deer, few people know what the animal looks like. The Musk Deer - “She Xiang” in Chinese or “Zhang Zi” among the village market place - is a small deer-like animal. It has no antlers. Instead both males and females possess clearly elongated upper canine teeth that project far below the lower lip and are easily visible even when the mouth is closed. Adult males, three years or older, have a musk gland between the naval and genitals at the edge of the upper thigh that secretes a brownish wax-like substance. Known as musk, it is a much valued ingredient used in perfumes and traditional medicine. There are five species of Musk Deer, all of which exist in China, with the Forest and Alpine Musk Deer being largest in numbers.

Yunnan alone host three species of Musk Deer. CERS is now coordinating a multi-year study of this little-known high-value animal to better protect the species, and further develop it for future sustainable use. Field studies and our visit to this Musk Deer farm are part of our program to better understand this animal.

This Dujiangyan facility, and two other facilities under the Institute’s management, hold up to 90% of the captive population of Musk Deer in China. Until three years ago, they totaled almost 1,600 animals. The devastating 2008 earthquake in Sichuan destroyed much of the fencing and many of the captive deer escaped into the wild. Of about 600 animals in two facilities, only about 40 remain today. The farm at Ma’erkang of Aba Tibetan Prefecture was more fortunate. Of about 1,000 animals, 700 remained.

At our initial meeting at the farm, Director Cai reminded us that no photography is allowed. As soon as he was out of sight, Chief Engineer Wang Chengxu took us for a tour of the farm where the Musk Deer are kept. Inside the fenced-off grounds, Wang nodded in approval for us to use our cameras. Cai’s cautionary reminder was simply ceremonial, much like a façade for the government regulations. In practice, they keep only technological aspects.
under wraps, especially guarding against foreign guests. With us they chatted quite openly with our researchers.

CERS resident biologist Dr Paul Buzzard, Science Director Dr Bill Bleisch and PhD candidate Li Xueyou, in charge of our research, asked many questions and Wang was most helpful in answering. We even collected hair and blood samples for DNA classification and analysis.

I managed to get close-up pictures of the Musk Deer, including two newborn fawns, dispelling the myth that this animal is shy and alert and would jump at the slightest noise or scent. I had heard that even the sound of a falling leaf could send a Musk Deer running off into the forest. Here they seemed so well domesticated that our intrusion did not seem to raise the slightest concern. We could approach to within two to three meters of them. In the wild, our scientists had to set up camera traps, hoping to photograph them in deep forest with little to no human activities. My close encounter was most rewarding as I have been contemplating raising a few Musk Deer near our Zhongdian Center.

When we finally rose to leave, we felt a state secret had been partially unveiled. “Let’s hope future study will help unlock the huge value of this animal, and we, too, will no longer have to work stealthily in the dark,” Wang remarked. After all, he has been working in this farm and research institute for more than 20 years, and is just about ready to retire.

Like market forces in all parts of China, I strongly believe that if the government would unleash its strong hold on the technology in captive breeding and musk harvest, we could see a huge increase in the Musk Deer’s population in private farms. This could enlarge musk production in a sustainable way for the future. Perhaps there will be a time when the price of musk would be at par with gold, or even cheaper. It should not be kept artificially high, but become everyone who needs it for medicinal purposes could afford it. Until then, musk’s true value cannot be fully realized.
In snowy southern Illinois, the end of the year found me not only enjoying the final games of the college football season - including a long-awaited University of Illinois bowl victory - but also looking forward to future Musk Deer research. In a previous report, “Looking for the elusive Musk Deer”, I wrote about the uniqueness of the endangered Musk Deer, threats to their conservation and my pilot research in the forests near the CERS-supported yak cheese factory near Langdu in northwest Yunnan. In the meantime, we have recruited Li Xueyou, a PhD student from the Kunming Institute of Zoology, to collaborate in the study. We also continued pilot work at the forests near Langdu as well as several other forests around northwest Yunnan.

At Langdu, Li conducted more transects to look for Musk Deer dung, and also set up camera traps to “capture” photos of Musk Deer and other wildlife. Musk Deer dung and hair were found as well as the dung from several other ungulates, but unfortunately no pictures of musk deer were captured. The camera traps were out only for a short time, however, and maybe the Musk Deer avoided the disturbed habitat. Care was taken to set up the cameras with minimal impact on the environment but the Musk Deer are likely very wary because of the intense hunting pressure. Several snares
Another aspect of the Musk Deer project is trying to understand more about Musk Deer production in captivity and ways to improve it. To begin this aspect of the project we visited the largest Musk Deer farm in China, at Dujiangyan, Sichuan. We learned about raising Musk Deer, the problems they encountered due to the May 2008 earthquake and the marketing of musk. We also collected blood samples for future genetic studies. Clearly demand for musk is still great, and there is much interest by the government in musk production. Improving Musk Deer conservation in the wild will greatly help Musk Deer management because it will allow for easier exchange of Musk Deer between farms. Moreover, a healthy wild population will provide a source of genetic resources in case captive populations become too inbred, and a buffer against potential losses. We also discussed the possibility of captive studies near Langdu to help with deer management.

Li also completed pilot studies in four other areas including forests of Gaoligongshan, Ma’ershan, Longmashan, and Laojunshan. Unfortunately, the evidence of Musk Deer in most of these forests was not as strong as at Langdu. Longmashan, a forested area north of the CERS golden monkey and Lisu site at Weixi, was a notable exception, though. At Longmashan Musk Deer dung and hair were found on forest surveys showing that the Musk Deer prefer to use the habitats covered by conifer forest, less than 500 meters from water, with moderate tree density, a medium slope and a high altitude, of 2,800m or more. Unfortunately, illegal hunting is a terrible problem for Musk Deer in these areas as it was in Langdu, and more than 10 traps could be found in one transect. Even in Longmashan, which is a nature preserve, with no hunting allowed, poachers frequently sneak in. Beginning in spring 2011 we will revisit the forests and use camera traps to learn more about the remaining wildlife.

At Longmashan we also found direct evidence of Musk Deer activity in trees. In fact, hair and dung were found at resting sites in trees about two metres above the ground. It has already been documented that Musk Deer feed in trees, but finding direct evidence first hand was a real treat. According to locals, the Musk Deer also give birth on large branches of trees, and if true this would add greatly to our knowledge of their use of arboreal strata. Maybe we can put some cameras up in trees to document this unique behavior.

This study will not only be about the Musk Deer ecology but also about the influence of different minorities and how they hunt and use the animal. The forests chosen provide an ideal opportunity for this because different minorities - Tibetans, Lisu, Bia and Dulong - predominate the different forests. Preliminary interviews indicated that Dulong, Lisu and Bai use the musk for medicines such as for curing snake bites, particularly in livestock, and rheumatic fever. The isolation of Gaoligongshan made it difficult to trade musk, but in the other areas, musk was almost always traded.

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This morning, I took an extraordinarily long shower, totaling 20 minutes. My usual shower lasts less than five. Not that I am filthy, but I am soaking up my quota for the next 10 days as I am not likely to get another decent shower once I get onboard the boat to sail up the Mekong.

This is not your usual cruise ship or yacht, but a very local houseboat which will take my team of five on a river exploration from the delta, hopefully, to Cambodia. Managing expectations was one lesson I learned at Harvard Business School, although the program was designed for non-governmental organisations like ours, so I begin with my personal hygiene. Everyone in the team was warned about the limited resources and conveniences. The ‘toilet’ is three thin planks in an exposed space in the back of the boat, with the middle plank missing. Water must be managed carefully. We bought six five-gallon distilled bottles, for just US$2 apiece.

My last shower in the hotel also allows me to contemplate the road, or river road, ahead. Suddenly I remember that we have only got a single-entry visa into Vietnam, but certainly we need to sail back to near Saigon to fly home. But this is of little consequence for someone who makes exploration his career. We’ll deal with it when we need to. The world is full of twists and turns, even in the diplomatic world and with foreign policy. They adapt, or we will, when the time comes.

My usual motto comes to mind: “It is easier to ask for forgiveness than permission.” I console myself that my APEC card may give me some immunity, since some countries allow cardholders to go the diplomatic line at airports. I am also skipping my functionary duty as a Political Consultative Council delegate in neighboring Yunnan Province. I am here in Vietnam rather than at the council’s yearly gathering to perform the mechanical act of clapping hands and voting yes to motions.

Yesterday, we drove through choking motorcycle traffic, during peak hours when everyone got off work, to the district selling hardware. We managed to buy a brand new, but necessarily small generator. Our boat has no electricity, and we must rig our own if we want to charge batteries, download pictures onto the computer, and have some lighting in the long evenings and nights we were to spend onboard this boat.

That the single Horse machine was made in China is no surprise. That is cost only US$100 is. No doubt the world is complaining, most noisily in the US, about one-way trade surpluses with such competitive pricing. Little league players like Vietnam, on the
other hand, may not raise so much fuss. After all, it has grains aplenty, and other resources like coal, crude oil and rubber, to moderate the trade balance with China. The shop owner showed us a beat-up Yamaha machine for about the same price. I knew he didn’t have much respect for this old horse as he casually put his foot on it while pulling the cord to start it. For once, my patriotism matches my good sense in a purchase.

Jan 12  17:35

“Yum Jao,” said the man with a red chin and dark complexion. In front of him was a bottle of what looked like brandy or whisky. “Yum Jao,” he called out to me once again. I gathered that must mean “drink some liquor” as that’s what it sounds like in Cantonese.

Just minutes ago I asked our boat captain Ly Hung to dock the boat so we could get to shore and watch two guys dropping and pulling up a fishing net. Their device has a unique structure. When the men walked on one side of this see-saw wood with a 130-degree V-shape, the suspended net would fall into the river. When the motion is reversed every minute or so toward the opposite side of two connected poles, the net would come up, an ingenious way of using mechanical leverage. On the best of days, they may catch as much as 300kg of fish; on a bad day, they may yield only 30kg, mainly a tiny minnow-like fish called Linh. As it turned out, the man on the bank is more than a casual drinker, reflected in his name: Whisky. He is the boss running this fishing joint, together with a restaurant, and there is more to this outfit with the river on one side and a street on the other. Behind his house, next door to his father’s, is a sizable fish pond. In it, he raises balsa fish and exports them to America. His helper put in fish feed to show me that the pond is flooded with these fish. Last year, Whisky sold 300 tons of them. A netted area by the pond is where he raises big ugly frogs that are said to be palatable.

Whisky was also eager to show me his pig sty. Under what looks like a warehouse, he stored his fish feed. Next to it there are a few dozen pigs, big and small. Two particularly large ones each weigh about 200kg. He proudly told me that each year he sells about 1,000kg of pigs. At the age of 42, Whisky is quite an entrepreneur.

The three Chinese characters, “xin hui de”, meaning “new maintenance virtue”, carved on the cement slab above the front of his door, caught my eye. Whisky gave a big grin and told my interpreter Linh that his family was from Guangdong and he is the fifth generation in Vietnam.

This village by the Mekong seems to have some Chinese inhabitants. In a kiosk by the bank, two young boys, maybe 10 years or younger, were playing Chinese chess as three others of about the same age looked on. All the pieces use Chinese characters. As I took leave and our boat pulled away from...
the bank, Whisky kept waving, saying “She-she, she-she”, or “thank you” in Chinese.

Our boat owner and captain Ly Hung was born in 1961. During the Tet Offensive in 1968, he was barely 7 years old. But he remembered at the height of the Vietnam War in 1972, when he was 11, their family fled the battlefront, moving from place to place. Rice planted never got harvested as the farmers kept moving on to avoid the war.

Hung was proud that their people in the countryside in the south were turned into resistance fighters, gathering intelligence for the Viet Cong. By providing information of troop movements, they were able to set up mines ahead of the advancing or retreating army. Ultimately in 1975 the US was driven out and unification finally triumphed over division of their country.

Hung was chosen to take us up the Mekong to Cambodia because he used to make such trips as a deck hand many years ago. Then, a four-ton boat loaded with coconut arriving in Cambodia would be worth a “kilo of gold”, he said. I questioned Linh’s interpretation, as a kilo of gold would have cost millions even 10 years ago. He must have been carrying cocaine rather than coconut, I mused. It turned out that by “one kilo”, he meant a local scale of measurement roughly equivalent to the weight of three gold rings, or US$500, a huge sum in those days.

The first night sleeping below deck offered a different experience. Despite having a protective net over my head and shoulder, I woke up with dozens of tiny red specks all over my leg and thigh. Swarms of mosquitoes had descended upon us and feasted through the night. I didn’t dare to lament as the other members all complained of being bombarded by yet another spell of “thunderous noise” which kept them up most of the night. I told them that Freud said people who dreamed of someone snoring must be sleeping very soundly, and that to have all four in my party sharing such dreams must be a great coincidence. They fumed at me all the more. At the next town, we scrambled to shore and bought a large mosquito net that could comfortably cover half a dozen people.
This morning we were at the water market of Can Tho. What used to be one of the busiest river markets is gradually dying. There are far fewer boats even when compared to my last visit just three years ago. Tourist boats, however, seem to be multiplying. Thanks to the new roads and bridges built at the delta, transporting goods has become far easier and cheaper over land than by water, eclipsing the traditional and historic markets on the river. Soon the tourism bureau may have to pay boat vendors and hawkers a subsidy to keep such activities alive.

January 13 19:30

By the third day on the boat, good sense trumped over patriotism, and the generator broke down. A small screw attached to the fuel hose cracked and the machine stopped. We had to stop in the nearby city of Long Xuyen to buy some glue to hold it together.

Near Long Xuyen is a much larger floating market. There were lines of boats like a wholesale market, and smaller retail boats. Each of the boats has a bamboo pole, on which hung a sample of the merchandise or produce for sale. Most boats have one commodity, be it watermelon, pumpkin, coconut, or cabbage. More affluent boats may have several items for sale. Tiny rowboats and motorized boats ply the waterway selling cooked food or other amenities.

Today I had my proudest moment since boarding the boat. I finally picked up enough courage to squat over the two wooden planks, and watched my excrement join the Mekong water flowing towards the sea. Other discomforts began taking a toll on my body. After sleeping two nights on a wooden hard floor with no padding, my upper back, shoulder and neck all began to hurt. Unfortunately there is no complaint department on this “cruise ship”. Besides, I was responsible for starting this whole ordeal.

The river teems with life. In the morning and evening, many people go down to the river bank and wash themselves. Local legend has it that men would get darker bathing in the Mekong whereas women would get more white and fair using the same water. Babies, vegetables, dishes and clothes all get washed in the river. Children play in the water, some learning to swim or just having fun. They waved as our boat went by while we snapped more pictures.

Fishing is a perpetual preoccupation on the river, be it someone casting a net, a small trawler boat tugging a set of nets, someone casting a net, using a rod or just a line. Of all types of fishing, perhaps fish farms are the most productive and lucrative. Sau Luon, 48, was a farmer up until five years ago. He turned to starting a fish farm after seeing other farmers transition into this new business.

Like others along the river, he and his family built a metal floating house. Inside are wired basins sunken into the river as they keep their stock of fish in such tanks, kept fresh and aerated by the flow of the Mekong. Here is where they also keep stacks upon stack of fish food. A grinding machine can smash other cheap river fish into a paste which then would be used to feed the more valuable stock. Behind the house is another canopied float with more such fish tanks.

In these tanks are hundreds upon hundreds of pinkish colored Ca dieu hong fish, which originated from Africa. When they reach full size, about 2kg, a fish merchant would buy them and export them overseas. Sau Luon’s farm harvests fish three times a year, producing 10 tons each time. His four children help raise the fish, obviously leading an easier and better life than a farmer. He said fish food is expensive and the business is not as lucrative as it seems. We bought two fish from him to complement our dinner, along with crab and clams.
Such metal houses occasionally lined long stretches of the riverfront with many fish farmers devoting their entire family to this occupation. They live and work there year-round, even keeping their pets, mainly dogs, on these metal islands. Vietnamese took to keeping dogs rather than cats. It is said that the word cat, Meo in Vietnamese, and meo meo, the sound the cat makes, sounds like “poor”. A dog, or Cho, and its bark, gau gau, is closer to the word “rich”, giau in their language.

These metal floating fish houses, together with tiny to mid-sized boat houses at Long Xuyen floating market, remind me of Sausalito near the Golden Gate Bridge in San Francisco, though living here is far more basic and with few amenities. For a casual visitor, it conjures up a romantic image. Living here, however, may be a different matter.

There is no end to life along the bank. Large factories and warehouses are constantly loading up boats, barges, or small size ships with loads for transshipment into ocean-going ships further down the delta, for export to other countries. A constant sight is a specialized boat with both sides bulging out at an angle, to hold rice husks. Such boats deliver the husks to locations along the river where they will be used as fuel in factories. We saw quite a few such boats anchored next to a long line of tile and brick factories with kilns to fire the ceramics.

In every town we stopped at, there seems to be a Chinese temple. At Long Xuyen where we had lunch, there was even a mausoleum for Guangdong descendants, dating back more than 100 years to the 20th year of the Guangshui Emperor of the late Qing Dynasty. Coastal Chinese were early settlers of Vietnam for many generations.

Before night fell, we banked to portside and went for a stroll in the village of Quang. Many homes lined the causeway. Several had fighting cocks under a rattan cage in their yard. That must be a popular pastime. I saw a small single-seat hairdresser shop and went in for a look. As it had running water, I opted to have my hair washed while we waited for dinner to be cooked on the boat. My colleagues all lined up for the service once they saw me inside. Each wash cost 10,000 Dong - or US 50 cents. I retired to my hard “bed” with a fresh head, attached to a sticky body.

January 14 21:15

This morning we went ashore where we anchored and had some local noodles at the street market. So far, all the way up the Mekong, there had been no bridge spanning the entire stretch of the river. The only one we had seen so far was that single bridge near Can Tho at the mouth of the river, constructed by a Japanese consortium. Everywhere upriver, though, there were scores of ferry points, big or small, even tiny ones plying routes between small villages on both banks.

Mobile phone reception is available all the way upriver at any point. It is amazing that even remote villagers find mobile phones affordable, chatting all the time, suggesting fees are also minimal. Motorcycles penetrate the smallest places, obviously more popular than bicycles.

It was about 16:30 when we arrived at the border where a yellow house stood on high ground over the right bank. True to form and prediction, a guard in green yelled at our boat and waved
a red flag energetically for us to stop. Our boat captain and his assistant were playing cards and weren’t paying attention, so I alerted them. By then we were a short way beyond the checkpoint and had to turn back. With trepidation, we docked next to the long stairs up the bank.

This was obviously a border checkpoint and they motioned for us to walk up the stairs to the guard house. Several officers came out to find out what this was about. We all pretended to look innocent and naïve, as if everything was quite normal in cruising upriver. There were exchanges of questions and answer which were all unintelligible to me. Then Linh asked us all to produce our passports for inspection.

The officers asked that one of us accompany Linh into the office. I went in with him, and there up on the wall were three ideological icons, Marx, Lenin and Ho Chi Minh. With my sunglasses on, I hope he did not see me roll my eyes as I pondered all possible answers to his questions. I whispered to Linh that, should they ask our intent, just say I had been to the source of the Mekong and wanted to see how grand and spectacular the river must be at its mouth in Vietnam. It is never a crime to flatter someone or their country.

After an hour-long grilling, we were told no border crossing is allowed except to local Vietnamese living in the vicinity. They noted our passport information, and questioned Linh while I sat and acted like a dumb tourist. We were asked rather politely to turn around. We obliged but did not fail to take the opportunity to ask to use a real toilet before embarking on our long return journey.

After two hours sailing and long after darkness set in, we reached Chau Doc, a sizable town by the river. We were delighted as we pulled alongside the Delta Floating Hotel, set up to service the more posh river cruises with foreign tourists. After checking into our room with a real toilet, we dined at the terrace restaurant overlooking the river. A shower, though with only cold water, was a pleasant surprise for everyone who had planned to do without one for 10 days. A real bed was also quite a treat.

Though we had to abort the mission, I knew this was just an inconvenient hiccup as we could easily fly from Ho Chi Minh City to Phnom Penh and continue the river journey downward to the Vietnam-Cambodia border. It would have been nice to sail uninterrupted, but national borders are still sensitive, and regulations are often dictated by political desires and designs.

At the source of the Mekong, I drank its water and bought three mastiff puppies from the Tibetan family living furthest upstream. Here at the mouth, I washed my feet and bought some mango and star fruit to plant in my garden. May they grow into trees and come to signify the everlasting memories and fortitude which I have with this great river of Asia. I will leave something behind as well. That troublesome generator? I will unload it on our boat captain - at a huge discount.
ON THE MEKONG IN CAMBODIA

Wong How Man
Phnom Penh, Cambodia - January 20, 2011

Relaxing at the Cadillac Bar next door to my hotel, I listened to the oldies hit “Rolling on the River” while thumbing through the Phnom Penh Post. The headline, “Spirits of Explorer survives for 100 years”, jumped off the pages. It was close to my own adage, “The spirit of exploration transcends time”, I thought.

It turned out the spirits mentioned in the headline are more intoxicating - three bottles of MacKinlay’s whisky, left by British Polar explorer Sir Ernest Henry Shackleton under his Antarctic hut, built in 1908. Though the crate holding them was frozen solid in minus 30° temperature, the whisky was still in liquid form, having a far lower freezing point.

The whisky must have kept Shackleton warm during those long freezing days in the South Pole. It seems brutal to write about the warm weather at this moment in the lower Mekong while Hong Kong is under the grip of a chilling cold front. But my exploration spirit knows no boundaries.

So here I am, exploring the Mekong within Cambodia. Phnom Penh, the current capital, is where the huge Tonle Sap Lake drains into the river. On the northern end of the lake is Siem Reap, the old capital of the Khmer kingdom. The lake acts as a reservoir or valve, controlling the floodwater of the mighty Mekong during the rainy season, and draining into it during the dry season.

At the confluence of the lake with the river, the water takes on different colors. Water from the lake, surprisingly, is more brownish than the Mekong water which is green and rather clear during this dry season. In fact, the flow of the Mekong downstream during the dry season has created much speculation and controversy about China’s harnessing of the river upstream.

The many hydroelectric dams built on the Mekong in Yunnan Province have caused great concern for countries along the river, in particular Thailand and Laos. China reiterated that the amount of water leaving the country contributes to only 13% of what the river feeds to the sea. But in dry season, experts calculated that the percentage is higher than 40%. So the draining and controlling of water upstream during the dry season can have a detrimental effect on water level, navigational ability, and overall ecology for people living downstream.

It is somewhat understandable that the Chinese, now with the help of the dams, can divert water for agricultural and industrial use, especially during the dry season. The Mekong Commission is set up to have a common goal and voice in dealing with the future destiny of this great river. China, noticeably, is an observer.
rather than a signatory to this club.

Compared to the Vietnam part of the Mekong which is buzzing with activities, the Mekong section in Cambodia is relatively quiet and calm. Within a half an hour cruise from the capital, the river traffic trickles to only an occasional ferry. Any sizable ships or boats are those plying the river with Vietnamese registration, bringing sand upriver, and going largely empty downriver. Even fishing activities are restricted to small-scale netting along the banks, using tiny boats.

The lower Mekong basin, especially the delta region, accounts for 20% of the world’s inland freshwater fishery products. But for the area around this section in Cambodia, the fishing yield is concentrated within four or five days of the year, during the full moon of the last month of the Chinese calendar, at the confluence of the Mekong with the drainage of Tonle Sap Lake. We happen to be at the right place at the right time to observe it.

While cruising upriver from Phnom Penh, we see a large concentration of fishing boats, two to three as a working group, with maybe 10 to 15 men standing amidships, hauling in large nets all day long. We closed in to observe and ask a few questions, interrupting their busy routine. It turned out that during these few days they can reap 500 to 600kg of small minnow-like fish each day. There is an apparent run of these fish each year at the same time when fishermen are out all day and night to take
in their fill. During the rest of the year, they may haul in as little as 3kg to 4kg after a full day’s work.

Both upriver and downriver from Phnom Penh, I saw small floating communities along the west bank. These boat people bring to mind the boat people refugees of the 1970s and ’80s, eking out a precarious and marginal existence. They are all of Vietnamese stock, some having been in Cambodia for over a generation. Nghia, with whom we spoke, is now in her 50s, with a daughter and two grandsons living in a tiny houseboat. She was born and raised on the Mekong at this Phenh An Chan floating village. We asked why they prefer living on the river. “We cannot own land in this country, nor can we afford to buy land, so we have no choice,” Nghia replied.

The Chinese community, on the other hand, seems to have a run on business in and around Phnom Penh. Many shops have Chinese characters on their signboards. Near the busy Central Market, there are also many gold and jewelry shops, all operated by people of Chinese ancestry. We ate at several Chinese seafood restaurants. Apparently a hit with locals, they all have great business. A meal with two dishes of shrimp, crabs, steamed fish from the sea, half a duck, local Angkor beer and more, filling all five of us in the team, cost only US$60, quite a bargain compared to other places.

Both English newspapers, the Cambodia Daily and Phnom Penh Post, report much on the ills of the country, frequently following stories on graft and corruption. The military seems privileged, as can be seen from the many late-model cars around town driven by men in uniform. The hotel we stayed at, the Paragon by the river, is owned by an Army Major. His picture is posted on the business registration, as well as on the wall of the reception, with him stolidly posing in army uniform. However he can be seen daily in civilian garb, hanging around reception. His new Land Cruiser, parked outside blocking pedestrians, has no license plate - just a VIP flash card under the windshield.
Over the last several days, the Cadillac Bar next door has become our regular joint during happy hour. Kenny, with a beard and ponytail, is the owner from Texas and opened this bar and grill three years ago, catering to the burgeoning tourist trade passing through on their way to Angkor Wat. A sign outside advertises real southern cooking and hospitality. Kenny had always wanted to open his own restaurant and went to Thailand to try his luck. But the costs there have become prohibitive and business too competitive. Here in Phnom Penh, the start-up cost is only a quarter of that in Thailand. So he stayed.

An easy trapping for foreign tourists is the relatively inexpensive local female partners available. One can catch glimpses of such pairings strolling along the bank of the Mekong, holding hands or dining at the many restaurants. Massage parlors also are plentiful, eroding the morals of a once strictly Buddhist country.

Tourism here is totally dependent on neighboring Thailand, which serves as feeder to Cambodia. When the Red Shirts staged a sit-in at Bangkok Airport triggering its closure, tourism trickled to nothing in Phnom Penh and Siem Reap. It was as if the Cambodian airports were closed as well. As a relatively small economy, the country has no flight serving faraway markets in Europe and America, and limited access elsewhere. However, river cruises on the Mekong, bringing high-paying tourists from Ho Chi Minh City in Vietnam, are on the rise. The riverbank has several large and ancient-looking riverboats, refurbished to their original beauty from the days when river travel was in vogue during the last century.

Because of their deeper draught, these riverboats must stay in the middle of the Mekong when cruising, far away from the two banks. In our tiny 15-meter boat, we could bank everywhere and went ashore to visit villages and farms. Overall, tourism here seems rigged and skewed, showing some irrational and disproportional charges. Renting an open-deck boat cost us over US$300 per day, whereas a similar sized, fully-enclosed boat was for sale for only US$5,000.

As we finished our last 12-hour sail on the Mekong, a full moon rose as we returned to port in Phnom Penh, long after darkness set in. I remember the joy I had today as I saw two species of kingfishers, the Common and Pied ones, perched along the shore before diving for their dinner. Such sights on the Mekong would remain with me always, and for future generations long after I am gone.
Today, modernization has brought many motorbikes to the plateau grazing areas. The herdsmen often decorate the handlebars with leather stripes and equip them with music players. Wearing fashionable sunglasses and traditional Tibetan costumes, the herdsmen ride their bikes head high on the plateau, blasting music at full volume.

There are no statistics on how many motorbikes are now on the plateau. We don’t know the extent of the social or economic impacts they have had on the herding community. However, we often hear stories of herdsmen going broke after selling their livestock to buy a motorbike. Instead of being seen as a transportation tool, the motorbike is now regarded as a fashionable and stylish possession to enable people, particularly young hersmen, to show off. The older generation dislikes this practice.

The plateau has become a huge motorbike market

There were few motorbikes in the past. When I was at secondary school, there was only one motorbike in the entire Zhiduo county and it was owned by the county post office. It was something we had never seen before and we were so excited. Those villagers who understood some Putonghua thought that it was “of the female gender”. Motorbike is motuo che in Putonghua and motuo was misheard as mude, the female gender. They said if it was a male, it would be even faster, how wonderful it must be to ride on. When motorbikes were first brought to the plateau, they were mainly old machines that were almost no longer roadworthy. They were repainted and sold to the herdsmen like new to cheat them. Travelling on horseback was not yet regarded as backwards and old-fashioned.

There were many funny stories about motorbike riding in those days. A robust herdsman fell from his motorbike. He re-mounted and tried to tame it as if it were a yak. Holding the handlebars as if they were the yaks’ horns he wrestled and twisted them hard.
The sudden acceleration destabilized him and made him fall down again. Another herdsman, for fear of losing his balance, always tied a long wooden pole across his motorbike.

More than 80% of the people who own a motorbike are young people. They love to ride their motorbike so much that they will even use it for herding their livestock or for extremely short distances. Every day scores of young herdsmen on motorbike will go to the county town to drink and play billiards, spending lots of money. On ceremonial days, there are often more than 100 motorbikes there, a spectacular sight.

In the past when there were no roads, getting spare parts or repair service for a motorbike was quite inconvenient. Many people simply abandoned their motorbike if it broke down, and bought another one. Today’s trend is disturbing. People are pursuing famous brands and new models and this has made the plateau one of the largest markets for motorbikes. Here in Cuochi village, each household has at least one. Many of them change motorbikes every year. The entire Maqu county, in which our village is situated, has a population of less than 3,000, yet it has three motorbike repair shops. One of them, I understand, repairs more than 200 motorbikes each month.

Motorbike a symbol of poverty

In the past, people looked upon those who were diligent and hard working as role models. With the coming of the market economy, this is no longer the case. Peoples’ values have changed. Owning a motorbike is regarded as being “in” and fashionable. Now half the households in the three-river region are families that do not have any sheep – they have sold them in exchange for a motorbike, fuel and repairs and spare parts.

My cousin, for example, has bought more than a dozen motorbikes in all. When one bike gets old or is slightly damaged, he just abandons it and buys a new one. He has sold all his yak and sheep, including those given to him by relatives to help him make ends meet. He was the first person in the village to become so-called “modernized” – owning things like a colour television, generator, VCD, cosmetics, and so on. Those who don’t know him well envy and praise him. He’s very poor now, not having even one yak. His wife has left him and he is staying in his roofless shed littered with broken motorbikes outside.

There are many people like my cousin. They chase after famous brand, top-model motorbikes, frenetically, to the extent of selling all their livestock and borrowing from loan sharks.

Most people who borrow money from loan sharks these days borrow to buy motorbikes or cars. Those who borrow for urgent and genuine needs, such as to get medical treatment, are the minority. The interest rates the loan sharks charge are exorbitant: 20% to 30% is considered the rate for “privileged” borrowers.

In years past, many herdsmen here went to the east to dig for caterpillar fungus. As they did not have any experience in such work, many ended up not finding any. And yet when these young herdsmen returned, they returned with smiling faces riding brand new Bashan motorbikes they had bought in the east. Bashan motorbikes are very popular motorbikes produced in Chongqing. These young people didn’t make any money during their trip and their motorbikes cost them a fortune. Stupidly, they still felt happy.
When I was working in the village, people told me that the poorest families in the village were often those with a motorbike or jeep outside their house or tent. These families needed lots of money for the machine and for fuel and would soon go broke if they weren’t already, they said. To discourage people from blindly pursuing motorbike ownership, the local government has laid down a policy not to give financial assistance to those who go broke because of overspending on motorbikes.

Motorbikes have also caused the herdsmen’s health conditions to deteriorate. A village doctor who is also a Living Buddha has noted that today’s young people are not as robust and healthy as before. In the past when people travelled on horseback, they would dismount and walk if they felt cold. But you cannot walk and have your motorbike follow you. More and more people are getting arthritis because of this. On cold days, you can often see people riding motorbikes with thick blankets wrapped around their body.

Families who have not sold their livestock for motorbikes are doing well. The Gaisong family is an example. They stick to old traditions and have not bought any motorbike or built a fancy house. They graze their livestock as their ancestors did and continue to do this even in winter time. They still keep pack yaks while most people have sold them. Their tent is the biggest in the village and is made of hairs from yak tails and of very good quality. They always have sufficient stock of food, mutton, yoghurt, flour, and other provisions.

**After thoughts**

By nature the motorbike is a suitable transportation tool for the plateau, but why are its impacts on our herdsmen community so negative?

In the past when the horse was the main transportation method, we led a life that was tranquil, leisurely and enjoyable – riding, working and singing under the blue sky. Herdsmen loved their horses like their siblings and they would cry if they had to part with them. In winter they would even let their horses drink their portion of tea to keep them warm. Now, they are selling horses in lots.

In the past, although living conditions here were crude and primitive, and material resources were scarce, we were happy and content. Now, after opening up to the outside world, we are unhappy, and obsessed with the desire to acquire more possessions and wealth than our neighbors. We no longer have the mood to sing and relax under nature’s blue skies. Everybody cares only for himself and is indifferent towards others. We’ve forgotten the teachings of Buddhism that we should be selfless and do our best to help and bring happiness to others. And in our contacts with the outside world, we have allowed our minds to be contaminated by vanity, waste and boastfulness. When I was doing research on climate change in the source region of the Yellow River, I once met an old monk who told me the root cause of climate change was human greed and selfishness.
He said it was these conditions that had caused such disastrous damage to the environment, and near extinction of so many animals and plants. The most serious threat to human wisdom, he said, was being self-centered and refusing to help and benefit others.

In the past, old people had the final say in all matters in the family. This was because they had so much experience in life that the family respected them and relied on them for correct decisions. Now, young people go their own way, without listening to their parents or grandparents, particularly when facing material temptations from the outside world. Many families become broke because the young people spend lots of money buying gadgets.

The plateau has opened up to the outside world. There is no way that we would revert back to a closed society. Opening up for modernization is not a bad thing. What is important is that in the process, we should find the right path and adopt the right thinking to help us modernize. I dislike people in the outside world who label us as a poor and backward people. The government has given us much help and we are grateful for that. I also believe that such help should be more focused, encouraging people to stand on their own and develop their potential. Otherwise, they would grow dependent on the help and become lazy. In our land here we have our own culture, traditions, values, lifestyles and way of thinking which, like our snow, mountains and lakes, grasslands and blue skies, we will always hold dear. We want ourselves, and the animals and plants on this land, to progress and prosper in the modernization process and our herdsman culture to develop alongside other modern cultures.

The phenomenon in which so many young people opt to sell their livestock for a motorbike makes me feel uncomfortable. As herdsmen of the older generation point out, these young people have failed to see that the motorbike will drain their wealth while the animals would help it grow. Having visited so many places and talked to so many people on the plateau, I have come to the conclusion that when these novices face temptations they cannot resist, they will lose their power of logic and reasoning. This has also occurred elsewhere in China when the country was first opened up to the outside world.

When different cultures meet and meld together, frictions and clashes are inevitable but these will gradually diminish and dissipate. What is important is for peoples in these different cultures to find the most suitable path for them to progress and to retain their good traditions and values.

A society that is closed to the outside world is unlikely to have any future. It must open itself to the outside world and in the process it must be wise in choosing what to adopt from the outside world and what not. The plateau culture has contributed towards preservation of China’s natural wealth. In its future development, is it still able to perform the ecological functions as it previously did? In today’s diversified world where conflicts between economic progress and environmental protection often arise, we hope it could, and will render our full support.

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT:
Monk rider on motorcycle on plateau, Bundled-up riders, Nomads herding yak with motorcycles, Rare sighting of a man on horseback, Three generations of family out on a motorcycle.
It was November 9, 1949 - barely a month after Mao declared on Tian An Men that the People’s Republic of China was founded. Lin Yushui, otherwise known as Leonard Lam, was at the captain’s seat on the left side of the cockpit inside his DC3, code XT-525. With a signal from his ground crew, he started his plane and revved up the engines. Around him, 11 other airplanes, mostly the C-47 transport version of the DC3, started their engines one after another. Lin and his colleagues were on a special run, a stealth mission, on this fateful day.

Between 6am and 8am, 12 CNAC (China National Aviation Corp) and CATC (Central Air Transport Corp) airplanes were to take off from Kai Tak runway and head north, landing in Beijing and Tianjin within a few hours. To most people at the time, these pilots and crew defected with their planes to the communists. To others of the young People’s Republic of China, these were heroes in an uprising, bringing their planes back to the arms of the motherland. Mao was to hand-script a letter of commendation to all the crew members three days later. The 12 airplanes that descended from heaven were like a godsend in those early days of the republic. Sixty years have passed since that tumultuous day when the world watched in awe as one of the largest aviation fleets defected en masse.

As the planes roared above Hong Kong, Captain Moon Chin, founder and deputy general manager of CATC, looked up at the sky and sighed. He knew the day was drawing near. Over the previous two days, he saw two strangers outside his house near Kai Tak Airport, seemingly stationed there to watch his every move. After all, he too, was approached several times by underground Communists from the Mainland trying to persuade him to also defect. In fact, his reluctance to return to China prompted a number of others to stay. Otherwise as many as eight more airplanes from CATC might have left the airfield that day.
The plan to take the airplanes and the company to China, though secret, was executed with great care and detail. During the final days, the inner-circle committee directed the event with those in the headquarters at the Peninsula Hotel. Each airplane was to be loaded with enough parts and equipment to last for the next three months of operation after defecting to China. The original plan called for 10 planes each from CNAC and CATC to be dispatched. More than 20 planes taking off in close succession, requiring up to two hours, would trigger suspicion from the British who controlled Kai Tak Airport. They had estimated there could be 20 planes based on available crew members who were committed to the cause who could operate them. Last-minute changes, not least due to Moon Chin’s refusal to join, resulted in only two planes from CATC participating.

One almost new airplane, a Convair-240 belonging to CATC, took the two managers of the two companies and inner circle of the uprising to Beijing. That same evening, Zhou En-lai hosted a dinner at the Peking Hotel for members of this group. The other 11 planes flew to Tianjin, circumnavigating around southern China to avoid the Nationalist Air Force based in Guilin which might intercept. The event became a major coup for the communists and their propaganda machine, scoring high marks among those who had progressive or leftist leanings both in China and Chinese communities around the world. For the retreating Nationalists, it was a major setback and the battle to acquire the remaining aircraft stranded in Hong Kong dragged on over the next three years.

Percy Chen, a leading barrister at the time in Hong Kong, fought in court to recover for the republic the 71 remaining planes claimed by the Nationalists, yet under British jurisdiction. Claims and counterclaims resulted, despite a Chief Justice ruling in May, 1950, that the planes should belong to the new government of China. The case got so bizarre that at one point the US CIA director, claiming to be a creditor who had purchased the assets of CNAC and CATC, sued General Chennault in a desperate bid to secure these airplanes. The court dismissed the case for lack of evidence. In another incident, seven planes were bombed and sabotaged while parked at the airport. It seems all stops were pulled to avoid China’s procurement of the airplanes.

As the fiasco rolled on, the US warned Britain that their bilateral relationship would be damaged if the planes were to fall into communist hands. Ultimately the British yielded to US pressure as they, too, were dragged into the Korean War. The colonial government succumbed to intrigues of a US-sponsored Nationalist government in Taiwan, in collaboration with General Chennault of Flying Tiger fame. In 1952 Chennault finally acquired the remaining planes under CAT (Civil Air Transport), an airline

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which later became Air America, a proxy operation for the CIA.

Some of those who defected, or who were heroes of an uprising, depending on the viewpoint, were inducted into the fledging Chinese Air Force. Others continued to serve in its budding civilian airlines. In all, more than 2,500 staff members of the two airlines, CNAC and CATC, signed a declaration to remain with the companies and served under the new government.

Lin Yushui who piloted the DC3 to Tianjin was a World War II flying veteran. Lin first joined the US 14th Air Force in China and became an ace pilot. While serving with the Air Force, he flew both the P40 Tomahawk of Flying Tigers’ fame, and the P51 Mustang, then known as the fastest and best maneuvering fighter of the day. He was credited with downing at least five Japanese airplanes in air battles. After the war, Moon recruited him as a pilot for CATC.

Lin’s flying distinction, which was at first an asset, quickly turned into a liability when the Cultural Revolution started. Being an overseas Chinese from the Philippines, he was soon singled out for attack and criticism before he was banished to a reform farm outside of Shanghai, raising and tending pigs for 13 years. Lin first returned to China as a teenager. Unlike others who falsified their age to avoid draft or conscript into the army, he faked his age to enter flight school in Kunming to fight the Japanese. That, however, was not counted to his credit in the eyes of the Red Guards. Instead, they highlighted his days with the US forces.

Today, sitting with me at the Aviation Club in a corner of the former Kai Tak Airport in Hong Kong, 90-year-old Lin reminisced about the day in 1949 which changed his life and destiny, forever. “I was the only one who brought the entire family along when we defected. My wife Rita and two-year-old daughter Wei Ci were the only non-flight personnel who came along,” Lin said, proudly recounting some of the details of that fateful day. “Recently, newspapers reported that the last Flying Tiger pilot had died in China. Actually I am probably the only remaining one,” he said, showing off his
Distinguished Flying Cross medal from the US Air Force. Pilots of the 14th Air Force inherited the iconic name after the original American Volunteer Group disbanded. As a final word of wisdom, he added, “To love your country, you have to pay a price.”

Moon Chin, on the other hand, lay back in his mansion-like home in San Francisco, pondering how life might have been different had he chosen to change sides during that momentous November day. Lin has been remorseful and hoping to meet Moon again, but the latter still felt he was wronged when Lin took off in the airplane without his consent. “Moon is a genius pilot,” Lin said repeatedly with sincere admiration during our conversation.

Moon’s flying career spanned over half a century beginning in 1932. He flew the Hump during the war and pioneered a new route in the western Himalayas K2 region from Xinjiang to India. At the end of the war, he was chief pilot for CNAC and had flown dignitaries including Chiang Kai-shek and his wife. After the war, he founded CATC together with a friend, purchasing more than 100 surplus airplanes. In 1951, Moon founded another airline, Fooshing Air, in Taiwan. Over the next few decades, his airlines took on many covert and surveillance jobs, including some chartered by the French during the French-Indo China War and by the US during the Vietnam War.

He and his crew undertook dangerous airdrop missions, both in China’s southern border as well as into the Mainland. It was a lucrative business. Air catering business also provided further returns for someone with entrepreneurial skills who carefully calculated his risks. Fooshing, also known as TransAsia Airlines, flourished and is still in operation today. Moon sold his shares upon retiring in 1983 and moved back to America, spending his summers in Toronto and winters in San Francisco.

My effort to broker a reunion between the two ageing aviators was almost complete as 97-year-old Moon revisited Hong Kong last month. Unfortunately Moon came down with flu and had to cancel the meeting. Sitting with two lady caretakers in front of the window inside a suite on the upper floor of the Peninsula Hotel, Moon watched with fascination the colorful display of fireworks for this year’s National Day celebration. The harbor-view room he booked was over US$700 a night. Whenever he flies, he takes First or Business Class while his two chaperones sit in Economy.

Lin Yushui’s fate is markedly different. Just down the road from Tsim Sha Tsui at Hung Hom, Lin may likely be watching the same fireworks display, but only on TV. Tucked away in a tiny apartment, he can consider himself lucky, being released from China in 1978 among the first batch of former nationalist officers who endured deprivation and harsh labor terms during the Cultural Revolution. When Lin crossed the Lo Wu Bridge into Hong Kong, he had just HK$20 in his pocket.
LOST FOOTSTEP
NO MORE?

Wong How Man
Yangon, Myanmar - January 4, 2011

MAIN: Swee Dagon Pagoda of Yangon at sunset
Thant Myint-U, a noted Burmese scholar with a Cambridge PhD and grandson of former UN Secretary General U Thant, wrote the highly acclaimed book, *River of Lost Footsteps*. It chronicled the contemporary history of Myanmar. He recounted the many crossroads the country had gone through in its recent history since independence. At each turning point, the country took the wrong step and ended up, inevitably, at a dead end.

Today the nation is again on the threshold of the “modern” world, with an opportunity to rejoin the international community. With the right move, it can march with its south and southeast Asian neighbors into the 21st century, though somewhat belatedly. The first “general” election (many candidates are, ironically, military generals) in 20 years took place and a new parliament would soon be convened. Would history repeat itself? Would Myanmar enter another dead-end alley? Or would it finally be on track in a catch-up game? I am an optimist, and would like to subscribe to the last assumption.

I often tell my friends who have not visited Myanmar the following; “When I fly from Hong Kong to Myanmar, I wind my watch backwards one and a half hours. But I turn it back at least 50 years.” There are nostalgic reasons to cherish such remarks and hope things stay the same, especially in rural communities with values of its simple and down-to-earth village people. But for this day and age, that notion seems a rather archaic and selfish proposition. It is inevitable that the country must and will turn a new page and come into the modern age. To hold it back is only wishful thinking, even for its strong military regime. However, there are lessons to be learned from some of the precedents as we looked around countries in the neighborhood, be it China, Thailand, Malaysia, Vietnam, Laos or Cambodia. Myanmar may chart its own way forward with some better choices and selection, and can possibly arrive at the 21st century, later, but further ahead. Tourism as well as industrialization, as two examples, had brought about prosperity at huge cost in environmental and moral degradation to many countries in the region. Would Myanmar be wiser as it searches for a path forward? I certainly hope so.

While writing this, I am sitting on the verandah of the Kandawgyi Hotel, sometimes known as the Teak Hotel. But the country’s much-valued teak wood is fast being depleted due to high demand and prices paid in foreign markets for such hardwood. As I look across to a long wooden parkway on Lake Kandawgyi in Yangon, I can see the morning flow of early risers of this former capital city (the government moved to a new capital at Naypyidaw). They use this walkway as their morning exercise track. Over the last 10 years since I have stayed in this hotel, I have observed the gradual changes.

Ten years ago, most of those morning walkers wore longyi, the sarong-like traditional skirt worn by men and women alike. Gradually I noted them, first the younger generation, then even the older generation, changing to sportswear, trousers and shorts. Today very few of those walking by the parkway are in longyi. I am an exception, as I often wear longyi at home in Hong Kong, or when I visit Myanmar. Traditional dress is going out of style in the big cities.
The government publishes a local English newspaper, the *New Light of Myanmar*. Until a couple of years ago, much of the printed international news was taken from Xinhua, the Chinese News Agency. It was as if news syndicated from such sources would be considered sterilized. Today, we gradually notice more and more news taken from the internet, occasionally even from Reuters. Xinhua of course has not gone obsolete. These are healthy indicators of a slightly more open view.

Also within the last couple years, we see a lot more liquidation of government properties, including some military ones. These acts helped fill the government’s coffers, and those of its brokers of choice. It may be another indication of what is about to change.

Myanmar was once the world’s largest exporter of rice. That claim is now a distant and dismal memory. Recently the huge surge in commodity prices, from grains to oil and gas, may put Myanmar, a country with huge reserves, into the forefront of this international trading once again.

The country also boasts some of the most important water resources, coastline, beaches, and fisheries. It is endowed with some of Asia’s most important rivers, the Irrawaddy, Salween and Mekong. The Irrawaddy Flotilla Company was, at one time before World War II, the largest inland fleet in the world. Perhaps soon Myanmar can regain that glory if these rivers were once again open to commercial navigation.

Tourism, stagnating at about a quarter million visitors a year, is a tiny fraction of that of neighboring Thailand, which receives more than 4 million plus visitors. But the slowness in opening up may just become its huge attraction as the world is getting tired of returning a zillion times to sunny Thailand and other southeast Asian countries. Infrastructure for the development in tourism is on the rise, fueled by a shortage of fine hotels during the high seasons. I stopped by the signature Strand Hotel yesterday, attempting to book rooms for my visit next month. For the days I needed, all rooms are full, even the priciest Strand Suite. Booking airline seats can also be a struggle during some months. Much needs to be upgraded as the country is readying itself for opening up to the world, with or without the senseless sanctions and embargoes imposed upon it.

At the Kandawgyi Hotel, I like to sit quietly in the lounge in the evening. Two ageing musicians have been a fixture at this jazz bar for as long as I can remember since coming to Myanmar a decade ago. On the guitar is Walter and at the piano Uncle Apollo. At 82 years of age, Uncle is relaxed and laid-back in a chair. Now and then he takes a break for a coffee and a cigarette. Tonight Uncle Apollo is sporting a colorful Hawaiian shirt with yellow flowers. Below his waist he wears well-worn longyi, and a pair of flip-flops. If one were to close one’s eyes, the tune could come right out of Chicago or New Orleans. Alas, the 21st Century and the 20th are not that far apart. Neither are the two continents. For Myanmar, hopefully she would not miss the next footstep this time around.
“Oh, this is a very rare and expensive cat,” remarked Aung San Suu Kyi as she crawled on the floor to take a peek inside the cage holding a two-year-old daughter of Sun, one of our original Burmese cats which started the CERS Burmese Cat Project in 2007. The Lady had yet to give the cat a name.

After being drugged for the flight from our cattery at Inle Lake of the Shan State, she was still dazed and refused to come out. The Lady seemed in no rush to coax her cat out. After all, she herself had been in confinement for much longer period than this cat. This cat comes complete with a Burmese Cat’s Owner Manual, medical and vaccination records and a CERS brochure about this particular project.

It was April 20, 2007, when I wrote in London about the chance of acquiring our first Burmese cats for reproduction and reintroduction into Myanmar. At the time, I noted with a wishful thinking that once successful, we would send a Burmese cat born in Myanmar to Aung San Suu Kyi as the most appropriate recipient and symbol for a striving nation marching again toward its historic glory. That wish, prediction or premonition, came true today.

Our partner in the project, Misuu of the Inle Princess Resort, met with Kim, the Lady’s visiting son, and mentioned my desire to send her one of our cats. Kim thought it would be a perfect gift before he must again leave the country in a few days. Things were set into motion immediately, and a three-year-old mission was accomplished within a day, a perfect finale to a wonderful project that CERS and our partner the Inle Princess Resort have embarked upon.
CERS IN THE FIELD

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT:
Students in front of Whale skeleton at Cape D’Aguila, CERS friends in Myanmar, How Man in high pass of the Alps, CERS friends set off on a hike, Linh filming in Phnom Penh, Temporary home below boat deck, Dinner on a Mekong boat, Loading the CERS exploration boat.
CERS in the Media

- Islamic Frontiers of China, a new book authored by Wong How Man and co-authored by Adel Dajani, was launched in London.
- Nanyang Technological University debuted a new documentary film and a photographic exhibit featuring CERS caving activities in China.
- Taiwan’s Dai Al Television Channel broadcast a half-hour interview with How Man on his exploration along the lower Mekong River.
- Tony Wheeler, founder of Lonely Planet, visited CERS Cat Café in Myanmar and posted in his blog a description of his experience.
- The News, Choate Rosemary Hall’s school newspaper, published an article about How Man’s lecture at the school.
Debra Meiburg, Master of Wine, offered her expertise hosting two dinners as an auction lot to fundraise for CERS.

Omega generously provided a limited edition Speedmaster GMT “Solar Impulse” for auction.

We thank Nury Vittachi for serving as our Master of Ceremonies of our annual dinner, and the following companies for providing special gifts for the evening: Coca-Cola China, William E Connor & Associates, Cultures by Toni P Ltd, Esquel Group, Eu Yan Sang Int’l Ltd, Lee Kum Kee Co. Ltd, Magnum Offset Printing, Omega, Ponti Trading Ltd, Shun Hing Group, Toppan Vite Limited, UBS AG, Yan Seng Factory Limited. We also thank all the individuals who helped or volunteered during the evening.

Richard Gere kindly donated a signed copy including scripting a poem of the 6th Dalai Lama in his photographic book on Tibet for CERS annual dinner auction.


Dora Wu made another major donation toward CERS Hainan traditional village restoration project.

Dr Gray Williams and Dr Cynthia Yau spent a weekend educating students affiliated with CERS conservation projects.

Coca-Cola extended its long years of support for another three years, and commit to organizing lectures for CERS to present our work to universities in China.

Dragonair continued its support of CERS.

Eric Chen and the Sampo Group made another pledge to support CERS for 2011.

Victor Hsu and Betty Tsui joined as new CERS patrons.

Dennis Cicetti made another donation to CERS.

Leonie Ki made a donation to CERS.

Self-named “Seven Golden Flowers”, who visited CERS off-sites in 2005 maintained their reunion over the years and support to CERS during our annual dinner. They are Anna Yeung, Elaine Koo, Cecilia Yau, Susan Chan, Alice Siu, Sylvia Kwk and Bonnie Huo. This year, they invited How Man to join their hike along the south coast of Hong Kong.

UPPER: Judith-Ann Corrente and Wim Kooyker with Burmese kitten at the Inthar Heritage House Cat Café of Inle Lake in Myanmar.

LOWER: Daniel Ng and Robert Kwan, two McDonald’s honchos, fry mini burgers at CERS annual dinner.