CLOCKWISE FROM TOP:
Reindeer herd in winter forest.
Oroqen family with Dr Bleisch.
Ewenki birch bark canoe, circa. 1983.
Aung San Suu Kyi during campaign trail.

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In the 1970s and 1980s when I stayed at posh hotels in China, local Chinese could only look on with amazement and admiration. Today, guests staying in Chinese hotels, even the most expensive resorts, are mainly Chinese. They used to look enviously at the Land Rovers I drove in the 1990s, but now no one even turns their head. That is as it should be, a sign of the great progress China has made in such short time. But can the Chinese also polish their etiquette and follow accepted protocols of behavior? When behind some of the finest wheels and on the newest highways, can they observe traffic courtesy? Can they caution themselves to brake as fast as they accelerate? I certainly hope so.

There is another ancient Chinese proverb, “Four taels (ounces) moves a thousand jins (pounds).” Let’s hope modern Chinese adhere to that motto, leveraging what they have achieved for even greater advances in the future. In that process, let’s also hope they advance the quality of life and care for their natural and cultural heritage, protecting and preserving such intrinsic treasures, rather than just accumulating monetary wealth.

Several articles in this issue deal precisely with the twilight of such heritage. CERS does not want to be just a voice, but also a call for action, leveraging the small part that we contribute to change a much larger world.

In the past six years I have visited China many times, not only for my work as a filmmaker, but also for my research in China's unique cultural and natural heritage. I remain deeply impressed by the country's dedication to the preservation of its cultural heritage, as well as the rapid pace of modernization. However, I have also observed a growing awareness among Chinese about the importance of preserving their cultural identity while embracing modernity.

In this issue, we present a special section on the topic of cultural heritage preservation in China. This section includes articles by leading experts in the field, as well as interviews with some of the key figures in the preservation movement.

The CERS Newsletter is a platform for sharing information and insights about China's unique cultural and natural heritage. We invite submissions from anyone interested in this topic, whether as an academic, a researcher, or simply as a passionate admirer of China's cultural heritage.

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All of a sudden, she begins singing. Her voice is tender with a few occasional high notes, coming out of a pair of soft lips. The melody is most natural, rather befitting the vast pine forest outside her tent. The tone is warm, contrasting with the deep snow and minus forty degrees temperature around the camp. Her high cheek bones are most unusual for a Chinese, but common among the Tungus language-based people of China’s northeastern territory, once called Manchuria. Her face, however, is most distinctive, with wrinkles filling her entire profile, manifesting into a most unforgettable feature. It is sculpted by a master artist called time.

Mariasol, the very last member of the historical reindeer herders of China, is 82 years old. Mariasol is also the last Ewenki, as the name of this minority of China means People Coming Out of the Forest. She is by Wong How Man

Harbin, Heilongjiang

TOP: Camp of the Ewenki nomadic hunter, circa. 1983.
BOTTOM: Canvas tent at camp today.
the only remaining person who can literally be called a forest person, feeling most at home living in a tent. The few others who occasionally come up the mountains are compelled to do so in order to keep an eye on their fortune; the reindeer herds living among the remaining forests of the Hing An Mountains.

These reindeer, long domesticated from caribous in the wild, used to move around as herd animals when the Ewenki nomadic hunters moved camp in search of new hunting grounds. Today the herds roam the forest freely in the winter and are rounded up with many difficulties during the spring. Most families have a dozen or two of these reindeers. Mariasol has over 300, part of the largest herd of a total of maybe 800 reindeer remaining in China today. Mariasol must be in a good mood. Her son Hexie rarely sees her singing. She sings one song after another, maybe four or five songs, before taking a rest. Otherwise she is always quiet and with few words. It all began when, sitting alone opposite Mariasol in her tent, I gestured a sign over my lips as if playing a Jews Harp. I knew her husband Lajimi, who passed away in 1996, used to play the Jews Harp. From behind her bed she brought out a small tin can, and from inside some small pieces of cloth she brought out a Jews Harp and began playing. The rhythm is again heavenly, with a beat that urges the heart to strum along.

I feel most fortunate to be entertained by an old woman who is famous of being very caustic. She is known to driven away reporters and visitors who flocked to her distant abode, seeking to interview her or to have a glimpse of this last relic of the Ewenki reindeer herder. But our friendship goes back a long way, almost thirty years to when I came as a young journalist for the National Geographic, in the winter of 1983. At that time Mariasol was barely into her 50s.

I came again in 1988, mainly to put Mariasol’s husband, Lajimi, on film as he prepared many unique artifacts and daily utensils of the Ewenki people. We also documented on video a futile hunting trip we embarked upon in the snow. Mariasol was the person who prepared all our
gear for that outing, bread, cake and all. She put the reins on our reindeer caravan and saddled them with carrying sacks. On that same trip, we filmed an interview with Niuna, the very last Shaman of the Ewenki. Now all these people are part of history, having passed away many years ago.

In all, CERS now has ten video tapes of 20-minutes each, documenting the last vestiges of a culture, lifestyle and tradition that are now almost gone forever, carried away by the bitter cold wind of the Hing An Mountains. Perhaps that was why Mariasol felt so happy on this very day, after I showed her on my iPad the films on Lajimi, and a few other acquaintances, who are now only a shadow in her distant memories. She looked most intently and listened attentively, asking to have the volume turned up when Lajimi started playing the Jews Harp. Unfortunately, the song was only like a whisper into her fast failing ears.

Genhe is where the government has relocated all the descendents of the former Ewenki reindeer herders. Today they may number 200 individuals, living in posh two-storey wooden lodges. To showcase the care of the government to this unique group, many new businesses were started in an attempt to leverage their history into a growing tourism industry. One popular item is birch bark objects with Ewenki designs and motifs.

Nearby is a museum explaining the past, or passing, of the Ewenki with some artifacts and relics. Sad to say, the CERS collection of Ewenki objects from the 1980s is a much more impressive repository of their history. And most of our artifacts I bought for a pittance while the original users were turning to new and ready made items. Some of the most valuable pieces of our collection, like the only remaining fishing net with birch bark pieces attached, came out of the trash pile at the time. A spirit box, with a wooden bird inside, came from the last Shaman Niuna. She used to make just such a spirit box for each newborn baby. These days, young Ewenki have never heard of it, let alone seen one.
My trip to the Ewenki in 1983 was a turning point in my career. It was here that I realized how fast indigenous culture and tradition are disintegrating among minority groups of China, especially among tiny groups like the Ewenki, who at the time numbered only 166 individual members. It was on this trip that I began collecting artifacts of the minorities of China, now amassed into a very important collection of objects. It was also on this trip that I understood how writing and photography cannot adequately record many aspects of the material and living culture. Thus I added video taping, however amateurishly done, to my work. Today we also have a very important archive of video records of many minority groups. The Ewenki video is only one such example.

The Ewenki visit was also the trigger point which prompted me later to leave the National Geographic at the height of my career as a frontline journalist and embark upon setting up the China Exploration & Research Society so as to actively pursue conservation efforts in remote China. To that end I feel gratified that we are modestly successful.

Back at Genhe over a hundred kilometers away, Mariasol’s second daughter Dekesha with curly permed hair is now dressed in a modern down coat with high leather boots. I left them a USB containing raw footage with ten films, many of which feature her father Lajimi.

Her brother Hexie, 46 years old, is perpetually drunk, or half way to being there. He was with us earlier at camp with Mariasol and decided to come home for a break. I have known him since 1983 before he joined the PLA for three years. In 1988 during the winter, he accompanied his father and me marching in deep snow into the forest on a hunting trip that yielded nothing except some rare footage on film. He used to be a sharp shooter like his father, carrying his semi-
TOP: Forest scenery in deep winter.
BOTTOM LEFT: Mariasol playing the Jews Harp.
automatic with pride. Now he hides his two rifles in his camp, but with no bullets to pursue his former career. A once proud and free-spirited person is now dependent on a different spirit, that of alcohol, to fill that vacuum inside. Material wealth and cosmetic fortune simply cannot replace cultural and traditional heritage.

I asked Dekesha to help transcribe some of the 1988 interview footage conducted in their language. Among the tapes, three involve an interview with the last Shaman Niuna revealing some of the hidden secrets of a Shaman’s practice. These were of greatest interest to me. An unexpected secret was revealed when Dekesha began translating the voice script to us. “Do you really want me to transcribe everything to you?” asked Dekesha at one point. “Yes, please translate everything,” insisted Zhang Fan who was helping in noting everything down. “There is a voice outside of the camera that keeps telling Niuna not to say too much as such secrets are valuable,” said Dekesha. Today they might have thought differently, as Niuna has carried those secrets with her to her grave.

When our filmmaker Xavier Lee showed Dekesha footage we took of Mariasol on this trip, another surprise came about. “Wow, her first song to Mr. Wong is a love song,” said Dekesha. How appropriate it must be, as it was Valentine’s Day when we were camping out with her. Her parting song to us was even more impressive. “This song was created by her at that very moment, with some beautiful lyrics describing your group descending on her camp like some tiny yellow birds visiting her,” described Dekesha. Such impromptu romanticism brought a most warming smile to our faces, even during such a brutal and cold winter.

For sentimental reason, I brought along and used on this trip the first expensive sleeping bag I ever owned. I bought it thirty years ago for the winter
trip of 1983 to visit the Ewenki. It was a Marmot Mountain Works top-end down bag with Gore-tex shell, promising to keep a person warm to minus thirty degrees below freezing. But for the night at Mariasol’s camp this time, the night time temperature dropped to forty below. Whatever was required to make up the difference in heat was adequately supplied by our warm welcome from Mariasol, baking for us the special Ewenki pancakes and bread that she made from her fire hearth.

Back at camp when we were readying to leave, Mariasol went out into the snow and chose from among the items on a wooden shelf something I wanted to take home. Missing in our collection is a set of reindeer saddle, saddle blanket and saddle bags. With frames made from birch bark and lined outside with moose skin, she has four sets remaining and decided to pick the very best for me. Though worn from use, this set is now for CERS, as well as for future generations, a priceless piece. It will far surpass the value paid by the nouveau riche of China who throw away their fortune for the high-street price of a name brand Hermès or LV handbag.

Our visit with Mariasol is the high point of our winter expedition. But in many ways, it is also the lowest point. Spring will return in a few months to the Hing An Mountains. Trees will bear green again and flowers will blossom. But with the Ewenki and their culture, it is withering into a long winter where spring will never come again.
They were just here ten minutes ago! About half a dozen.” Our first attempt to see the reindeer in Han Ma National Nature Reserve was a failure. Although we immediately set out following what seemed to be the freshest reindeer tracks, we could hardly catch up with the nimble deer, well adapted to fast travel in deep snow.

Reindeer herding is believed to have begun about three thousand years ago, making reindeer the last of the domesticated animals to be tamed. They were probably first domesticated in central Asia near present day Mongolia. In fact, reindeer may have been domesticated more than once. While the Sami people of Finland and Scandinavia never ride their reindeer, using them to pull sledges instead, the eastern people of the tundra of Siberia and the forests of Manchuria traditionally raised reindeer for riding as well as pulling. At least two separate traditions exist. One group sits on a saddle with stirrups, much like a Mongolian horse saddle, and sits in the middle of the animals back. The other group, most notably the Evenki and more northern ranging Eveni people of eastern Siberia, use no stirrups, and instead carry a long pole to tap the ground for balance. They also place the saddle far forward, over the reindeer’s shoulders. This takes the weight off the animal’s vulnerable back and allows the rider to get full benefit of the reindeer’s speed and endurance.

Reindeer herding is still practiced by several minority people throughout Eurasia. Today, reindeer are reared mainly for meat and skins and for the valuable short spring antlers, still covered in the blood rich “velvet” from which the hard bone forms. However, it is likely that reindeer were first domesticated
for a different purpose – the hunt. Only by riding tamed reindeer or pulling their supplies on sledges could the original reindeer people keep up with the wild herds of reindeer that migrate hundreds of kilometers through the year. Traditionally, the Evenki throughout Siberia and Manchuria led a lifestyle that was a mix of hunter-gatherer and pastoralist. They raised their reindeer for milk and above all for transport, but meat came from the wild mammals that they hunted. Reindeer were only killed as sacrifices or for use in special rituals. Even today, the Evenki of China are reluctant to kill their reindeer, preferring to hunt for wild meat illegally. In this sense, the Evenki reindeer people of the southern forests must be in many ways more like the ancestral reindeer people who first discovered the secret of domestication. Unfortunately, these southerners are losing their traditional way of life much faster than many of the northern reindeer nomads who keep huge herds of thousands of domesticated reindeer migrating over the treeless tundra of the north.

The traditional culture of the reindeer people was completely integrated with their hunting and nomadic lifestyle. Spiritual life centered around a belief in spirits that animated everything important to life – reindeer, dogs, wild animals, mountains, lakes, and even knives and guns. Specialists in the knowledge of spirits and the ways to control them were able to communicate with this spirit world through a ritual of singing and drumming, entering into a trance during which they were said to fly to successively higher levels of the cosmos. The Evenki language gave the English speaking world their word for these specialists – the shaman. Today there may no more than one or
two true Evenki shaman remaining in the world. Shaman were brutally persecuted by the Soviet government in Russia, especially under Stalin. Not sufficient to exile them to Siberia, where they already lived, they were imprisoned and tortured. Notoriously, some shaman were even challenged to prove that they could fly and then dropped from helicopters. China was slightly more civilized, but no less efficient at stamping out shamans. In 1952, the Chinese government organized a three-day ritual in which the two most powerful shaman of the Orochen requested the spirits to leave and never come back. The last Orochen shaman died on October 9, 2000, thus ending the tradition among the Chinese Orochen.

In China, the ancient reindeer culture was practiced in the northernmost regions of Heilongjiang and eastern Inner Mongolia, represented by two officially recognized minority groups – the Ewenki and the Orochen. In fact, their languages are very closely related, and anthropologists recognize them both as part of the Evenki group of Tungus people. While the Ewenki continued the ancient tradition of using domestic reindeer to travel on nomadic hunts, the Orochen long ago gave up their reindeer and adopted the horses more typical of their Mongolian neighbors. Until the 1980’s, members of both groups continued their nomadic lifestyles, subsisting by hunting deer, elk, sable and squirrels for their skins. However, just as in Russia to the north, the government of China provided incentives, subsidies and pressures to encourage these last northern nomads to settle down into towns. While this has meant that their children can now attend regular schools and assimilate into the mainstream of Chinese society, it has also been the beginning of the end of the traditional migrations on which the reindeer culture depends. Much of the forest on which the hunt depended was also cleared in the logging boom of the 1970s and 80s. Hunting and guns among the Ewenki were finally banned in 1996. Government subsidies and alcohol combined to destroy any interest among the young and all but the memory among most of the old.

Ewenki culture is undergoing something of a renaissance to the north in Russia, as Ewenki scholars, teachers and politicians try to revive pride in traditional culture. Even shamans are making a comeback.

What remains of the reindeer culture in China? Is there any hope of reviving some of its lost knowledge and skills? Has enough been documented to at least create a faithful record of what once was? This is the reason we are willing to brave the shocking temperatures of China’s farthest northern frontiers in the middle of winter. We travelled to the Amur River valley in Heilongjiang Province on the border with Russia and on to nearby Inner Mongolia to track down the last reindeer herders in China.

Winter camp was a cluster of four canvas tents and one traditional teepee. The teepee was the most interesting, so similar to the teepees of the native Americans of the western US plains. It was a squat conical structure made of larch poles leaning against each other, covered with a canvas leaving the center...
hole open above a fire pit. No one was home; they were living in the modern canvas tents with camp beds and wood burning stoves with chimneys.

When we arrived, we found Mariasol in her modern tent cooking pancakes. She looked exactly like she had looked in the pictures that Howman had shot five years before. Two others were in the camp, a son, named Hexie, and a nephew, Jianke, who kept up a constant banter during our entire visit. Other family members do not even bother to send a representative to the winter camp, coming only in the summer when temperatures are warm. I was disappointed to see that the reindeer were not there. In winter, they roam freely, and are only rounded up in the early spring when the valuable pilose antlers are sawed off. (The antlers like those of other deer, grow back each year, and will even grow back in stunted form if they are cut while growing.)

Only eight families in China still herd reindeer today. Mariasol herself has over 300 reindeer, which her son tends for her. Her nephew has only 20 reindeer, and he claims that he no longer knows where they are. “Maybe in Heilongjiang somewhere.” If not tended, reindeer quickly go wild again, since they are only semi-domesticated. This may be the last generation of reindeer herders. Hexie’s son is not interested in reindeer herding. He refuses to talk to his father when he has been drinking, which seems to be most of the time. His may be the last generation to even remember what a reindeer camp was like.

I wondered aloud why more families did not continue reindeer herding. It seems like a hard life, but not much harder than herding yaks on the Tibetan highlands or cashmere goats in Mongolia. An adult reindeer can be sold for 5,000 RMB and a pelt can be sold for 2,000 RMB. A pair of pilose antlers can be harvested from each adult reindeer every year, and can bring up to 1,400 to 1,600 RMB per kg. Mariasol’s herd of over 300 can bring in 70,000 to 80,000 RMB each year just from their antlers. The Forestry Bureau helps with anaesthetizing and immobilizing the animals and takes a 10-15% tax in return, but this should still leave a good profit. When I asked Jianke my question, he told me that there were too many thieves who would shoot the domestic reindeer in the woods and steal them for their meat. I suspect the reindeer also just wander off, no longer actively tended by the herders during the slack season, and only partly tamed to begin with.

We returned to Han Ma Nature Reserve the next day, arriving just before eight AM. This time we were in luck. The protection station head had just laid out some salt in the snow for the deer, and four startled deer trotted up the hill upon our arrival. They soon relaxed enough to come back down the hill, eager for the tasty salt. A bell around the neck of the largest one clanged softly, completing the Christmas image, but it was clear that these were animals that were more wild than tame.

Perhaps the reindeer will carry on living in these forests even without the Ewenki to tend them. But the culture of the reindeer people may soon see the end of its 3000 year history, and another way of life will have disappeared from the earth.
Much has been written recently about new lifestyles that foster health and promote sustainability. There is even an acronym LOHAS and a magazine that goes by the same name. This is surely all for the good. The world could use more health and more sustainability. But long before these were buzz-words, lifestyles of self-sufficiency existed that were based on the use of knowledge of how to live within the means of the land and its resources. That knowledge, accumulated over hundreds of generations, is endangered now in a world that often seems to be changing too fast to be concerned about what is being lost.

The Oroqen people of northeast China in many ways epitomized self-sufficiency. The Oroqen are one of the five officially recognized groups in China that are members of the Tungus group of cultures. The best known and most numerous Tungus people are the Manchu, who ruled China throughout the Qing Dynasty. Others include the Xibe people, famous as archers who were enlisted as troops and moved to Xinjiang to defend the western border of the Chinese empire, and the He Zhen people, specialists in fishing who made waterproof clothing from fish skins. The Ewenki, close relatives of the Oroqen, are the last reindeer herders in China.

Among all of the Tungus people, the Oroqen are best known for their skills in hunting and for their deer-skin clothing made from their prey. They are also known for their skills in crafting cases, boxes, cradles and canoes from birch bark, stripped from the abundant white birch trees in the forests of Manchuria.

Today, only one Oroqen—“The Last Hunter”—is still permitted to hunt “in order to keep the culture alive.” For a minimal fee, he will take videographers and photographers along on his hunting trips. He can also make a canoe from birch bark, and has filled several orders for canoes for the “ethnic village” amusement...
parks that have sprung up in China’s major cities. His wife is one of the last Oroqen to have the skills to stitch clothing from the skins that her husband brings back. Together, they are perhaps the last people alive who remember all of the traditional skills that once made the Oroqen totally self-sufficient. A family could live in the forest traveling with the game, collecting the food they needed from the land and fashioning their clothing from the skins of the animals that they shot and trapped, and constructing their daily necessities from skins, birch bark and wood.

It is tempting to think of traditional cultures as stable and unchanging until the modern world rushes in and strips them of their resiliency. In fact, all cultures have a history, and cultures change constantly under the influence of exchanges and pressures from other cultural groups. New technologies can transform a culture, as when guns replaced bows and arrows among the Oroqen. New foods can have profound impacts, as when the Oroqen began trading skins for flour and alcohol.

The Chinese anthropologist Qiu Pu, writing in the 1980’s soon after the Cultural Revolution ended, published a monograph in English on the Oroqen: “China’s last hunters”. The text is peppered with quotes from Marx, Engels and Lenin, although surprisingly perhaps, Mao does not appear. Throughout the long discussions about the state of the Oroqen society in its ineluctable evolution from primitive communal clans to class society, Qiu scatters real facts that give a picture of the changes that Oroqen people experienced over the last 350 years.

According to Qiu, sometime in the mid-1600’s, seven clans of Oroqen as well as Ewenki migrated from the northern bank of the Heilong River to the southern bank. Why they moved is not known, but it is interesting that this coincided with the lowest temperatures of the so-called “Little Ice Age”, a time of global cooling that ended in the 17th century. The Oroqens’ reindeer
were later decimated by a plague in this new southern homeland, and many Oroqen soon adopted horses from other minority groups. (Some Ewenki in China continue to keep reindeer even to this day.)

The Manchu Emperor Hong Taiji conquered the Evenks and Oroqen, capturing and executing the leader of the Solonen Evenks, BomBoborg, in 1640. The Manchu soon consolidated their rule over the entire Heilongjiang basin, which then became part of the Qing Dynasty empire. In 1691, the 30th year of the reign of Emperor Kangxi, the Qing government grouped the horse-riding “Molinga” Oroqen under the Butha Eight Banners and required them to provide tributes and military service. Even as late as 1875, 1,000 Oroqen marksmen from the Mount Wangshan region in the inner Hingan Range were selected for military training.

The tribute that the Oroqen were required to provide to the Qing emperors took an interesting form. Each adult Oroqen was required to pay a tribute tax of one sable pelt per year. Many Oroqen continued nomadic hunting, but delivered tributes to so-called “Andas”, meaning ‘friend’ in the Oroqen language. In addition to collecting the sable fur tributes, the Anda also provided ‘his’ Oroqen with flour and supplies. This Anda system continued for nearly 200 years based on mutual benefit, but it also opened the way to gross exploitation. Wen Xu, commanding general of Heilongjiang, censured the Anda for having treated the Oroqen “worse than slaves and beasts of burden.” In 1882, the 8th year of the reign of Emperor Guangxu, the Butha General Yamen was abolished and with it the formal Anda system. However, even then, unofficial anda and private merchants, many of them Russians, continued to buy and barter for valuable pelts.

Globalization had reached the Oroqen, and there was no going back. The Anda system and the introduction of market hunting changed the Oroqen’s way of life forever. For example, in the one year of 1931, an Oroqen man named Menggaogu of Huma and five members of his family, of whom two were able-bodied adults, killed roughly 70 roe deer, 16 moose, 6 deer, 15 wild boars, 2 bears, 2 lynxes, 2 otters, 1 fox and 600 or more squirrels. The family used all the meat and also the pelts of 30 roe deer, 14 moose, 4 deer, and 2 bear. Apparently, this was enough to cloth the family for one year. However, even at this early date, the Oroqen were already tightly linked to the outside world. The family of Menggaogu of Huma sold the rest of their skins, and with the proceeds, the family purchased grain, cotton cloth, gunpowder, salt, tea, tobacco and other supplies.

While not mentioned in Menggaogu’s yearly accounts, another market commodity was also introduced by the traders – liquor. This has had a devastating impact on Oroqen culture.
Market hunting also proved to be too much for the wild populations of many wildlife species to maintain. Under the impact of the market demand and with the widespread use of more accurate guns, wildlife numbers fell, making it harder for hunters to find and kill the animals they sought. Between about 1900 and 1940, the average number of squirrels, moose and roe deer that an Oroqen hunter could bring back declined by about half, and the number of red deer fell from 30 to 10 per year*.

Somewhere between 1740-1776, the Emperor Qianlong issued an edict sealing off the northeast from outsiders, in an effort to protect the culture of the Tungus people in its original heartland. This provision lasted for over 100 years, but was finally rescinded by Emporer Xianfeng, hoping to populate the northeast in order to counter pressure from Imperial Russia to the north. Indeed, in 1858, the Treaty of Aigun (Aihui) between China and Russia granted Russia control of a vast region to the north of the Amur River that was previously considered to be under Qing control.

Change continued for the Oroqen living in China. Between 1919 and 1939, the policy of “Forsaking hunting for farming” was introduced to the region by the Koumintang government. However, after 1939 and Japanese annexation, this policy was reversed by the Japanese. Oroqen were labeled a “special people” by the Japanese and ordered to return to hunting. All land was confiscated from those who had begun farming, and all pelts had to be given to Japanese. This Japanese domination continued until 1945 and liberation.

Change has certainly not stopped with liberation. The culture of the Oroqen was a target of reforms to abolish superstition, which included the end to the practicing of shaman – traditional healers and seers who could communicate with the Oroqens’ spirit world. Recent government interventions have included the settlement of most Oroqen in cities and towns and compulsory education for all children through grade nine, thus ending the family migrations. Logging has transformed the forests where they used to hunt, and hunting has been banned to take the pressure off scarce wildlife. Banned for all, of course, except for the last Oroqen hunter.

*Qiu Pu provides these statistics from historical sources:
~1900: Estimated that a competent Oroqen hunter could obtain 100 roe deer, 30 deer, 40 moose, and 600 squirrels per year.
~1911: After the introduction of modern rifles, it was estimated that a competent hunter with modern guns could obtain 80 roe deer, 20 deer, 30 moose, and 400 squirrels per year.
~1940: Estimated that a competent hunter could obtain 60 roe deer, 10 deer, 20 moose, and 300 squirrels per year.

Heilongjiang means Black Dragon River. It seems symbolic and appropriate that we are here at the head of the river as the Year of the Dragon begins.

“Today the weather report said minus forty degrees, but we are used to it,” said Liu when I asked how cold it was. He had just returned home from collecting fish from the nets, laid under ice-holes of the Heilongjiang River. “In fact the water is much warmer below the ice and once the fish are out of water, they freeze to death;” quipped Liu. Today’s catch only brought in small minnows and one larger hei niang catfish, perhaps one kilo in weight. On a good day he may get one that weighs ten kilos or more.

His neighbor Li Lanqing who runs the Longjiang Yuan (Dragon River Source) hostel and restaurant was luckier. He produced a three kilo carp, frozen solid, and sold it to us for Rmb500. With a saw, he cut it into two halves. One to be served as our lunch and the rest to be taken back to Polar Village (formerly known as Mohe Village) for dinner.

We are at Luoguhe, a village with some sixty households at the head of the Heilongjiang River, or Amur River, as it is known to the Russian side across on the other bank. Here is where the Ergun and Shilka rivers, southern and northern branches respectively, have their confluence, becoming the Heilongjiang, the tenth longest river in the world. This is also the provincial border between Inner Mongolia and Heilongjiang, together making up what was once called Manchuria.

Winter here is necessarily brutal and bitter, being adjacent to the huge continental climate zone of Russia’s Siberian Far East. For visitors from the tropical region further south, it may seem deceivingly romantic, as the entire land is dressed in white and frost. Reality checked in when we went on an excursion to interview several fishing families along the river. My small camera was frozen stiff as a newly-charged battery went dead. Wearing fogged up, then frozen, eyeglasses is routine. Even my pen’s ink was frozen when I tried to make a few notes during the interview.

In recent years, more independent tourists have begun to arrive. Luoguhe is now on the map because nearby Polar Village, 60 km away, is publicized as the northernmost village of China. In fact the village is not even the northernmost point of the country nor the northernmost community, but the name has already stuck. In the same way, Luoguhe takes claim to be the source of the Heilongjiang River, but the confluence is another seven kilometers upstream.

We drove over the frozen river to the confluence before turning east again and following the river down, driving over the frozen water for 70 kilometers back to Polar Village. Snowplow trucks must have shoveled away the snow, providing a smooth border highway on the ice during the winter. I got behind the wheel to enjoy skating our Land Rover on solid ice, at times allowing it to go into a slight tail spin for fun.

Along the way, we encountered a PLA border patrol truck, but they simply passed us by. In more heady days, up until maybe a decade ago, such border regions were considered highly restricted with military sensitivity. Across the bank were a few Russian sentry houses and high observation towers. Compared to brand new installations used by the PLA on the Chinese side, the Russians’ positions looked rather rustic. Perhaps it is one way for China to flex its economic muscle towards its neighbor.
At one point I ran into two PLA soldiers on foot patrolling the river. Their mouth masks were full of ice as the vapor from their breathing had condensed and frozen. I thought they must have committed some major offences to be given such a punishing assignment in the middle of winter.

While there were many signs posted warning tourists not to venture across the border, the locals seem not to take such warnings too seriously as I saw many fish holes beyond the center part of the river, at times right near the bank of the Russian side.

Li Da-ma, otherwise also known as Li Guiqing, is owner of a family hostel along the river. We chose to stay with her because of the cleanliness, but above all, for the heated garage for our two Land Rovers. Even though our radiators have anti-freeze fluid and the diesel in our car is rated to minus 35, with nighttime temperatures of minus thirty or forty, the oil would be frozen.

During my last visit in 2005, there were only a couple of hostels in the entire village. Today there are over a hundred such family dwellings and several large hotels. More hotels are being
built or are being planned. Obviously, the recent unlocking of fortune in China is bringing a large army of nouveau riche yearning for new destinations in a more out of the way place.

Li Da-ma was from nearby Mohe Township and formerly worked with the forestry bureau. After retiring to her home in Shenyang in Liaoning province, she heard that the local government was giving out ten permits for home-based hostels with a stipend of Rmb10,000 to each family willing to start such a venture. She rushed back to Mohe Village, now renamed Polar Village, to apply but was too late. The quota was filled. But she was able to convince the government to allow her to take out an operation permit without the stipend. That was in 2007. The rest is history. Today her modest ten-room home, a stone-throw away from the border river of Heilongjiang, brings her easily a quarter million in income each year. Even Li Changchun, China’s prime minister to be, visited her home in 2008 as a symbolic gesture to encourage such entrepreneurship.
However not all is well. Li Da-ma is noticeably worried about her big neighbors, building up large-scale hotels left and right. “Lately, the government and local tourism bureau tend to favor and patronize these large developers. They often tell visitors that our smaller places are all full and point them towards the more posh hotels. In reality, we are still always vying for business, especially during the off season and winter months;” lamented Li. At that moment, her second daughter Wang Li interrupted. “My mother used to have four hectares of farmland; likewise many locals all have plots. The government bought us out on the cheap and sold to hotel developers many times over;” complained Wang Li. That however has become a familiar story all over China in recent years.

As for me and my team, we would choose such a home-stay any day over yet another branded five-star outfit. Especially during a cold winter, when the warmth of home, with a meal cooked by Li Da-ma, would beat any fine hotel bed or restaurant, hands down.
CRAVING FOR CAVIAR, FOR BETTER OR FOR WORSE

by Wong How Man
Heilongjiang
February 6, Harbin (45.7°N)

We are in Harbin, the northernmost provincial capital of China. Today is the 15th day of the lunar New Year, Year of the Dragon, and a time of celebration by all Chinese. The sun is setting at 4:30 PM at this latitude while a full moon has already risen. Flying in, I could see that all the rivers were frozen, though there was no snow on the ground.

By 5 PM it is already dark outside and everywhere is the sound and flashes of fireworks on display, shooting up to brighten the otherwise too-early night sky. Huge specimens of the now-famous ice sculptures of Harbin, an imposing castle here and a line up of animals there, dominated several center lanes and intersections on the boulevard from airport into town. They are lit up from the inside with multiple color tones, giving the look of a crystal fairyland.

My team, six of us for now since our filmmaker Xavier would join us in a couple of days, drive off from our hotel to a hot pot meal. No other food or meal would stay warm and keep you warm in such weather. The temperature lingers between minus seven degrees in mid day to minus twenty-three at night. Momentarily it starts snowing. A few flakes drift down, which gradually become bigger, and by the time we come out of the restaurant, the entire ground is covered in white.
This is the first snow of this winter and we are already into February. As Wang Xianmei our host living in Harbin said; “The weather has changed”. I cannot recall how many times I’ve heard the same remark all over China in recent years as we explored the full breadth and length of the country.

With weather in mind, I changed my computer wallpaper from an image of us pushing our vehicles through deep snow on expedition in the Qilian Mountain to another image of tropical waves pounding my garden front at Tai Tam Bay in Hong Kong. Such reversal and contrast of climatic scenes, though only virtually, seems to play trick in beating the weather at hand. Maybe on my computer I will pull up a buffet of my favorite dishes once we enter the desolate dietary winter of the border with Siberia. But then Wang also told me of the caviar we could get rather cheaply along the Heilongjiang at the border river town of Heihe. That town will be our destination tomorrow for the first leg of our expedition towards the border.

February 7, Heihe (50.2°N)

From -7°C to -17°C took a half day and 250 km as we drove from Harbin to Bei’an, a town to the north. Though it is only midday when we stopped for lunch, the sun was hanging low due to our northern latitude. Likewise trees cast long shadows on the ground throughout the day. Even inside the car, we are bundled up in layers of clothes. When a phone rings, it takes a while to fiddle through the many layers of pockets trying to locate where the ring is coming from. Despite setting the air-con at 20°, the fan blows out warm air, relative to the temperature inside the car.
When over our car radio Wang Jian, our second car driver, comments on how bleak and boring the scenery looks outside, I suggest a more romantic and sensual interpretation. “Think of the long line of trees without leaves as someone baring the body, fully naked and revealing all, be it plumpish or skinny. The occasional nest on a tree ought to bring an additional dimension into your mind,” I radioed back.

After driving for about 650 kilometers, we reach the border city of Heihe, or Black River City. By now, the temperature outside lingers at about -30ºC in the day time. Across the Heilongjiang River is Russia. A new bridge spans the national frontier as cross-border trade has flourished in recent years, a far cry from the days when the two communist giants exchanged propaganda slings and real shots at each other during the 1960s.

We journey to the famous Russian Street of Heihe to purchase some provisions, especially edibles brought in from the Russian side. High on my list is the caviar that Wang had brought to my attention. Inside the first store, filled with shelves over shelves of Russian merchandise, I stock up on several bottles of both salmon roe and sturgeon caviar. The orange red roe and the black sturgeon eggs gleam through the glass cases with bottling dates clearly stamped on the bottom. Bill Bleisch who reads some Russian explains to me some of the details printed on the label. I am overjoyed at the run-away prices of 25Rmb per small bottle and 65 for a large one. Maybe I can treat my dear friends to it when I get home. Or so I thought. Later we open a bottle to find out that they are all tasteless and simply jelly; no doubt another product from China’s notorious and scandalous faking industry. Now other members of my team are also doubtful about the vodka and beer they bought at the same store. Even our dinner at a supposedly Russian restaurant becomes an extremely uncertain experience.

Feb 8, Station Eighteen (52.4ºN)

Another 400 kilometers takes us to Station Eighteen, a name among a long string of numbers attached to logging stations since earlier days. Along the way, the forest of birch, pine and fir provide a scenic mosaic among the winter snow. We follow a road running almost parallel to the border river known as the Heilongjiang or Amur. It is the seventh longest river in the world and a future target of CERS for seeking the source. Now and then, there are high towers. Some are sentry points to monitor illegal border crossing activities. Others are near logging camps to prevent forest fire. A massive fire that lasted weeks in 1987 depleted huge tracts of the forest along the frontiers.

We stop for the night here in order to visit an old friend. Guo Baolin is the very last authentic Oroqen hunter. At 66, he still goes on hunting trips into the forest. With his five hunting dogs, he bagged a few boars and a roe deer recently. We dine on some frozen game meat from his storage room. During my 2005 visit, we interviewed Guo and noted down his many hunting stories, besides acquiring his hunting jacket made from Moose skin. This time, after exerting some coercion, I purchase his fluffy fur hat made from “hou” or raccoon dog.

Before we take leave, I suggest Guo’s wife Ge Xiahua should pass down her sewing skills with Oroqen motifs to her granddaughter, now barely 12 years old. More and more, I see among ethnic tribes that their only hope of rescuing some remnants of their culture is to bypass an entire generation and hand down their heritage to the grandchildren. With the Oroqen it could very much be the same case if they wish to preserve some tiny vestiges of their tradition.

I assure Ge that, unlike other collectors of ethnic artifacts, we purchase such objects in order to preserve them within China, at one of our theme museum exhibits. But before the hat reaches its ultimate destination, I would be a temporary custodian, using it to keep my head warm for the remainder of this very cold winter journey.
There is a haze in the air this morning from the fires of last night. When I was in Ailaoshan Yunnan last month, fire was on everyone’s mind. For the fourth year in a row, a prolonged drought had turned the pine forest into a tinder-box ready to explode into flame. Here on the edge of Inle Lake, fire seems to be no concern. Last night, as the flames shot up into the sky seemingly from right outside the resort, our friend Misuu admitted that it looked scary; “Don’t worry, it is normal.” The reed beds around the lake burn regularly, consuming the dead grasses and returning nutrients to the soil. New growth sprouts up almost immediately. Even on the hillsides, ground fires are part of the ecology, consuming the litter of leaves and branches on the ground, but rarely affecting the trees, which have fire-resistant bark.

The wetlands are adapted to fire, but also to flood. These changes are that the plants and animals here are adapted. So have the people. This morning we joined a local entrepreneur, Titusu, to take a tour of her lakeside village. Over 1,400 people live on the lakeside in houses perched on stilts. Although the water level is at an all time low right now, she pointed to the water marks on the house pillars, showing the level of record floods from last October. Whether wealthy farmers or poor fishermen, all of them travel by boat. “We learn to row at the age of four;” she tells us, as she skillfully steers the boat, perched in the stern of the boat on one leg and with her other leg wrapped around the long paddle. “We learn to swim at the same time.” The one-legged paddling is a specialty of Inle Lake. I imagine I would do a lot more swimming than paddling if I try it.

The village life seems idyllic, but all is not well. The lake is suffering from a variety of environmental problems, and as it does, the fishermen suffer as well. More people have moved to the lake to take up farming in the floating gardens that line the shores. As a result, the area of open water has shrunk dramatically over the past 50 years. At the same time, the pesticides used on the tomatoes and zucchini plants have washed into the lake. Perhaps the combined effects explains the decline in fish.

We tend to think of our present age as the root of all evils, and past times as somehow an idyllic period of harmony between man and nature. In fact, the destruction of natural heritage by humans, while accelerating, has been going on relentlessly for millennia. Six decades ago, for example, Myanmar lost what must have been one of the wonders of the natural world. According to the colonial explorer Oates, there used to be a breeding colony of rare Spot-billed Pelican and Adjutant Storks on the Sittang River plains just below Shwegyin. He estimated the colony covered no less than 100 square miles and supported countless millions of birds. He visited the colony on November 25th, 1930.
8, 1877. “From July-October or November the whole area is nothing but a most dismal swamp, inundated to the depth of ten feet in many parts…. Immense flocks of pelicans and adjutants [storks] were flying in circles over our heads the whole day. The whole forest consisted of very large trees, but a portion, about one in twenty, was made up wood-oil trees (ie. Kanyin), gigantic fellows, 150 feet high and more, with a smooth branchless trunk of 80-100 feet. These are the trees selected by the pelicans. I noticed no tree contained less than three nests.” The immense breeding colony may have continued to exist until 1935. By 1946, it had disappeared, the forest cleared and the swamp transformed into rice fields.

The pelicans and storks are gone, but Inle Lake still supports thousands of migrating birds each winter. I went out early in the morning with Misuu and some of the staff from the Inle Princess Resort. Misuu explains that she wants each one of her 200 plus staff to have a chance to see the birds so that they appreciate what is protected at Inle Lake. Our guide was a young man from the wildlife sanctuary. He was able to identify all of the birds we saw at a glance and quickly show them to us in the well-worn bird guide that he carried. Even late in the season, he was able to lead us to flocks of Lesser Whistling Duck, Common Coot, Glossy Ibis numbering in the dozens, not to mention the ubiquitous egrets, Little Cormorants and Brown-headed Gulls. Purple Swamphens were a big surprise for the resort staff. “Oh! I had no idea they were so beautiful!” one of the girls exclaimed. “We had these for dinner just the other night.” The visit to a rookery was exciting, watching the elegant plumed egrets feeding their gawky youngsters. For me, perhaps the biggest treat was seeing the pair of Pheasant-tailed Jacana that were visible most mornings, tip-toeing with their long toes on top of the lily pads in the branch right beside our breakfast table. I hope to be able to come back in the rainy season to see them in their breeding plumage, flaunting their long tail feathers and yellow striped necks.

Inle is interesting not only for the birds, but also for what lives under the water. With an elevation of about 885 meters above sea level, Inle Lake is an isolated upland lake, just like Er Hai and other high lakes in Yunnan Province. The isolation of these highland lakes has created evolutionary experimental zones just like the Galapagos Islands that Darwin made famous. Instead of finches and giant tortoises, the experiments in these lakes were carried out by fish and snails. Inle reportedly once had 28 species of endemic fish and 20 species of endemic snails, species that are found nowhere else in the world. These include the colorful scaleless Swabwa Barb (Sawbwa resplendens), the Emerald Dwarf Rasbora (Microrasbora erythromicron), and the Inle Danio (Inlecypris auropurpurea); species that have found a place in the aquariums of fish lovers throughout the world. Some of these species and genera have become increasingly rare and may already have gone extinct. In the lakeside fish market, the fish offered for sale seem to be common species, many of them introduced to the lake in the hopes of increasing fish catch.

One of the wonderful things about natural heritage is that it usually has great potential for a full recovery from damage, as long as species do not go extinct. Inle Lake still has much to offer those interested in Myanmar’s natural heritage. It is even being considered for protection as a Wetland of International Importance under the Ramsar Convention. Inle Lake is already famous as a tourist destination for its unique cultural heritage. CERS is working together with the Inle Princess Resort to promote awareness and appreciation of the hidden natural side of Inle’s beauty.
Finally I too have my Evita moment. Below the balcony of my room are gathered a couple of thousand people, waving and cheering while looking up. Here I am at the brand new Strand Hotel at Moulmein, known today as Mawlamyaing, by the mouth of the Salween River, the third largest city of Myanmar.

The cheering crowd was gathered here, despite it being 9 PM already, to welcome someone they love dearly. Checking into the hotel minutes ahead of us is the Lady, Aung San Suu Kyi, staying just a floor above me. Momentarily she came out to the balcony and the people went into an uproar of cheers. Someone on the balcony gestured for the crowd to quiet down, and suddenly all became quiet.

The Lady spoke with a soft voice and asked everyone to go home for dinner and come back in the morning. As if on cue, everyone began turning around to go home. She too had to go downstairs for a late dinner with her entourage. After all, there would be a long day of rallying in the morning as she made one of her 48 stops within a month, before the by-election set for April 1.

The following morning, the Lady had a simple breakfast before heading off on another long day of speaking routine. She had some orange juice and milk, pineapple and watermelon, a rather healthy diet. In case my readers thought that I joined her for breakfast, I must confess the details are the result of following the routine of an inquisitive journalist. I ran into a hotel maid in the elevator with a room service cart coming down from the Lady’s fourth floor penthouse to my third floor below. I nosed around and extracted some private details about the Lady.

As she left the hotel, I got some close-up shots of Aung San Suu Kyi as she walked out to a cheering crowd outside. Within minutes of her departure, everything returned to perfect quiet in this hotel on the bank of the Salween River.

We were in Moulmein to study the mouth or estuary delta of the river, having seen it at the source several months ago. The tropical climate and dynamics of human activities here offer a stark contrast to the arctic and pristine environment at the source high on the Tibetan plateau.

After breakfast, we boarded our boat, a long boat with hard-top canopy, and sailed toward the very last village along the banks of the Salween River. There is a large island at the estuary, dividing the mouth of the river into two sides before it enters the sea. This morning we follow the western channel to the sea. The first village we ran into was Kalwi. A gunboat was anchored a couple of hundred meters from the jetty and a few marine police or Naval officers were out on the deck, waving our boat.
to come closer. Bill got smart and put away his long lens on the camera and went under-deck. Chris also quickly put aside his sophisticated looking gun-turret-like tripod and filming equipment. Here in Myanmar, the recent opening of a long-closed country still leaves a shadow of caution in our minds. Cautioned we were, but by the goodwill of the Navy, who advised us that the tide was going out and our boat would be too big and with too deep a draught to get back upriver in just a little while. Their advice was heeded and we quickly negotiated for a smaller boat and continued on our journey. Indeed we were to discover later that even the smaller boat would get stranded at low tide so that we had to wait for over an hour, watching anxiously for the tide to come in and lift the boat free again.

Momentarily we reached an even smaller village, the very last community along the Salween. After plowing the boat head-first into the bank, we disembarked into calf-deep soft mud. Very slippery mud it was, too, and more caution was used in order not to slide into the mud as we waded gingerly toward the village ahead. Tidal water had just receded and we were about 300 meters from the real shore. Each step involved slowly plunging one foot into the mud while trying to stabilize the body. Lifting the other foot to follow, the first foot would slip a little on its grip up the slanted slope.

This risk however was rather harmless when compared to the snowstorm we had to weather at the source of the Salween several months ago. At the source, life really did seem to be on the line. One team member was so exhausted after falling off his horse and picking himself up that he lamented a second fall would spell his demise, never to be able to get up again. Should one fall here, the only danger would be “drowning” in deep mud. A dozen pairs of muddy feet finally reached dry land and it was rendered worthy of a group photo, just of the feet of course.

U Thein Phe is a retired teacher of 75. He spoke perfect English and answered some of my questions. Da’re is a village of almost a thousand families, mostly farmers, with about twenty percent of the families being fisherman. These fishermen are mainly Muslim and have some middle-eastern features. Usually farmers are more “wealthy” than fishing people, as their crops are better assured, whereas fishing yield is more uncertain. Recent years have also seen overall catch dropping. As for himself, he used to go to Moulmein only once in a long while, not being able to afford the bus fare. That was when he was getting only 8,000 kyats per month in retirement funds. Today the new government gives him 23,000 as allowance each month. So he can afford to go to the city any time he wants. Life apparently is getting better lately.
We had the good fortune to come across a wedding in process. Everyone in the village was invited, coming and going all the time, helping with preparation of food or helping themselves with consuming the food. Children seemed to be having the greatest fun, enjoying the feast that was provided to all guests. The young couple, 18 for the bride and 24 for the groom, were dressed up smartly and sat generously for our photo opportunity.

As we rose to leave, the host was most gracious, seeing us down the stairs with a few kids following our march toward the shore. Getting our feet into mud again was a revisited ordeal. I began wondering how many times I would have to repeat this feat in the next two days as we sailed upriver to visit more villages. Maybe we would time ourselves to make stops when the tide would be coming in, rather than going out. Here in the tropical jungle, we were also apprehensive of malaria. I reasoned that if sweating is one of the symptoms of malaria, I must be having malaria all the time.

The moment of enlightenment finally came. My favorite saying regarding rivers has been, “At the source I drink its water, at the mouth I wash my feet”, a metaphor about the two extremities. So here I sat on the side of our boat, savoring the experience while the boatmen poured water from the Salween and helped me wash my feet. It was a wonderful feeling to see the dark muddy glue gradually disappear to reveal a pair of tanned but clean feet once again.
For the second time on this trip, we are stuck.

The boatman, sensing Howman’s impatience, climbs out of the boat and up the muddy bank to look out for the incoming tide. The soldiers on the police boat had warned us that we would get stuck if we continued downriver to the last village. That was why we switched from our larger river boat to a smaller flat bottomed boat. But after a quick visit to Ta’re Village and its forest temple, we are now perched on a mud bank with no way forward or back. Our only way out and back to Moullmein and our hotel is to wait for the incoming tide.

We are all beginning to wilt in the heat. My mind wanders. The name Moullmein conjures up memories of the famous poem Mandalay by Rudyard Kipling. I recite as much as I can remember to pass the time.

By the old Moullmein Pagoda, lookin’ lazy at the sea,
There’s a Burma girl a-settin’, and I know she thinks o’ me;
For the wind is in the palm-trees, and the Temple-bells they say:
“Come you back, you British soldier; come you back to Mandalay!”

While Kipling’s Jungle Book remains as popular as ever, his poetry seems to have gone out of fashion. He has been pegged as the poet laureate of British colonialism but, I find his poems often contain so much honest humanity that it is easy to forgive the occasional jingoism. His down to earth descriptions of the lives and thoughts of common foot soldiers and administrators goes a long way to explain why a generation would leave the comfort of home and strike out on a new life in Asia. In the poem Mandalay, the British soldier sums it up:

“If you’ve ‘eard the East a-callin’, you won’t never ‘ead naught else.”
No! You won’t ‘ead nothin’ else
But them spicy garlic smells,
An’ the sunshine an’ the palm-trees an’ the tinkly Temple-bells;
On the road to Mandalay,
Where the flyin’ fishes play,
An’ the dawn comes up like thunder outer China
’crosst the Bay!

Actually, Moullmein is not on the road to Mandalay, but sits at the mouth of the Salween River. And the bay looks west, not east, with the sun coming up behind over Thailand. But if we can forgive Kipling’s geographical errors, his other descriptions all ring true. Elephants no longer load teak at the port, but the temple bells still tinkle at the Moullmein pagoda. And the teak logs still come down the river, loaded on barges on hauled along submerged, because they are too heavy to float.

Much of the forest in Myanmar is gone now, cleared for farming or unsustainable logging. With its passing, so many wild places have lost their wildness and their wildlife. It became clear how much has changed when we stopped at the Kyauk Kat Lat Pagoda near Pa An. In this one spot, wild animals were abundant and diverse. We saw the rare Green Peafowl, Grey Heron, Purple Swamphen and Lesser Whistling Ducks, plus Long-tailed Macaques and large colony of bats in the sacred cave turned temple. The protection given by Buddhism clearly made a difference, since we never saw anything like this many wild species in any other spot on our travel on the river. Elsewhere, we have seen one flock of ducks and a few solitary herons, but little else. Our most spectacular discovery occurred when a restaurant owner in Wtoe Eye showed us a picture of a 10 foot crocodile that had been caught in a tributary of the main river last year. It was sold to a breeding farm in Thailand.

Or wait continues. I don’t know how the others feel, but to my mind, today’s ill-fated trip downstream would be worth it if we had seen only one thing alone. As we approached we saw them wheeling through the air above the large trees that surrounded the last stupa on the river – bats. These are not cave bats, like
the little fellows we found in a karst cave temple farther up river. Those insect-eating bats have a face that only a mother or a mammalogist could love. These fruit-eating bats have a dog-like face covered with reddish fur, resembling a small fox, hence their common name of Flying Fox. They are probably the Large Flying Fox, also known as Giant Fruit Bat or, to the scientists, P. vampyrus. Not vampires at all, these bats feed by eating nectar and fruit they find in the tree tops. They roost in colonies in trees, hanging upside down with their wings folded so that they resemble dark wrinkled fruits themselves. Disturbed as we approach, they flap away, slapping the air noisily with broad wings that reportedly can reach 2 meters in span. Fruit bats are considered a delicacy and harvested for the market in other regions that I have visited in Asia. The bats are here probably because of the protection of Buddhism again. Ta’re’s Buddhist temple, the last temple on the Salween River and one of the oldest in the region, has protected its hundreds of bats just the way it has protected its colonial era library.

Before our visit to the bats, we paid our respects to the abbot and the monks at the temple. The vision of peace offered by the monks gives me the patience to put up with the delay on the river as our boat remains stuck fast. It was in a forest temple much like this one that I found refuge and peace in Vienchang in Lao PDR during a personal life crisis long ago, so I have a special attachment to places like this.

Underneath the hot sun, my mind begins to wander again. The bank oozes fresh water that trickles down the slope. Where it joins the river, the sandy mud dances, twinkling in the sun as if filled with gold dust. It reminds me that some of this mud must have washed all the way down from the source of the Salween river in the highlands of Tibet. On our trip to the source in 2011, it was cars, not boats, that had been stuck in the mud. Otherwise, it is hard to connect that experience of ice and snow with the hot muddy river at the Salween’s mouth. The trip to the source had been marked with glacier ice and foul weather that culminated in a dangerous white-out snowstorm.

The boatman calls out from above that he can see the incoming tide, but the water on the bank continues to fall, not rise. I wonder out loud if there will be a dramatic tidal bore, like the famous bore at Hangzhou, when twice each day the river meets the tide with such force that waves of up to 9 meters tall and travelling at 40 km/hr are regularly recorded. I remember years ago, on my first trip of exploration outside the USA, when I was blessed with the sight of a pod of Belugas, the small white whale of the Arctic, swimming up the Churchill River in Manitoba, breaching and blowing as they followed the bore up river. Would porpoises and dolphins use the bore the same way here in the tropics? The Irawaddy Dolphin (Orcaella brevirostris) is not a close
relative of the extinct Yangtze River Dolphin, but is actually closer to the Orca or Killer Whale of Shamoo fame. The name is misleading, because they were once found not only found in Irawaddy, but throughout southeast Asia. Today, the species is in a crisis, with only one secure population of about 5,000 individual dolphins, all in the Sunderbands Nature Reserve in Bangladesh. In Myanmar, the population may number less than 50 individuals, and all found in one small protected area in the Irawaddy River above Mandalay. Is it possible that a few of these rare dolphins still remain in the Salween River?

My reverie is broken when the river growled as if in frustration, announcing the arrival of the tide. The muddy water downstream was broken by a growing patch of golden water coming in from the sea. Suddenly, the current reversed and sticks and other detritus that had been floating downstream began to travel rapidly back upstream. While there was no dramatic wave or pods of breaching dolphins, it was a pure thrill when the water level began climbing rapidly up the bank. Within minutes, our boat was free and we were soon heading back to our overdue lunch.

This is not the first time we have been stuck on our visit to the mouth of the Salween. On our way to Moullemein, we were stuck in traffic for over two hours by an unexpected tide of humanity. The road became one way only, filled over capacity with cars, trucks, buses and motorcycles loaded with thousands of people. All had the same destination, a rally of the once banned National League for Democracy which would feature none other than the Lady herself. In fact, we soon learned, her car was just ahead of us, and she was heading to the same hotel in Moullemein where we were to be staying. She was on a whirlwind tour of the country to stump for 48 parliamentary seats that were up in a by-election scheduled for April. T-shirts, banners and signs were everywhere featuring her picture paired with that of her famous father, the freedom-fighter, Aung San. “Does this happen often?” Howman asked. “Once every 22 years;” answered Misuu. That is the length of time since the last free election in Myanmar. It was another case of frustration turned to excitement, as we realized that we were witnessing history in the making.

It seems that the tide has turned in Myanmar. The ports at Moullemein, Sittang and Yangon may soon be bustling again, filled with ships being loaded with teak, ore and other natural resources. I find myself hoping that the change brings benefits for all the people of the country and also for its wildlife, so that Kipling’s flyin’ fishes and Salween’s flying foxes, as well as the water birds, dolphins, and other species can continue to play and thrive for generations to come.
CERS IN THE FIELD

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP:
Our tracks on the frozen Heilongjiang, border river between China and Russia. Chris Dickinson, CERS filmmaker at the mouth of the Salween. Xavier Lee, CERS filmmaker filming on the river Heilongjiang. Berry Sin in full arctic outfit. How Man stands guard at the border sentry over the frozen Heilongjiang. CERS team with the remaining Ewenki reindeer herding family.
CERS IN THE MEDIA

- CCTV aired two half-hour documentaries featuring CERS personnel. One was focused on Qiju Qilin, our Tibetan Director in Zhongdian. The other program focused on foreigners of CERS dedicated to helping conservation in China, including Dr William Bleisch, Dr Paul Buzzard, and intern Zoe Nulebuff.

- Hungary’s Hamu Es Gyemant Magazinkia featured CERS and How Man’s work in a major piece of article.

- Spanish off-road magazine Todo Terreno, the most important one in the country have a four-page special about CERS expedition.
For CERS’ 25th anniversary, three key supporters made larger than usual gifts to the Society. Mr Billy Yung, CERS Director, donated HKD Ten Million for CERS to purchase our office in Wong Chuk Hang. Dr William Fung, CERS Advisor, donated USD One Million to support our ongoing exploration and other projects. Mr Barry Lam, CERS Chairman, pledged USD One Million to support our education mission. We thank their huge generosity.

CERS thanks Magnus Bartlett, long-time CERS Board Director. Mr Bartlett is retiring from our board after over a decade of dedicated service to our Society.

Wim Kooyker, husband of CERS advisor Judith Corrente, visited How Man’s private studio/gallery in Hong Kong. Judith is a major supporter of CERS with her yearly donation.

Shun Hing Education and Charity Fund donated HKD 1 million in support of CERS education programs.

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