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Since 1986

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP:
Naga festival at Myanmar's northwestern region, Our CERS fisherman in Tai Tam, Steller's Sea Eagle ready to strike, Muslim vendor at Golden Triangle.

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President's Message

As Napoleon once said, “China is a sleeping giant; Let it sleep, as when it wakes up it will shake the world.” China, of course, has woken up.

Myanmar is now the sleeping giant of Southeast Asia, and it is about to wake up from a long hibernation. Will it follow the path of China, or that of Vietnam or India? I think not. While a late starter may appear at first sight as disadvantaged, this can also be turned into an asset in our time of rapid change. Coming from behind, one can aim to run a marathon rather than a sprint.

The country is ideal for those who want to take a longer term view, be it in investment or to advance “sustainable” projects. For CERS as an NGO, we plan in 5 to 10 years term, thus making capital investment into lengthy projects rather than quick fix types of crisis intervention programs. These days people are prone to use, or abuse, the term “sustainable”, without asking about the necessary prerequisite of “relevancy”. If it is no longer relevant, why sustain it? Be it a policy, a corporation (NGOs included) or even a life.

We strongly feel CERS’ relevance to Myanmar is gained by aiming to benefit the host country, even before sharing the knowledge and information we gather with the rest of the world. It is for this reason that our archive of pictures and collection of artifacts are first and foremost for setting up of a permanent exhibit within the country.

Our decision to build an exploration boat in Myanmar will not only put us in position to reach the remotest regions of the country, but allow us to design conservation strategy and projects to go in tandem with the imminent changes happening in the country. We would embrace changes and modernization while ensuring that crucial and key heritage of the country is put under caring hands. For achieving that, we intend to partner with local government, NGOs and communities within Myanmar.

While no investor myself, I have been following the world economy and the inevitable ebb and flow of the market tide for many years. It is my personal view that Myanmar is an ideal country for those who are not distracted by the monthly, weekly or daily fluctuation of the market, and prefer to invest and rest, like a bear sleeping during a long winter hibernation, just to wake up again to the full blossom of another new spring’s bounty.

People who sleep well with nice dreams do not necessarily realize those dreams. Myanmar is known for having real gems, not just dreamed up ones. This issue of the newsletter brings our readers not only to distant parts of Myanmar, but also to a few hidden and sleepy spots from other parts of Asia.
One by one, we carefully untangled them; first their legs, then jointed mouth-parts and finally claws came away from the tangled clear filaments of the nylon net. I could see Jocelyn’s frustration; she was used to just tearing out the dangerous claws and discarding the wounded bodies of the crabs back into the sea as worthless “by-catch.” But to me, each one was precious, a record of the treasures of the bay. In one haul of the net, we found no less than 5 species of crabs. And the excitement was only beginning. Once the crabs were safely in the glass-sided tank, I poured over the books in the library and surfed the web to learn more. The stories that popped out were as amazing to me as anything I had seen in Xinjiang or Tibet.

It is not uncommon to discover rare treasures in Tai Tam, in the CERS collection of rare books on exploration, minority cultures and natural history of China. One book that I found on the shelf has

CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE:
Dante, at Tai Tam with Herring Scad. Jocelyn with hairtail, a.k.a cutlassfish, over two meters and weighing 30 Kg from Tai Tam Bay. Sub-littoral crabs of Tai Tam, from Morton and Morton, 1983.

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TREASURE IN OUR BACKYARD: THE CRABS OF TAI TAM

by William Bleisch, PhD
Tai Tam, Hong Kong

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always been a kind of book of wonders for me. Published by Hong Kong University Press in 1983, it was written by Professors Brian Morton and John Morton, and simply entitled *The Sea Shore Ecology of Hong Kong*. Filled with details of the shapes and habits of animals that live out their lives where the ocean water meets the land, I can spend hours happily pouring over its diagrams and lists. In that book, the authors describe the Sheltered Flats of Tai Tam Harbour as having more than the usual importance of Hong Kong coastal real estate. It is a valuable scientific resource, “being the only part of the coast of Hong Kong Island (predominately a drowned rocky shore) to develop protected inter-tidal flats.”

It is a bit embarrassing to admit that CERS stumbled upon this explorer’s paradise by accident rather than design. It was our boatman Dante and his brother Renato who took the lead on the first exploratory expeditions into the waters of the Tai Tam Bay. Just like the early explorers of the British East India Company, they were seeking material gain and not scientific knowledge - fish and crabs for the table, rather than stories for the newsletter. Growing up on the coast of Palawan as Jocelyn had, handling the fishing nets was second nature to her, and she soon taught her husband Dante and his brother Renato. They have since been bringing in a regular grocery list of edible fish; Herring Scad, Whiptail Silver Biddy, Spectacled Filefish, Golden-lined Seabream, mullet and flounder. They also caught the beautiful blue-legged males of the delicious swimming Flower Crab (*Portunus pelagicus*). But it was the rest of the catch that caught Howman’s notice. As more and more odd creatures surfaced in the net along with the edible fish and crabs, he began to have the oddest among them put on temporary display in a small holding tank, photographing some of the more remarkable animals to send the images to me and to our friends at the Swire Marine Laboratory.

On one day in May last year, the yield was particularly rich, in both numbers of species and in strange stories. First, there were several of the little crab with a scientific name reminiscent of the sleepy dormouse in Alice and Wonderful - *Dromia dormia* – meaning the slumbering Dromo or Sleeping Sponge Crab. Dromo crabs are famous of their habit of further camouflage their drab, hairy, brown bodies by carefully cutting out a piece of a living sponge or sea squirt with their chelae (crab claws) and placing this living cape on the back of their carapace, holding it in place with modified 3rd and 4th legs.

Another crab, less common, was even more bizarre in its habits. At first I was afraid that it had lost nearly all its legs when it was extricated from the net. It was only when I looked closely that I noticed that the 3rd and 4th legs were still there, but were reduced to tiny hooks that turned up over
the back. It was a thrill for me to see the matching but typically understated description in Morton and Morton of *Paradorippe granulata*, a crab “…of somewhat novel appearance,” and to discover that these tiny hook legs are used to secure a living sea anemone on the back of the crab. In fact, we had found the remains of a small grey anemone in the net beside the crab. Presumably, the sea anemone’s poisonous tentacles give this small delicate crab some added protection. What the sea anemone thinks of the arrangement is anyone’s guess (assuming that an animal with a nerve net but without a central brain can be said to think at all).

Other treasures from the net were more normally crab-like in appearance, but turned out to be no less remarkable. The spiny body and chelae of *Enoplolambrus validus*, in the Elbow Crab family, the Parthenopidae, hint at a relationship to the long-legged king crabs of more northern waters, although in fact they are not related. (Amazingly, the giant king crabs are more closely related to the little hermit crabs of Hong Kong shores). Why Elbow Crabs need such remarkably long claws is unclear, although it must make sense in the crab’s world. By the way, Parthenope was the name of one of the singing sirens who, in frustration at being unable to seduce the...
brave Ulysses, threw herself into the sea and drowned. We have never heard this crab sing, and so it is not clear to me how it earned such a romantic name.

In contrast to the gangly limbs of the elbow crab was the compact neatness of the Spotted Box Crab, *Calappa philargius*. This group of crabs have the habit of covering their faces tightly with their claws, giving rise to another name, the “shame-faced crabs.” The chelae fit tightly together over the head, like a 3-D puzzle, so that it would be hard for any predator to find something to grab onto, leaving just a mouthful of thick hard shell. The powerful pincers of the box crabs are specialized for cracking open snail shells, its common prey.

Soon after this bumper harvest of species, the net pulled in an even more incredible creature, a Mangrove Horseshoe Crab, *Carcinoscorpius rotundicauda*. Despite their name, horseshoe crabs are not closely related to crabs, and in fact, are not even crustaceans. They are arachnids, closer to scorpions, ticks and spiders in their lineage, if not in their marine habits. It is a lineage with a very long evolutionary history, with a successful basic body plan that has not changed in 400 million years. There are only 4 species of horseshoe crab living today, three in the western Pacific and one in the eastern Atlantic. The current global status of these remarkable living fossils is not known, but it is known that they have declined sharply in China, due to habitat loss, coastal pollution and over-harvesting. Horseshoe crabs are fished both for food (although there is not much meat on a horseshoe crab, it is considered a health food by some) and for production of limulin amebocyte lysate (LAL) for biomedical work. It is known that horseshoe crabs in some areas play important ecological roles. For example, at least 11 species of migratory birds use horseshoe crab eggs as their primary food supply during their fall stopover in Delaware Bay, and the adults are one of the most important foods of Loggerhead Sea Turtles there. The fact that this time traveler turns up at Tai Tam Bay a few miles from Central on Hong Kong Island amazes me.

CERS has added a bigger holding tank at our Tia Tam Center, complete with filters and heaters. But the real show is in Tai Tam Bay itself. This brief collection barely scratches the surface of the wonders that are still out there. We have not even mounted an expedition to the wilds of the mudflats yet. According to Morton and Morton, that bible of the Hong Kong shore, there are at least 3 and perhaps 4 species of fiddler crabs on the Tai Tam mudflats, as well as soldier crabs, hermit crabs, snapping shrimp, ghost shrimp and other mysteries, all waiting for the explorers.

Morton and Morton in 1983 recommended careful conservation and management of the sheltered flats of Tai Tam, such that the entire Bay and Harbour should be included as the nucleus of a multi-purpose Nature Conservation and Recreation Area. Today, with the closure of the massive quarry on Cape D’Aguilar at the mouth of the Bay and the effective implementation of the ban on trawlers, Tai Tam is living up to its potential as a haven of biodiversity. It can only become more and more important as more and more of the natural areas along the rest of the coast of southern China succumb to break-neck development.

In our enthusiasm for exploring, perhaps we have been too quick to strike out for the new, the remote, the unknown. Priceless treasures can be found in our own backyard.

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1. The IUCN Redlist lists all Asian species of horseshoe crabs as Data Deficient and notes that update is needed.
Mind your head,” said my interpreter as I entered a Naga home. Too late, as my cap shaded my view of the low-hanging doorway and I banged my head. But that phrase of warning rang deeper and went back centuries into time immemorial for the Naga living along the border of Myanmar with India, up near the foothills of the Himalayas. Headhunters the Naga were, up until at least 1983, perhaps even into the 1990s, as one account puts it.

Thus visitors in the past always had to “mind their heads” when traveling among the jungles of the Naga hills. When the Naga hit, like guerillas coming out of the jungle, they took no hostage, just heads. Some of these raids among villages netted not just one head, not even a dozen heads, but hundreds. Feuds among neighboring tribes could last for generations, at least until the British colonial power finally extended their rule and penetrated the remote region with an attempt to pacify the area and put an end to such barbaric tribal warfare.

They were only partly successful as some of the Naga became Christians. Teaching by the British that one shouldn’t kill each other did not stand up to test during the Second World War. The Naga started questioning how come the Japanese and the British were at each other’s throat. Following independence of first India and then Burma, the ancient practice on both sides of the border resumed again. Even today, in such a distant land, little to
no modern law seems to apply. The Myanmar government also exert only nominal rule in many of the country's frontier region. This is evidenced by the periodic sentry points that I passed, with army and military police carrying machine guns and assault rifles while overseeing all passers-by with watchful eyes.

The Naga region is officially closed to visitors, save for a short few days around January 15 each year when the government organizes a Naga New Year festival with the cooperation of local and native chiefs of Nagaland. This used to vary from village to village, during a time after the Naga harvested their last crop and make ready to plant for the new season. But the government tried to make it uniform so the tribal chiefs and their cohorts could get to know each other, even their former enemies, and make peace. It also came to show some nominal authority of the central government in a nation filled with minorities, many of which are insurgents up till today.

I took a chartered flight from Yangon with a dozen or so foreign visitors. At a stop in Mandalay, more passengers came onboard. They were all local tourists, mainly photographers, or aspiring photographers of sort, noticeable from the array of photographic equipment they were all carrying. One teenage-looking girl, purportedly daughter of one of the richest businessmen in Mandalay, was sporting two Nikon D800s with multiple long lenses. Unlike them, I always hide my “real” camera in a small non-descript photographic bag while only showing a tiny point-and-shoot camera for candid opportune shots.

Our organizer U Mg Ni said this year there were far fewer visitors. Over the past dozen or so years since the government inaugurated the festival, each year they may have 70 to 100 guests signing up for the trip. As the exclusive and only organizer for “tourists”, he charged an exorbitant sum, especially for a country like Myanmar where the Kyat currency usually goes a long way. This year there were only 18 of us foreigners; two from Hong Kong, three from France, one German, one Austrian, one Dutch with his Thai partner, two Japanese, one Iranian with his Mongolian partner, and a bit surprisingly five Russians. Almost all were professional photographers shooting for
assignment, except the Russians. Together with the local guests, we made up a group of 31.

The last hour of our flight was all over the jungle. Not a village or even a road could be seen below us. The twin prop dropped from the clear sky ceiling and landed in a short airstrip outside the town of Khamti, along the upper Chindwin River. This river is one of the most important tributaries of the Irrawaddy. Starting from the Himalaya foothill, it runs for over 500 kilometers before joining the main Irrawaddy below Mandalay. Our CERS exploration boat, 100-foot in length and shallow in draught, is being built with exploring this Chindwin River in mind. Thus it was a relief to see that, even during the dry season, similar boats of up to 150-foot length still made it to this point. My iPad map tracked my whereabouts, as I noted our position was only 50 or so kilometers from the border with India.

We boarded open-backed motor tricycles with our bags. In a caravan of eight vehicles, we sped off with a trail of dust to the jetty by the river. From a prop plane to motor tricycles swaying back and forth, then in open long boats along the jungle, it conjures the image of Tin Tin and his sidekick Snowy rushing off to the next adventure. Topping it all, we got to the west bank of the river and climbed on top the metal scaffolding frameworks of six pick-up trucks and began our long and bumpy road journey.

Some six hours away into the jungle would be our final destination of Lahe, a small mountain outpost, which is the festival ground for this year. Two other Naga villages, Leshi and Nawng Yang, are rotated as festival ground yearly depending on security issues during any particular year. At the moment, given the insurgency and government army activities in the Kachin region adjacent to Nawng Yang, it is doubtful next year that village will be considered.

The climb to Lahe was particularly difficult with huge inclined grades as I heard our truck forcing its way uphill using only first and second gear. Three hours into the trip, zigzagging up and down switchback mountain dirt roads, we were into darkness as the winter sun set early. It may be just as well since we could not enjoy the lovely jungle canopy of huge tress at night. Furthermore it was easier not to see the dust that came at our face from the car in front. I remembered the short note provided by the organizer on our itinerary for the day, “five to six hours travel on air truck”. ‘Air truck’ sounded all so romantic before reality sets in. After all, we were all on real Upper Class, as the term is used in First Class travel on the trains in Myanmar.

I must admit to feeling relieved and delighted as we turned one corner and saw lights in the distant, after riding for hours in darkness. Reaching “town” took another twenty minutes. I looked forward to checking into our hotel but that dream was downgraded to a small local house on wooden stilts, and then further downgraded as I was led into my room with two cramped and tiny mats on the floor. Temperatures dropped drastically during winter night in the mountain and the thin blankets provided were hardly enough to keep us warm. Luckily I brought my thinnest sleeping bag and picked up a blanket in Yangon as insulation inside. With that, I mustered through the night while most other guests complained, but somehow shivered through.

CLOCKWISE FROM UPPER LEFT: Naga men at festival. Parade of one of the tribes. Spectators in the evening. Air Truck, or open-top truck. Drum made from single log. Naga women at festival.
The next morning we finally had a good look at the festival ground just a few hundred meters away. Many vendors were beginning to set up shops on the ground, selling oddities like digital watches, pocket radios, CD players, and LCD lights, mostly brought in from neighboring India. There were a few street side cafes and clothing stores at the main junction, the only junction of Lahe.

By mid-morning, I heard a low unison chant, at times like grunts, getting closer and closer to the festival ground. In ten minutes or so, I saw a long file of scantily dressed Naga warriors marching toward the festival ground. First you saw white feathers over their decorative hats before you saw their heads and then bodies. The feathers were plucked from the tail of the hornbill birds of the region. This signaled the arrival of the first tribe, having been on the road for five days marching on foot. Since they came from the furthest village, to control timing, they had left their home earliest.

For the remaining part of the day, more and more tribes started arriving. By the end of the day, there were about twelve different tribes; some had large groups of women marching along. The nearest tribe had still taken a day to trek to Lahe. Large groups may have up to a hundred participants and small ones maybe fifty or so members represented. They were put up in local schools, government buildings and larger homes. It was said that the organizer took care to keep a distance among former enemy tribes, such that hostility would not flare up.

I paced the festival ground to look at the merchandise on sale, as I hoped to pick up some artifacts for the CERS collection. In particular I was interested in hand-woven textile of the Naga, colorful and with lovely motifs. While there were a few ladies demonstrating weaving with their hand looms, I only wanted old and used blankets and shawls. Prices were reasonably high and I was told by one local that it would drop dramatically by the last day of the event. So I only picked what I wanted with my eyes and waited for the fiscal cliff in prices in two more days. Such measured prudence proved very effective when I purchased items later on at less than half the original price.

I also took one of the trucks to the nearest Naga village some 15 kilometers away. Chief U Ka Yar was away, but his 26-year-old son Lar Law was at home. He was being groomed to become the future chief. Such chieftains were hereditary among Naga tribe and the young man went to primary and then secondary school at Lahe, thus spoke Burmese. Through him and my interpreter, I was able to find out a few things about their village. The local primary school has 56 students for a village with 80 families and over 300 inhabitants. I was also shown the many racks under the eaves of houses, once reserved for display of heads hunted from enemy villages, but today only adorned with all types of animal heads. Most abundant were buffalo, deer and monkey skulls.

At the Chief’s home, I visited the mother of the current Chief. At age 80 and with face tattoo, she was sharp as a nail and brought out her finest weaving specimens to show me. Asking price was high, but she kept emphasizing that at her senior age, she would never make another piece. And the younger generation could no longer be taught such refined skills. I took the bite and bought one of the two last pieces of her handiwork for 100,000 Kyat or approximately US$120.

At a thatch-roofed house, another old lady waved for me to enter. Words travel fast in a village and she must have heard that I was potential clientele. She brought out a number of fabrics and blankets. For a blanket, she asked for only 10,000 Kyats by putting up ten fingers, a fraction of what I just paid a little while ago. That would be approximately US Twelve Dollars and very reasonable. But with buyer instinct and routine, I counted 9,000 Kyat and put in front of her as my offer. Throughout the years, I have learned when a seller sees actual money, he or she knows you are serious and would enter into real bargain. The deal was quickly struck and I handed the money over.
Next I bargained for the remaining two pieces, again at 9,000 a piece by offering her 18,000. But now she refused to budge. It took me a while to realize that the old lady could not multiply. I turned around and offered her the same price, one piece at a time. We parted happily, she with her money and me with the additional two pieces. That was a great bargain compared to the 100,000 Kyat I had to pay to rent a beat-up truck for just a few hours in getting there.

The second day’s opening ceremony of the festival was presided by local, district and even Central Government officials. As foreign guests, we also had special seats assigned under a roof. The Naga tribes all took up their places on long bamboo benches. The most disappointing part was all ceremonies were conducted in Burmese, then translated briefly into English for our benefit. Unfortunately for the Naga, although they are the center of attraction, their language was never used on stage or throughout the entire event.

The third day, the main day of the festival, was filled with performances and dances by each of the participating Naga tribe. Most of these were accompanied by songs like battle chants, and stylized dances. Several groups, one at a time, would take over the long drum carved hollow from one very large and long log, some thirty feet in length. The beat got my heart pulsating to its rhythm and it could be heard from a great distance.

That evening a huge bonfire was lit and more dances ensued, to the accompaniment of some fireworks, paid for by the government. The Naga sang and danced late into the night, drinking to their heart’s content the home-made rice wine stored in a bamboo cylinder that they brought from home. By the next morning, they would begin their long journey home. So would I, who attended this little-known Naga festival in the northern jungle of Myanmar; my head still intact, though a little intoxicated. And next year, I shall return, in our own boat, and with luck I’ll be able to bring a few more CERS heads. That is, if my board directors are willing to risk theirs!
“Hundred years old;” the priest replied when I asked how old he was. I balked at his answer, as the white-robed, gray-haired, Oriental gentleman seated on a scooter was trying to rush off. He certainly didn’t look a hundred, so I persisted and asked again; “I mean seriously, how old are you?” “A hundred,” came his answer, once again with a big smile on his face.

“Ok then, when were you born?” I put my question differently. “Well, between 1937 and 1938,” came the answer. “So you are around 74,” I configured. “Yes, but our mission is 100. It just turned 100 on December 9, a few days ago;” the priest finally gave me a qualifying answer. No doubt he was in a joyous mood, matching all the colorful flags that were flying throughout the courtyard of the premises.
This is no small church courtyard, but the mission ground of PIME, or Pontifical Institute for Foreign Missions of Italy, with many buildings; church, chapel, school, dorm, and even an orphanage. All this time, the priest never dismounted his scooter and I knew I must ask quickly for short answers; “How many Catholics around Kengtung? How many come to church daily and during Christmas? How many priests does the mission have? How many orphans? How old were you when you joined the Order?” I fired off many questions all at once.

“As a young boy I wanted to become a monk but my father won’t allow it, so I became a priest. It took over ten years of study. We have 57,000 Catholics in this region, and there are 30 priests serving the entire area. Our orphanage has over 50 orphan boys. The girls are at Saint Theresa, over 30 of them there. On a Sunday there are five to six hundred coming to church and during special days upward of a thousand. For our 100 years celebration, twenty priests came from Italy, even two from neighboring Chiang Rai in Thailand;”
came all the answers I waited for. The missionaries must have done a great job with so many converts, considering Myanmar is a predominantly Buddhist country.

All this time our conversation was conducted in Mandarin Chinese. “How come you speak Chinese?” I quickly added. “My ancestors are Chinese and my father came from Tai Shan near Canton, our last name is Wu, one two three four five, number five Wu.” Father Wu, also known by his Christian name Norman, must have been in a jolly good mood to volunteer more personal information. With that, he gave me a final smile and a wave with his hand, and sped off in his scooter down the hill.

Nearby is the Saint Mary’s Convent, also started by Italian Sisters. And a short distance off is the Saint Theresa, also with a school and orphanage. I walked over to St. Mary’s and took a peek inside the chapel. There he was, Father Wu, saying a morning service to about twenty nuns inside. No doubt he was in a rush earlier when I detained him for all my questions. One nun did not attend the service and was limping outside with a crutch. “I broke my leg and the doctor said I must learn slowly to walk again,” said Sister Calamatina. While the name sounds Italian, the face and complexion was obviously local, either Shan, Lahu, Akha, or Burmese.

The PIME Mission takes up a hill overlooking Nawng Tung Lake which is the posh part of town here in Kengtung, capital of the eastern Shan State of Myanmar, and more notoriously known as the Capital of the Golden Triangle, once the most important opium center for the world’s supply in narcotics. On the other side of the lake is the former palace of the King of the Shan, a region in eastern Myanmar which was at one time a de facto independent kingdom. The British offered it a referendum when Burma got its independence during a more turbulent time from its colonial past.

Promise of both autonomy and representation in parliament, as negotiated by General Aung San (father of Aung San Suu Kyi), turned the history of the Shan kingdom into a state of the union of Burma. Prince Sao Shwe Thaik of Nyaung Shwe, also in the Shan State, was made briefly the President of the new nation as the country got her independence. Aung San was assassinated just prior to independence and later his military successors made all promises of secession short-lived, turning the Shan State into a battle ground for over two decades until peace returned to the region some twenty years ago.

The Sawbwa Palace, a historical monument, was destroyed in 1991 by the Burmese government as a way of distancing the people from their historical past. Today it is site of the Kengtung New Hotel. Taking up a prime location but with the lobby dark and deserted, it can no longer reclaim its former glory, not even a tiny shadow of its distant past. Across the street is an old colonial building which was once part of the residence and perhaps one of the finest examples of such building in existence today.

Kengtung used to have a king, or chieftain-headman, who is known in China as a Tu-Shi. Around the time the Italian PIME Mission arrived, one of the last kings, Sao Kawng Kiao, built his Sawbwa Palace in 1905. At a small mausoleum with several stupas, I met Sao Eng Mong, a man into his seventies. He claimed to be the 59th generation descendent of King Sao Mangrai who first built Kengtung. At the time, the king was so powerful that he set up five regions under his rule; Kengtung as the center, Jinghong now called Xishuangbanna and Menglian, both within today’s Yunnan, Chiang Rai and Chiang Mai in today’s Thailand. I was surprised that Sao Eng Mong recounted his family history in perfect Chinese.

“I was sent to Chiang Mai in Thailand in 1958 and finished my junior high school at a Chinese school. I came back ten years later, and spent twenty years fighting the Burmese. My father was the 42nd King called Sao Sai Mong. His throne was handed down to my uncle Sao Sai Long. Here are stupas where several of my ancestors are buried,” Sao Eng Mong recounted with obvious
pride. With disdain in his voice, he twice spoke of his days fighting against
the Burmese. Before I took leave, this once-a-prince gave me a photo of his
parents, and one of the former palace, quite grand looking in its heyday.

Of eight city gates around the old city before, only one remains today as a relic
of the past, though without walls attached. Somehow through the good work
of the missionary, god’s kingdom outlasted the dynastic kingdom.

By coincidence, I came to Kengtung on the same day as the Shan New Year
Festival. Outside of town was a major gathering of people in festive mood.
Many food stalls and shops were set up like a bazaar of sort. The most popular
seemed to be the small game lottery type stall where children gathered around
to win a prize or two. The simple crab game, like a simplistic gambling board
game, was also quite a hit.

The following morning, I visited the daily market. By 7am, the place was
already crowded with people. Though there were many hill tribes like the
Akha, Lahu and Hmong, almost all men had given up their traditional
costume, and women’s costumes were modified to having fewer decorations
than before. At times it required a keen eye to make the distinction.

My guide Victoria spoke perfect Chinese and some English. She too is a
Catholic and thus was given a Christian name. Her father came to Kengtung
from Langeang County in Yunnan at the age of eight. He just followed others
who fled China in search of a better life. Grown up and married a Lahu wife,
they started a family around Kengtung.

After a day in Kengtung, I headed back toward
the border of Thailand. Four hours drive away
is Tachileik, the border town between the two
countries. Here are crowded streets with many
shops and venders selling all type of knick knacks
from Thailand. Above is a short bridge connecting
to Mai Sae, a very busy frontier town on the Thai
side. It is this region, within close vicinity to the
border with the Lao PDR, that has been famous as
the notorious Golden Triangle.

In the past, this was the drug capital of the world,
where opium was grown and processed, to be
then sold around the world. Today, reports have
it that much of the illegal trafficking has stopped,
replaced by more healthy border trade that includes
many agriculture and household goods, not to
mention a healthy flow of tourists going back and
forth, including myself.

Victoria told me that among all the tourists she
has guided, I was the first one from Hong Kong.
However, she also mentioned that Hong Kong is
well known to everyone around here. Jackie Chan
happens to be the most popular movie star for all
ages. Kengtung’s connection with the Chinese
people continues.
Your tickets are for upper class,” said Klai Klai my driver. With that he handed me a scrappy and coarse piece of paper, a printed form with some handwritten Burmese on it. Our names were written on it, together with our passport numbers behind.

Momentarily something flashed into mind. Is upper class like the many pick-up trucks around the country, with people sitting on the roof? Or is it like some of the Indian trains I have seen in pictures with passengers sitting on top? After all, Thirty-six US Dollars for the three of us to ride from Mandalay to Lashio, a lengthy sixteen hours ordeal on a local train, hardly promises to be an Oriental Express or Road to Mandalay experience.

“This is the best tickets, with assigned seats,” added Klai Klai reassuringly. Tickets in hand, I went back to the hotel and rested early, before being awakened at 2:30 am to leave for the train station. As I got into the station and arrived at platform 4, I found many people were there ahead of us. They had slept the night covered with blankets at the platform. Some may even be perpetual squatters of the space, as their belongings are telltale of much more than an overnight tenancy. Our train arrived on schedule but departed ten minutes late, at 4:10 am.

We took to our seats, rather comfortable soft seats with arms, though the recliner function refused to work. There were even ceiling fans. A peek over at the regular class revealed no fans and hard straight-back bench seats. Our windows could only open partly whereas regular class had fully open windows, for goods and cargoes to pass through, and humans to climb in and out, be it out of necessity or to save time.

With three long whistles, we pulled out of the station. There were only a few passengers at this Upper Class carriage, and the conductor checked our tickets. At a station on the edge of Mandalay, many more local passengers crowded in. They started taking up any and all seats left available, some three persons to two seats, some sitting on the lap of another passenger. The cabin got more rowdy and noisy as the train started going again.

The conductor sitting at the back kept a blind eye to these new passengers and...
never asked to see their tickets. Obviously they were non-paying hitchhikers taking a free ride to the next few towns early in the morning to work, or to play. By around 7am when it began to get bright outside, these passengers gradually dissipated into one station after another, and we were left quiet again.

As the train picked up speed, the going got rough, bouncing up and down and wavering side to side, at times at ten or twenty degrees sway to each side. It was fun watching the passengers’ heads bouncing up and down from their seats, knowing all the time that mine must be performing the same act with the same rhythm. The doors of the carriage were either kept open or could be opened, allowing the passengers, or overflow of passengers, to stand by the doors to appreciate the scenery outside. Go down a couple of steps and you could swing your body outward while holding on to a long railing to take in also the fresh air flushing at your face.

Just one warning, if you don’t watch out, there may be more than fresh air hitting at your face. At many locations throughout the trip, the bushes and trees brushed against the train and scraped the windows, at times with broken branches and leaves falling inside the cabin. This is winter dry season and I could not imagine what spring growing season would bring inside the train as it passes through dense forested areas.

At Pyin Oo Lwin, the famous hill station of colonial time, a group of western tourists came onboard. A couple of them were Germans, one Canadian and the rest Americans. The latter had been catching up fast on missing years when the US sanction of Myanmar stopped the globetrotters from visiting the country. They are usually the most friendly among travelers and before long you could overhear conversation covering their impression and opinion of the country, their family and even their life’s story. It added spice to the most beautiful scenery of the countryside unveiling outside the window.

At each stop, be it a real station or just a make-shift platform, vendors peddle food and other knickknacks. Women usually carried their ware on baskets sitting on their heads. As the day wore on, we got more hungry but refrained from trying the local food offered for sale along the railroad. Most looked too spicy to fit our palate. Only a loaf of bread and some grapes sustained us for the entire journey. At some stations we stopped for less than five minutes and at some for up to half an hour. We never knew when the train would take off until we heard the whistle warning passengers to get back onboard.

It was usually at the small and quick-stop stations where there would be a small crowd with merchandises, be it fruits,
TOP TO BOTTOM:
Train station enroute with many food vendors and casual passengers.  Transaction done in a hurry.  Mother offering soft lap seat to child.  Hard floor as bed at Mandalay train station.

vegetables or hard goods like bamboo and small timber boards, being thrown onboard.  As the train stopped, activities got into a frenzy.  They would come through the door, the windows and any opening while someone on the receiving end in the train would organize it when the train got moving again.  I could only surmise that these were contraband cargo heading to the next town when the same activities would be reversed or repeated.

At about noon, the train went through a slow climb up to somewhat of a plateau.  Then there was a huge gorge in front of us as the train snaked its way closer and closer to the edge.  At one point, the tracks went on two long hairpin turns before crossing a very high bridge.  Looking down while the train passed in snail pace was quite exhilarating.  I held my breath while gingerly putting my camera outward and faced it downward to get a shot of the high bridge, all the while bracing myself to the handle of my chair.

After sixteen hours of constant massage by the chair, we arrived after 8pm in Lashio, once an important town along the Burma Road during the Second World War.  Here, somewhat closer to the border with Yunnan, were many stores and restaurants owned and operated by Chinese.  Many had been living here for generations.  We checked into the Green Park Hotel on a hill overlooking the city.  A bungalow with three spacious and clean rooms cost a modest US120.

Though late, we found a Chinese restaurant where the owner family all spoke Yunnan dialect and some Mandarin.  We finally caught up with a most hearty breakfast, lunch and dinner, all blended into one, though somewhat belatedly.
I was clearly ready for my return to the National Western Stock Show in Denver, Colorado USA: (1) cowboy hat, check (2) leather belt, check (3) big belt buckle, check and (4) boots, check (ok, not cowboy boots, but I was perfectly comfortable with my hiking boots).

The stock show is over one hundred years old and it is one of the biggest in America. Farmers and ranchers from all over the country show all the major breeds of cattle, sheep, and draft horses, as well as llamas, American bison and even yak. I went to the stock show last year to investigate yak herding in America and I met many herders. They were very keen to hear about the work of CERS conserving wild yak and invited me to give a talk at this year’s stock show.

My talk covered three areas: (1) the history of yak domestication (2) CERS supported wild yak conservation at the Arjinshan and Sanjiangyuan Nature Reserves and (3) the close relationship of yak to bison. The talk was very well received, and during the discussion afterwards I learned many things from the herders, especially because many of them have both yak and bison. From my research during the rutting season at Arjinshan I noticed many similarities between yak and bison such as the use of wallows (i.e. rolling in the sand) as
an aggressive display, and males guarding females. The herders confirmed that their yaks use wallows as aggressive display and also remarked that the yaks urinated in wallows before using them, like bison. This behavior is likely akin to male goats urinating on their beards to indicate status. I had suspected that the wild yaks at Arjinshan were also urinating in their wallows, but it was too far to be sure.

I also learned more about raising yak in America where about 2,000 yaks are raised by up to 90 herders. The herders are primarily in the mountainous western states of America such as Colorado and Wyoming but yaks are raised from as far away as Texas to the south and New Jersey on the east coast of America. Like last year I was amazed at the ability of yak to adapt and thrive in the low altitudes and high temperatures of America, but in Texas they have to work hard to keep the yaks alive. For example, they manage the herd so calving takes place in the cooler winter and must take steps to cool the yaks in the hot Texas summers.

American herders are attracted to yak not only for the novelty factor of raising charismatic, odd, hairy beasts, but also because yak have the ability to produce lean healthy meat more efficiently than cattle on lower quality forage. Most of the herders have links with restaurants and organic farmers markets, and business is good. Even selling at premium prices several times more than prime grade beef they can’t keep up with the demand for yak meat. There is also considerable interest by people to start raising yak, and breeding bulls can be sold for up to $15,000.

American yak herders are also actively pursuing the sale of yak wool. At the stock show last year a wool expert lectured on the unique qualities of yak wool and the great market potential. Yak herders clearly took the advice and they now combine their wool resources to make a variety of products such as gloves, hats and scarves. These niche products sell well and according to some herders, it is their primary income source. The wool expert returned this year to judge the wool division and she is very keen to analyze wool from wild yak or wild/domestic hybrids,
so hopefully I can gather some for the next stock show.

It is also advantageous to raise yaks because the yaks tend to be more disease resistant than cattle. There is concern in the yak community, however, with a disease known as “blue tongue” that has hit some herds. Blue tongue or catarrhal fever is a viral disease transmitted by small insects known as midges. This disease causes high fevers and swelling of the face and tongue which often results in death.

One way to prevent the disease may be to improve the bloodlines of the domestic yak, as is done at Cuochi Village in Sanjiangyuan Reserve, Qinghai. There, we work with herders that conserve wild yak for the hybridization benefits of wild bulls breeding with domestic females. The North American domestic yak population was founded by as few as 10-15 individuals and it may be getting dangerously inbred. American herders were eager to hear about the situation in Cuochi and would be very keen to import hybrid yak bulls or frozen semen to improve the bloodlines of their yak. Such importation is not possible at the moment, however, because of the potential for spreading diseases.

This trip demonstrated the success and potential for raising yak in the lower altitudes of America, and a valuable collaboration has been initiated between the CERS supported wild yak project and the American yak herders. Hopefully in the future CERS can facilitate breeding with wild/domestic yak hybrids to improve domestic yak breeds in both China and America and add value to wild yaks. Interaction with American yak and bison herders is also a great opportunity for me to learn more about the similarities between bison and yak.

And I get to pick up fashion tips on my western outfit. With the Year of the Snake approaching, I’m thinking rattlesnake boots.
I am standing at a crossroads, quite literally. From here at the bus terminal, I could go southeast to Luang Prabang and the temples of the ancient capital of the Lao Kingdom of Lan Xang. Or I could go north, to Muang Sing where the Lao, Thai, Myanmar/Burma and Chinese borders all come together in the Golden Triangle — where the drifters’ blogs report that Akha ladies from the mountains still hawk their “agricultural products” from the poppy fields on the streets. Or I could go east, across the border into Vietnam, to Dien Bien Phou, where, in 1954, General Giap and the Viet Minh army, supported by local Shan partisans, defeated the French colonial forces and their air force after a two month siege, a turning point for western colonialism in Asia. Or I could go southwest, back the way I have come, to the Mekong and on to Chiang Rai in Thailand, once the capital of Lana, a kingdom that stretched from Chiang Mai north to Jing Hong in China, and from Luang Prabang in Lao in the east nearly to Mandalay in Myanmar/Burma.

I like this feeling of being at the point of maximum possibilities, like a chess player with a strong position covering the board. But now it is time to make a move.

I head into town, or rather, to the new town, which is 7 kilometers away from the bus station. The southern town was bombed into oblivion during the secret war between the U.S. and the communist Pathet Lao guerrilla fighters in northern Lao. There is not much there beside the bus station now. The new town, in contrast, is bustling. Sitting down to lunch in a backpacker café, I hear French, German, and English words mingling with Lao, Akha and Lanten. It seems the whole of Western Europe has donned a backpack and gone on Christmas holiday here. Tourist companies cheerily advertise 1, 2, 3 and 4 day options for trekking, bicycling, and kayaking. Sleep in a traditional Lanten village. Float the Nam Tha River and the Mekong all the way to Luang Prabang. Bicycle to the China border.

I stop and inquire at the Forest Retreat, a pizza restaurant run by New Zealanders, Dre and Karen,
advertising camembert pizza made with real French cheese, wines from Australia, and treks with local Khmu minority English-speaking guides. Over a good cup of coffee, I ask Dre whether I can see any wildlife in the forests. He tells me the place to see wildlife is the local day market, where hunters bring their latest catch early each morning. I hurry there before the morning cool turns to hot noon.

In the market, behind the rows of dealers selling vegetables and fruits, back in the back, even behind the sellers of *khao soi* noodles with marinara-like tomato sauce with fermented beans, and the sweet bowls of multi-coloured *nam van* jellies in coconut soup, there is a row of women sitting on the ground selling dried fish and forest products. Several of them also sell wild meat. On my first visit, late in the day, I see the meat and reddish hide of a Common Muntjac and the dainty body of a Lesser Mouse Deer. There are also two female Silver Pheasant. In the back, hidden in a bag in the basket of a motorbike, the seller also has a brush-tailed porcupine. The next morning, another seller displays a pair of beautiful Mountain Red-bellied Squirrels, a string of small birds, and the smoked foreleg, chest and head of a Pig-tailed Macque. She sells a fresh mouse deer as I watch. She also has a live Hoary Bamboo Rat, scurrying around in a plastic basket, its front teeth pulled out to keep it from gnawing through its tether. Another seller displays the corpses of a Common Palm Civet and a Spotted Linsang, a small civet with a lovely patterned coat. There is also a Small-toothed Ferret Badger on offer. The next day, a Grey Peacock-Pheasant turns up, its feathers each dotted with an exquisite peacock eye. There is also a strikingly patterned black and white Giant Squirrel and a Giant Flying Squirrel, each as big as a large cat. The seller stops me from taking pictures, giving away the fact that she knows full well that these animals are protected by Lao law.

My widely-shared prejudice that most of the wildlife trade is fueled by rapacious Cantonese gourmands seems to be unfounded here. The buyers in the market all seem to be local. A Yunnan girl at the front desk of the big Chinese run Royal Hotel tells me that few Chinese travelers stop here, even during the big holidays. Most prefer to continue on to the World Heritage City of Luang Prabang.

Eager to see the animals alive, I join a couple from Belgium who are also interested in seeing nature. We plan a 3-day trek with two nights stay in the forest. Annette, a geographer, and Philippe, a retired civil servant, want to travel slowly and quietly through the forest, stopping often to watch birds. I could not imagine better trekking companions.

I have already tried a trek with the Gibbon Experience on the other side of the ridge. Together with a group of 4 young travelers from the Austria, Germany, the Netherlands and Alaska, we traveled through deep forest with enormous trees for two days. The Gibbon Experience is perhaps unique in Asia for its use of zip lines – steel cables stretched tight across valleys so that visitors can glide through and over the forest canopy, sometimes for up to 800 meters and 30 meters up. This allowed us to get deep into the forest very quickly. It was a treat for me to see deep forest birds, like the Asian Fairy Bluebird.
and to see the scratch marks of a bear’s claws on a large tree, no doubt made as it descended the trunk after gorging itself on fruit or nuts above. It was also moving to know that a group of gibbons was out there in the forest near the luxury tree house where we stayed over-night, even though we were not lucky enough to hear their morning songs. The experience of the ziplines was exhilarating and the tall old forest was sublime. But the fast pace and the noisy chatter of my companions meant that we saw little other wildlife. I am eager to try again.

We leave the town about 9:15 AM and drive south back towards Thailand, climbing up into the Nam Ha National Biodiversity Conservation Area. Villages and houses line the road. We turn off on a newly refurbished dirt road that travels down the Nam Tha River. Stopping at a village, we cross the river one at a time in a small wooden dugout canoe. We hike up steeply, through old fields at first, dense with Croton Bush and other weeds, then through bamboo forest, where the giant bamboo grows tall, blocking out the hot sun. We reach a ridge, then follow the ridge up steeply to a pass at 1,046 meters elevation. This forest is still recovering from past logging, crowded with the stems of giant bamboo, and the vines and stranglers that drape the trees are still young. But there is wildlife. The guide in the lead sees a Leopard Cat dash across the path and into the forest.

We descend to a small bamboo hut in the forest, the Forest Retreat. The forest here is good, and so, in the middle of the night, I take a walk through the forest with my headlamp, looking for wildlife. I spot nothing, perhaps because the half-moon still sheds too much light to calm the strictly nocturnal animals. I try again at 5:50 AM, after the moon has set and before the dim light of dawn. As soon as I step onto the path, a muntjac barks out in agitation nearby. Also known as the ‘barking deer,’ the call sounds almost exactly like a dog. Later, a large squirrel gives a loud alarm call from a tree loaded with fruit, but the dawn light is still too weak to see clearly.

After a breakfast of sticky rice, eggs and fiddleheads from young forest ferns, we continue our trek, now descending along a ridge through old-growth forest with massive trees. Some of these have dropped hefty black nuts onto the trail. These mag koo nuts are hard to open, denting Mr. Aer’s big local knife. Inside is a small delicious nut, tasting something like a Brazil nut. Other trees have dropped softer fruit. Some sport enormous buttresses that fan out from their trunks, sturdying their massive trunks like the flying buttresses of medieval cathedrals in France. Aer challenges us with a local puzzle, which he makes from bamboo on the spot. None of us can solve it until he shows us the trick. I remember reading that, in the Qin Dynasty, the region of southern China and Lao is thought to have hosted a civilization every bit as advanced as that of the Yellow River Emperor’s. Unfortunately, its elaborate palaces, forts, tools and weaponry were all made from bamboo, so nothing has survived for archeological study.

We reach a clear river and wade across over gravel and sand. On the other side stands a bamboo hut, and beyond, another river. This is the confluence of the Nam Ha and the Nam Tha, where we will spend the night. Our guides soon have a net out in the river, stretching it across the confluence from a bamboo raft. Their first catch only contains three fish, but one of them is remarkable – a freshwater puffer fish, looking exactly like a miniature of the better-known marine puffer fish that swim in the waters off our CERS Tai Tam Centre in Hong Kong. I ask if it isn’t poisonous, and Mr. Aer, obviously disgruntled, quickly skewers it and roasts it in the bamboo fire; too quickly for me to get my camera. He pops the hot meat into his mouth and smiles without saying a word. The 2nd and 3rd haul of the net yield more fish, but no more puffers. We enjoy a feast of sticky rice, very fresh river fish roasted on bamboo skewers, and a stew made of wild banana flowers, the hearts of palm from rattans, fiddleheads of young ferns, cilantro, cardamom and chili peppers. All of the ingredients are from the forest. Even the pot is a cylinder cut fresh from the giant bamboo.

At 3:30 AM, I rouse myself again and don a headlamp to walk the dark forest trails. Christmas Eve is turning to Christmas Day and, true to the poem, “not a creature was stirring, not even a
mouse.” This may be because, just a few hours ago, we were treated to rather unusual Christmas carols. A large party of rowdy local boys crossed the river with flashlights, dressed in heavy jackets, boxer shorts and flip-flops. Carrying home-made spear guns fashioned from wood and heavy elastic bands, with stiff cable cut for spears, they were out night fishing. They crossed the cold river singing jubilantly about the dragon boat races that are as popular here as in Hong Kong.

In truth, the confluence is no longer a very wild place. Looking down the Nam Tha River from the hut in the morning, we can see the newly widened road and hear the tractors and trucks travelling past young plantations of rubber and bananas. This is the confluence in more than one sense – it is the meeting of the past and the future, the wild and the tamed.

On my way back to China by bus, I chat with a young man from Fujian who just graduated from college in Kunming. He came to Lao PDR to see if he could make his fortune in the new rubber boom here. He is even preparing himself by studying the Lao language. He seems sincere and earnest, not the grubby carpet bagger that I imagined. I remember a few years ago flying into Jing Hong in Chinese Xishuangbanna, listening to the tourists from Shanghai and Beijing ‘oo’ and ‘aw’ at the dense carpet of green forest below. They did not know that the green was entirely rubber plantation… the natural forest had all been replaced by this exotic invader from Brazil. Soon, most of northern Lao PDR will look like Xishuangbanna. I find myself wondering if the rubber plantations will provide as much to the local people as the forests once did.

Perhaps trekking tourism offers an alternative. Trekking operations cater to a niche market of tourists, sometime called drifters. With no fixed itinerary, they plan their trips as they go. Generally traveling rough and light, they reach some of the most remote destinations, looking for areas still untouched by mass tourism. Although they do not shy away from discomfort, they do spend their money. A 3-day 2-night adventure on the ziplines and tree houses of the Gibbon Experience costs $300 USD, and even a simple trek to a minority village will cost over $100 per day for a couple, all inclusive. Much of the money goes to local guides, porters and villagers. Luang Namtha has been singled out by UNESCO as a pilot and a model of this kind of sustainable culture and nature tourism. The model depends on the tourism creating incentives for local people to protect the forests and preserve their cultures. So far, it seems to be working in Luang Namtha.

It seems a shame that the model has not caught on more in China. When I reach Mengla in Xishuangbanna, I look for a back packers café for information. Lost among the upscale boutiques, massage parlors and car parts stores, I finally find the tiny Forest Café, with a sign that promises encouragingly “English spoken here.” But the proprietor speaks no English, and shoos me away when I ask if I can buy a bottle of water instead of the liquor, beer and Red Bull she is peddling. No tour guides can provide any information about trekking possibilities in the area, although there are advertisements on the web about operations based further on in Jing Hong.

In general, China is not very friendly to the independent foreign traveler. Despite this, there is a growing movement of adventurous Chinese drifters who are eager to explore the most remote areas of China, by car, by bicycle and by foot. Call them drifters or call them explorers, either way, this could change the face of Chinese tourism forever. Perhaps we can help. CERS helped start this movement in China from its earliest beginnings, and has served as a model and a leader ever since.
SEA EAGLES AT WORLD HERITAGE SITE

by Wong How Man
Tsurui, Hokkaido

MAIN: Sea vessel among floating ice.
REMAINING: Steller’s Sea Eagle with orange beak and White-tailed Sea Eagle with yellow beak.
The boat ploughed into the drifting ice and I could hear the crackling sound around me. The seagulls gathered in large flock behind as if they must know a feast was forthcoming. Soon we were surrounded on all directions with ice, some as tall as three or four meters. We had just set sail out of a fishing town called Rausu in the northernmost part of Japan.

This is Shiretoko peninsula protruding out of the northeastern part of Hokkaido. In 2005, the peninsula was designated as a World Natural Heritage Site by UNESCO, in order to protect its pristine ecosystem, natural beauty and the abundance of wildlife that make this place its home. Shiretoko comes from an Ainu word, meaning “end of the earth”. The Ainu were the earliest settlers of Hokkaido and other islands, extending all the way to the Aleutian chain connecting the Asian and American continents.

I have come here in pursuit of the endangered Steller’s Sea Eagle. They are known to concentrate around this northernmost fishing port of Japan during the winter. The minus 15 degree temperature was transformed ten or more degrees lower once wind chill was factored in. Despite being wrapped in layers of down, I could feel the brutal sea wind scorching my face. But it was all worth it. Not just the Steller’s, but also the White-tailed Sea Eagles were out in droves.

The jet black colour with white shoulders and a bright orange-yellow beak and feet make the Steller’s Sea Eagle stand out among other birds. In fact, the beak is larger than all other eagles, including the American Bald Eagle. And its size is also huge, up to nine kilograms with wing span up to 2.5 meters, averaging the largest among all known eagles. Strangely, the female can be up to 50% heavier than male birds.

They are considered globally vulnerable to extinction and are a national treasure in Japan. Out of a total of approximately 3,200 breeding pairs of Steller’s Eagle, 90% of them live in the Shiretoko Peninsula. There are still only 2,000 to 2,500 pairs in Japan. The future of Steller’s Sea Eagle depends on the successful conservation efforts that are taking place.

In 2012, there was a birth of a nestling Steller’s Sea Eagle. And in 2016, there were two hatched chicks in the nest. The conservation efforts in Shiretoko are continuing to protect the habitat of this endangered species and to reduce threats to its survival. The Shiretoko Peninsula is a place where we can see these majestic birds in their natural habitat, and where we can learn about their habits and the challenges they face.
Sea Eagles in the world, perhaps up to 2,000 birds are living in and around Hokkaido. The remaining birds spread out in the lower Amur River, Kamchatka and Sakhalin islands of Russia.

Ando Makoto, my guide here in Hokkaido, travelled with me. He has been on such winter cruises many times. But today is different. The weather has been quite uncertain in recent years and there were days when visitors waited and waited, but no eagles appeared. In fact, the special boat that can head out to sea under such weather has stopped operating unless they are sure the birds are around. The call came last night that sighting was confirmed - the eagles had returned.

We left Ando’s home lodge at 5am in the morning and drove for almost four hours to reach this distant outpost by the coast. We boarded the boat gingerly as the gangplank was icy and covered with snow. It had been snowing since yesterday and the road was barely ploughed clear. A few kilometres out in the choppy sea and I could see floating ice, first a thin layer then thicker and thicker as we moved further out. Before long, we were among drifting ice, all around. Here is where the sea and shore birds converged. The seagulls were most abundant and somewhat of a nuisance as we were trying to focus on the Sea Eagles. Surely they were all around too.

Basketfuls of fish were thrown overboard to attract the Sea Eagles, though the gulls certainly got the better part of it, being much larger in numbers. Whenever an eagle swooped in, the gulls would scatter.

I took particular joy in photographing the eagles in flight. While I could hear other photographers clicking away with their motorized camera, I preferred to snap at a more leisurely pace, one image at a time, using manual focus rather than automatic mode. Object in motion have always been tricky for auto-focus lenses, not knowing where to do spot focus as the cameraman tries hard to follow his subject. But today’s digital cameras offer exceptional options, taking ISO speed to 3200 or higher, thus allowing high shutter speed and low f-stop to gain more depth of field, compensating for more tolerance within a focusing range. The resulting images of my eagles in flight, using only a 300mm lens, speak for themselves.

Where the sea is cold, the marine animals tend to prosper and grow to huge sizes, as fewer predators abound except perhaps man. It is certainly true in the water of northern Japan, a short distance from Russia’s Far East coast. Here the Hokkaido King Crab is not only large and abundant, but a delicacy for the Japanese. Rausu is one such fishing port, boasting ships that can brave the rough sea. The town and other neighbouring towns have many seafood produce shops and markets.

Ando took me to one such shop where large basins held huge King Crab and live scallops in their shells. We chose three sizable crabs, each weighing in at almost four kilogram. The price, though not cheap at 38,000 yen total, was only a fraction of what it would have cost in Sapporo, let alone Tokyo. That evening, after a long drive back to Ando’s home, we feasted on one crab while saving the rest to take home to Hong Kong.

Ando asked me to write something on his wall in memory of my visit. I wrote of the romance of the bitter wind, drifting snow, dance of the cranes and frozen ice. And lastly, that I would certainly return next year for the crab, who will be getting fatter during the intervening year.
“This is an Irish song from 600 years ago,” Ando San annotated as he finished playing with a fast strum on his Martin D4 collector series guitar. The music’s resonance filled the small room next to the kitchen. The fireplace was burning warm and outside the window the snow seemed to glow even in the dark. Just two days ago, a 6.9 magnitude earthquake rocked through the area and his speakers fell from their mount high up the ceiling. Now they are secured, with duct tape around them.

“This other guitar is a Dobro, very old and made before the Second World War,” said Ando who was born in 1964. Sliding a glass piece over his ring finger, a piece cut off from the neck of a wine bottle with edges smoothed off, he played another tune, Amazing Grace improvised as blues, on this all-chrome metal guitar. This is just another of Ando’s large collection of about 15 guitars.

But Ando’s love is more than music, guitars and motorcycles. His fascination with nature is also strong and genuine, drawing him to move away from his native home in Sapporo to distant Kushiro in eastern Hokkaido. He wanted to be among the Japanese Crane (known as Red-Crowned Crane in China) and the abundant wildlife, including bear and deer, living close to the natural forest and wetland. He moved here ten years ago with his wife Shinobu, turning a farmhouse barn into a warm and comfortable home he named Hickory Wind.
As a professional nature guide, Ando Makoto’s name has travelled far and wide, bringing in guests from faraway Europe and America, as well as from all over Japan. This is my third trip to Hokkaido in as many years, staying with Ando for the second time. His six rooms are in great demand and often full. It is not unusual for guests to book months in advance.

One of the prime spots for observing and photographing cranes is just a few hundred meters away from Ando’s house, within walking distance. Almost everyone comes for their love of nature and photography, though let’s not forget Shinobu’s very fine cuisine that she cooked every night, with a unique menu and quality ingredients. Tonight, we have a multi-course dinner, served to an exceptionally large group of nine from Thailand, an American lady from Connecticut with her Scottish husband and a young man from South Africa.

“I have many secret spots,” said Ando as he put up his photographs with a projector on his wall. Whenever there is a large group, Ando will give an illustrated talk in the evening. His witty remark is unusual for a country known for being reserved and abjectly polite. Many of his jokes are short and simple, yet funny. “This one is from another of my secret spot,” said Ando as a spectacular photo of cranes roosting on a river hit the wall. “Here’s one of the bear turning his eyes skyward as an acorn fell on his head,” chuckled Ando.

“And the owl, I love owls, be it the Ural Owl or a Fish Owl,” Ando said proudly as the images changed on the wall. “The Steller’s Sea Eagle is from the coast but hardest to see is the Tufted Puffins, as there are only four birds remaining in Hokkaido,” Ando said as two beautiful pictures hit the wall one after another. Next came a picture of two red fox mating and tugging at each other, while turning their heads with expressions as if growling at each other. “They were really very happy, mating only once a year and only for ten minutes. I was lucky to catch that,” remarked Ando.

“This is my secret spot where I go canoeing. The stars at night, spectacular. The Milky Way, see the Big Dipper reflected on the water!” Ando exclaimed with a smile of satisfaction on his face. To round out the evening, he showed yet another secret spot where he photographed salmon jumping upstream.

On my first day out, luck also befell me and I got the pictures of the cranes that I wanted, and one particular image that I could not expect to capture without luck. At night, I showed two of my best pictures of the cranes, one taken last year and one on this trip. Ando was delighted to see both of those photographs. I told him those were taken at my secret spots. It would be too brutal to tell him that they were both taken only a meager 200 meters away from his home!
THE AILAOSHAN TRAIL: A WORK IN PROGRESS
by William Bleisch, PhD
Jinshan Yakou and Kunming

“Remote for detachment, narrow for chosen company, winding for leisure, lonely for contemplation, it beckons not merely north and south but upward to the body, mind and soul of man.”
- Myron Avery, 1934

Lowering the heavy pack from off my back for what I promised myself would be the last time on this trip, it was easy to be proud of what we had accomplished. With a team of seven others, we had walked almost 50 kilometers over unmarked trails along the backbone of the Ailao Mountains carrying our own tents, bedding, gear, and enough provisions for the four day journey. Starting at a forest station above JianXing Township in Xin Ping County at 1,953 meters above sea level, and ending at the Jinshan Yakou Guesthouse on Rt. S307 in Zhenyuan County at 2,409 m, each day involved 7 to 8 hours of hiking with full packs, climbing up peaks as high as 2,644 m and down to valleys as low as 2,000 m. We set camp twice in the dark.

Painful at times, but the trail was everything I had dreamed it would be. Long walks through tunnels of dwarf bamboo under the shade of a canopy of ancient trees, mountain clearings predesigned as perfect campsites, breath-taking views from the top of the escarpment looking down from the ridge top onto a sea of dense clouds 1,000 meters beneath us, the wind wailing over the top of the pass above our camp sheltered in the gully below. Clear mountain brooks and rocky cliffs, carpets of moss underfoot, huge fallen logs to duck underneath or scramble over, forests of giant Rhododendron, gentians and fragrant Mountain Tea flowers. We found signs of Golden Cat, deer and large raptors; bears are commonly reported. And always the knowledge that somewhere in the treetops there might be eyes peering at us - the rare Western Black-crested Gibbons, which occur sporadically throughout these forests.

It was just like the Appalachian Trail through the southeast USA, only with bamboo and gibbons! In the relief of getting that heavy pack off my back, I started to day-dream while I rested. Before long, I thought, there will be a trail from the Vietnam border all the way to Shangri-la and beyond. There will be trailheads and trail signs all along the mountains, leading day-trippers from Yuxi and Kunming to join the trail for a day or a weekend. Dedicated “thru-hikers” will be able to travel along the entire length of the trail north to south, staying at simple shelters or at comfortable cabins.
CLOCKWISE FROM TOP:  
This dense forest is home to a family of gibbons, the rare singing apes of southwestern China. The Western Black-crested Gibbon is considered globally endangered with extinction, and Ailaoshan is home to the largest contiguous population of the species left in the world. Zhang YunDe hikes through a sea of ferns on the Ailaoshan Trail. Veteran trekker Yang Xing on the Ailaoshan Trail. Winter Rhododendron flower on the trail. The Ailaoshan Nature Reserve trekking team, with (right to left) Vice Director Li Bo and forest guards Chen ZhongPing, Zhang YuanDe and Li DeRong (59 years old). The patrolling trails that they scouted out have become the Ailaoshan Trail.

run by local farmers, who will cease hunting and cutting trees. Teams of forest rangers will guide tourists instead of chasing away loggers. Forests will be replanted and wildlife will return....

It was easy to fall into run-away enthusiasm. Then I remembered that we had only hiked 50 kilometers. Another 1,000 kilometers of the trail remain to be mapped, opened and explored before it could really be considered a “through trail” across southern Yunnan. And some of it we did not even have permission to cross yet! Was I just dreaming?

I reminded myself of the long, slow development of the most famous of all mountain trails - The Appalachian Trail - America’s great through trail along the eastern mountain range. The trail was announced, with great fanfare, in 1923, when only a 20 mile stretch was open to the public, from Bear Mountain outside of New York City west towards the Delaware Water Gap. The “AT,” as it is also known, now spans 3,500 kilometers across the US, from Mount Katahdin in Maine to Springer Mountain in Georgia. With over 250 cabins, shelters, and campsites along the way, the trail is visited by an estimated 3 to 4 million hikers every year, including over 8,000 “thru-hikers,” people who have reported completing the entire trail in a single season.

The idea of a “through-trail” in China came to me while hiking the White Mountain section of the AT with my son last year. The concept of the through-trail, a long recreational trail along the ridge line of the mountains, actually began in the US with the AT. In 1921, the year after his wife died, Benton MacKaye published an idea that would change the map of the United State. He called it “An Appalachian Trail: A Proposal in Regional Planning.” MacKaye was trained as a forester and was one of the first graduates of the Harvard School of Forestry, but he published his article in The Journal of the American Institute of Architects. For MacKaye, it was not a trail, but a utopian vision of connected community camps linked by a trail along the Appalachian skyline, almost within sight of the smoky cities, designed to foster an entirely new way of living and a new outlook, an antidote to depression, greed, unemployment and even militarism.

Ninety two years later, MacKaye’s vision has given rise to three grand through-trails across the United States from south to north: The AT, the Pacific Crest Trail and the Continental Divide Trail. They are all protected as part of the National Scenic Trail System, authorized under the National Trails System Act of 1968 and managed by the US Forest Service and National Park Service in partnership with local NGOs like the Appalachian Trail Conservancy. In the 1970s, Europe joined the movement. The Alpine Pass Route now crosses Switzerland 350 kilometers through the alps, while La Grande Traversata delle Alpi (the “GTA”) spans the entire arc of the western Alps, over 1,000 kilometers in all.
Where are China’s mountain through-trails? I have been dreaming about the possibility of a trail across the mountains of western China for some time. It was Howman Wong’s suggestion that I should stop talking about it until I had actually walked the trail. This last week, with support from WildChina, the Xin Ping Ailaoshan Provincial Nature Reserve, the Yuxi Trekking Club and Fauna & Flora International, we took the first steps.

While MacKaye is credited with the idea of the Appalachian Trail, many others were instrumental in its realization. A Professor at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Edward Charles Pickering, started the Appalachian Mountain Club in 1876 to explore and preserve the White Mountains in New Hampshire. (The AMC now has 12 chapters stretching from Maine to Washington DC and over 90,000 members.) In 1910, the Assistant Headmaster of the Vermont Academy, James P. Taylor, started a similar club in Vermont, the Green Mountain Club. In 1912, the GMC began the construction of the Long Trail across Vermont, America’s first long distance mountain hiking trail, completed in 1930. These efforts were the sprouts that inspired MacKaye to plant his big idea.

Our modest trek across the Ailaoshan also involved many partners, with a team of 8 people. The trail-blazers in fact were Vice-Director Li GuoSong of the Xinping Ailaoshan Nature Reserve and three local forest guards (Chen ZhongPing, Zhang YunDe and Li DeRong, 59 years old), all three local villagers who have been enlisted by the nature reserve to patrol the forest and report violations to headquarters. They not only led us along their patrolling trails, but they did much of the heavy lifting and cooking. So did Yang Xing - a local adventure travel leader and a veteran China explorer in his own right. In addition to founding the Yuxi Trekking Club, he has led many treks through the forests of Ailaoshan and has climbed Haba Snow Mountain five times. Liu Jian, another enthusiastic member of the Yuxi Trekking Cub, was our dedicated photographer, and also provided his back for the trek and his car for the road to the mountains. Zhao TianXiao, an expert on gibbon conservation from Fauna & Flora International, brought the whole team together and served as liaison for planning before and after. Having never hiked a long trail before, Zhao was the real hero of the day; our pace-setter and also our guinea-pig. More than once on the trip he lay down and announced, with some certainty, that he was dying. But he completed the entire trip with no ill effects and proved by doing so that it is ready for visitors.

Together, we hiked across the Xin Ping Ailaoshan Provincial Nature Reserve almost 50 km from southeast to northwest. The trip took us 4 full days – the locals could probably have done it in 2 or 3 - we think tourist groups would probably want to take 5 or 6.

Marking and cleaning the route, improving the campsites, arranging for guides and guards – there is still much work to be done. And that is just the first section of the trail. There is, however, already great interest in the project, and we are planning more expeditions for the months ahead.

Perhaps my trail-side day-dream was not so far-fetched. Maybe we will be allowed to continue our trek. After all, I am convinced, there will be real benefits to China in the long run. Not only will a mountain trail benefit the physical and mental health of city dwellers – as MacKaye envisioned – it could also provide some real economic benefits to local villagers living in these remote mountains, as they provide food for visitors, work as guides or porters, or run simple farm-stay style inns for hikers. A network of local trekking clubs could promote and maintain the trail all along its length, and also provide educational opportunities for local kids, just as the AMC does. And a mountain route linking nature reserves could build support and interest for re-connecting forest habitats, just as it has in the USA. That will be critical for the survival of many endangered species, such as the gibbons, especially in the face of changing climate.

In his 1921 article, MacKaye invited his readers to imagine a giant standing astraddle the Appalachian mountain range looking north and south along the sky-line of the ridge, and east and west to the crowded cities below. It was the only way that he could coax his readers to share the vision that his trained eyes could see so clearly. With the advantage of Google Earth, it is easy now to see the potential routes of a through-trail along the Ailaoshan and Huanglian Shan ranges of Yunnan. It may not be so easy to walk it all – but every journey starts with a single step – especially a long hike. 
CERS IN THE FIELD

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT:
- CNN aired multiple spots of a half-hour interview with How Man on exploration and its impact to China.

- The Boston Globe published a story on How Man’s lecture at the city, with supporter Richard Friedman by his side.

- The World of Chinese, a bi-monthly published in a cover story, “Guardians of the Plateau” on CERS’ Tibetan Mastiff project.

- Taiwan’s Monthly, a magazine for young readers, published a four-page article on CERS and How Man.

- Wan Pao Daily in Taiwan published a half page story summarizing two newly published books.

- How Man recently delivered lectures at the following: Asia Society in New York, Deerfield Academy to entire school of over 800 students, Boston organized by Richard Friedman and Patrick Lyon, Executive Forum in HK, Jebsen Company Annual Dinner, Hong Kong University Architecture School, Taiwan’s Commonwealth Human Space, HK ELSA Jewish High School.

- Dr Paul Buzzard, CERS Field Biologist, gave lectures at the Royal Geographical Society in Hong Kong, two CSR Lunch Seminars for the Jebsen Company, as well as talks at HK Island School and the Li Po Chun United World College of Hong Kong. In addition, he presented a paper at the Western Stock Show, the largest stock show in North America, on the subject of Wild and Domestic Yak on the Tibetan plateau.

- Dr Chu Hongjun, with among co-authors Dr Wong How Man, published a paper on the Asiatic Beavers night-time activities in the Chinese academic journal Mammal (Acta Theriologica Sinica).

- Xavier Lee finished production of his latest documentary film for CERS, “Swan Song of the Last Reindeer herder”.
Richard Friedman joined as latest CERS patron. Friedman is a hotelier/philanthropist from Boston and recently organized a lecture for How Man to present CERS work to area select audience.

Danny Lee and Amy Fung became CERS first 2013 patron as they joined us on January 1.

Judith Ann Corrente made another sizable donation to CERS.

The Moritz Foundation made their annual substantial donation.

The Sahan Daywi Foundation made its annual donation to CERS.

Dennis Cicetti, Antonio Koo, Leo Tsai and Lewis Chan continue with their annual donation to CERS.

We thank Nury Vittachi and Angelina Kwan for co-emcee our annual dinner. Elaine Kwok for being auctioneer. We also thank all gift donors for the evening, Cultures by Toni P Ltd, ION Worldwide, Omega, Qiju Qilin, Stephen James Organics, Shanghai Tang, Toppan Vite Limited, UBS AG, William E. Connor & Associates, Yen Sheng Factory Limited.

Ponti Trading Ltd sponsoring of wine for Qiju Qilin’s exhibit opening at Sin Sin Gallery.

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CERS’ MISSION:
The mission of the China Exploration and Research Society is to enrich the understanding of our cultural and natural heritage.