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CLOCKWISE FROM TOP:
Praying flags framing sacred Nyibu Yutze seen from mountain pass between Sichuan and Qinghai. Ho Chi Minh with Chairman Mao and Peng Zhen in China. A mule caravan near the border with Vietnam. Wang Yunmei, original member of the Red Detachment of Women, at age 103.
President's Message

This year is the 60th anniversary of the first ascent of Everest, a feat accomplished on May 29, 1953 by two extraordinary and determined climbers, Edmund Hillary and Tenzing Norgay. Both came from humble background, the former a New Zealand beekeeper and the latter a Sherpa raised in Nepal but living in India at time of the climb, though only recently confirmed to be born in Tibet, a guarded secret kept until long after his death.

Their accomplishment elevated them to a height higher than the 8848 meters summit of Everest. The film *The Conquest of Everest* was released shortly after by the British-led climbing expedition. Hillary’s book is titled *High Adventure*, whereas Tenzing’s book *Men of Everest*, released the same month, viewed the climb of their sacred mountain differently, calling the mountain by its traditional name Qomolangma rather than Everest. Tenzing looked upon his climb as almost a pilgrimage, praying for mercy in order to succeed.

Hillary, being a Christian, took a small crucifix from Team Leader Hunt to the top, but looked at the climb as a high-stake venture for conquest. In the morning of the final assault for the summit, Tenzing pointed down at ‘Thyangboche’ monastery far below. Hillary thought the monks must be performing their morning devotions, praying for their well-being for the summit, Tenzing pointed down at ‘Thyangboche’ monastery far below. Hillary thought the monks must be performing their morning devotions, praying for their well-being as promised. Most likely however, they were praying to their mountain god, rather than to his god.

As he came down from the summit to Camp XIII and met his teammate George Lowe, Hillary uttered his first words after his monumental climb, “Well, we knocked the bastard off!” Late in his life and in his last book *View from the Summit*, he admitted that he urinated on the summit of Everest.

Their two diverging viewpoints and attitudes define the philosophical difference and outlook between East and West. As an explorer brought up in the East and educated in the West, I can understand both approaches and viewpoints toward each person’s ultimate goal are just as relevant and important, be it a pilgrimage or a conquest. Personally I tend to adopt the former. Spiritual strength internally almost always complements external physical power and determination. Later in life, Hillary was to take on the Eastern spirit and focused on more humble charity work in the Himalayan region, particularly in Nepal and among the Sherpas.

In this, I also recall Chairman Mao’s teaching to cadres of the United Front Department. He compared their work to being like an ancient Chinese coin, round on the outside and square in the middle, meaning be flexible when dealing with others though with fixed principles internally. Likewise, I adapt to new approaches outwardly though haven’t changed much internally.

While the first Everest summit was reached 60 years ago, this year marks the 40th year since the Everest expedition. Hillary’s book is titled *High Adventure*, whereas Tenzing’s book *Men of Everest*, released the same month, viewed the climb of their sacred mountain differently, calling the mountain by its traditional name Qomolangma rather than Everest. Tenzing looked upon his climb as almost a pilgrimage, praying for mercy in order to succeed.

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Finally I look at history in the eyes, and hold history in my hands. Her hands are so fragile that I cannot help but hold them lightly. Wang Yunmei was born during the Qing Dynasty; to be exact, on May 23, 1910, a year before the Chinese Republic was established by Dr. Sun Yat Sen. Today, she is 103. Sitting next to her, I feel the diminutive size of her body does not reflect the giant place that she holds in China.

Wang isn’t just any Centenarian; she is an icon who hailed from a tiny village with a dozen or so households in Hainan Island. Circumstances would catapult her and the group she belonged to into center stage in Beijing, China and even the world. Wang Yunmei is a member of the Red Detachment of Women, a guerrilla force of about a hundred amazons formed in 1931. It was an intelligence-gathering cum fighting brigade of the early Red Army on Hainan, this tropical island off Guangdong Province with almost the size of Taiwan.

The renegade group would fight for the better part of two years against local landlords and the troops of the government, as part of the early liberation movement between the communist Soviets and the conservative nationalists. Some were caught and executed. Others disbanded into the hills and were later repatriated home. But their isolated story later became a mainstream
legend of women’s participation in a national movement for the liberation of the country.

Fortuitous as it may be, had it not been for the Cultural Revolution and the wife of Chairman Mao, this special detachment of women might remain little-known except to revolutionary historians. The story of this particular troop of women was chosen by Jiang Qing, Mao’s wife, as the theme of arguably the most popular revolutionary ballet opera created during the turmoil years in China of the 1960s and thereafter.

First it was staged in Beijing, with Chairman Mao attending the premiere performance with many state leaders. Later it was made into a popular movie shown all over China and the world. It helped inspire an entire generation of young radicals at university campuses, both in China and around the world. Even today, various dance troupes in China would perform this ballet as one of the most significant revolutionary numbers to a cheering crowd. Over ten years ago, then President Jiang Ziming presided over the audience at one such revival performance in Beijing.

Seven other operas were to define those turbulent years, but the “Red Detachment of Women” is perhaps the most popular, with its theme songs leaving indelible memories in Chinese minds, young and old. It would not be an overstatement to say those tunes, and the stories they help portray, are familiar to all who lived in China from the 1960s to current times. For Wang Yunmei, her fortune might very well have been different as well, and be forgotten in the wheel of history. However, history was kind to her. Even today at the advanced age of 103, she stood tall, though with a tiny and diminutive body, in Hainan and in China.

I had the great fortune of meeting Wang Yunmei at her home, rather than at the memorial garden/exhibit center the government put together as a showcase about early communist struggles in China. She was installed there as a living icon, drawing tourists and visitors to the park. Due to a recent accident and thus an injured arm, her family brought her home for recovering and recuperation. Thus my visit with her was in a much more natural and homey setting than at a commercial and political facility.

Yunmei can only speak her local Hainan village dialect, thus all our questions were translated or answered by her granddaughter Ma Xiju. Whenever we tried to take her picture, she would put her right arm up and do a salute like an army officer. Changing from a red velvet hat to her army hat with a red star, it was obvious that she took her role of a military icon with great pride. In April 2010, Xi Jinping, China’s President-in-waiting, visited her and a picture on her wall depicted the two saluting each other.

“People used to ask her when she joined the Party,”
said granddaughter Ma, referring to a much asked question which usually defined a person’s seniority within the communist pedigree. “She would always answer by simply saying that she was a part of the Liberation Red Army,” added Ma. It was much later when they discovered that, despite her fame, she had never formally joined the Party.

At a very senior age, every year Wang would ask her family whether they could help her join the Communist Party as she doesn’t know how to write and fill out necessary forms and protocols. A petition was finally made two days before her 102nd birthday, and quickly approved. Thus, today Wang Yunmei is a Communist Party Member.

While there must be other relics of this vintage in China, among Centenarians, no doubt Wang Yunmei must be the oldest applicant ever to be admitted into this special Club, with over 80 million members in China. As I rose to leave the tiny Big lady, her granddaughter brought out a small badge, her insignia of being a proud member of the Chinese Communist Party. I had the great honor of tying that very pin to her clothes before taking leave of her.

CLOCKWISE FROM RIGHT:
Exactly 80 years ago, right before Chinese New Year, Ho Chi Minh was released from Hong Kong’s prison. Dressed up as a wealthy Chinese merchant and taken out to sea by the Governor’s private launch, he boarded a ship, entered First Class cabin and set sail for Amoy, today’s Xiamen. Ho had just finished a twenty month prison term at Victoria Prison, acquitted through the effort of a dedicated English lawyer, and was on his way to freedom. He spent the lunar New Year of 1933 in Amoy. Why the special treatment?
Ho was detained in the British colony by request of the French colonialist authorities in Vietnam. However through a long court proceeding, he was finally freed and let go into China, spoiling the intrigues of the French. Britain had in the past given shelter to foreign revolutionaries, as long as the person in question had not stirred up trouble within her own territories. She had given refuge to Karl Marx, to members of the failed Paris Commune, to Lenin’s party from Russia, even allowing them to hold a congress, and now to Ho Chi Minh. Such reasoning was cited in Ho’s own words of gratitude in his self-composed purported biography.

Ho Chi Minh, less known by his Vietnamese pen-name Nguyen Ai Quoc, and many other aliases when he was a young revolutionary. By whatever name, he had an interesting web of connections to China, including close ties to many within the Chinese communist leadership. After the China-Vietnam relationship went sour in the late 1970s, there were good reasons why his native country did not want to highlight Ho’s long and extensive ties to China, nor the many poems he wrote in Chinese during his jail terms. He was first jailed in Hong Kong between 1931 and 1933 for eighteen months, then again later between 1942 and 1943 for thirteen months in various prisons in Guangxi Province under the nationalist regime of the Kuomingtang.

My own interest in Ho Chi Minh started during the Vietnam-American War when I was a student in the U.S., observing anti-war protests and demonstrations at campuses throughout the country. Later, during my years with the National Geographic, the liaison person assigned by the Chinese government to assist me, Mr Wu Tianfu, had told me of his many contacts with Ho Chi Minh, meeting him when the then President of Vietnam used to visit China yearly. His pictures with Ho rekindled my interest. In fact Wu, who became a close friend, not only accompanied Ho Chi Minh on his travels, but also escorted Che Guevara on his visit to China in 1960. I was fortunate to hear some untold stories of those secretive years.

Recently, I led a CERS expedition through the border region between China and Vietnam and visited a museum dedicated to Ho Chi Minh in Longzhou township of Guangxi Province. There, we saw the house he had lived, organized his comrades within the early Vietnamese Communist Party, his study where he scripted letters and documents, and saw relics including his pen, his mug and his chamber pot. There on exhibit were also many early pictures of Ho Chi Minh in China.

When detained and sent to Hong Kong’s Victoria prison, Ho Chi Minh was known by the Chinese name of Sung Man Cho, an alias he used for extended periods of time while operating in China. He must have honed his Chinese, in particular Cantonese, during his time in prison, and left 133 poems written in that language. I will attempt to recount and interpret some of his poems written when he was interned at several prisons in Guangxi China, which I do not think have been translated well before.

Witty and eloquent, many terms he used in his poems came right out
of Cantonese rather than from the Mandarin spoken in the north. For example, giving one poem the title “Prison guard stole my See Dick” in reference to a walking cane, he borrowed the term from commonly used Cantonese. In two other poems, he refers to himself as “Lo Fu”, yet another Cantonese colloquial term, often used in Cantonese operas.

To “Lie”, with the meaning of being captured, is another Cantonese term used in his poem on Gambling. It is also interesting to note his humor in this poem, comparing gambling outside of jail being illegal to it being allowed and common place within prison. He described prisoners lamenting that they did not enter prison earlier so as to play the game in peace. Calling a prison cell “Lung”, and using “Yao See” to mean “sometimes”, were also very much the Cantonese style of those days.

Even before the Vietnamese communists were organized as a formidable force, Ho’a poems already gave indication of a future militant, as he compared prison bed bugs to tanks and mosquitoes to a squadron of planes. In another poem, after having read the anthology of a thousand famous Chinese poets, he reflected that in contemporary times, even scholars should learn to charge on the battlefield.

Bored as he was during his long jail term, he took up Chinese chess. In a poem, Ho compared the game to a battle with a thousand soldiers and ten thousand horses. In that poem, he presciently took note that given the right opportunity and fast action, a small move by a tiny figure can change the entire game and defeat those with multiple armored chariots. His last verse of this poem noted that though both sides started as equals, only one side would prevail at the end, and the victory belongs to the bravest general.

Romantic satire was also of note in his poem. In one case, he mentioned old inmates welcoming new inmates, just like fair clouds chasing rain clouds in the sky. He was also very observant while in prison and interpreted some mundane situations into philosophy. In one poem “Midnight” probably written while awake in the middle of the night, he mentioned how everyone asleep looked peaceful and kind. The difference between good and bad persons can only be discerned when people are awake.

His outstanding knowledge of the Chinese classics gives us a hint of his scholarly
pursuits. One poem referred to Chinese history, when a prisoner of Qi Kingdom would not eat the Zhou Kingdom’s corn and thus died hungry at Mount Shouyang. He compared that to his days when a gambler would not eat the congee of the government and thus starved to death. In another poem titled “Qing Ming”, he reproduced one and a half verses of a famous Tang poem, while substituting the people in jail as the personalities. It recounts how during the festival, people visited their ancestral graves. In another poem an old court official was referred to as “Gong Hing”, a phrase again only used by highly literate Chinese.

Ho’s literary pendulum swings from a mastery of Chinese classics to his command of street talk and mundane observations. Though his collection of Chinese poems are little known to either Chinese or Vietnamese, they form an important study of Ho Chi Minh’s early years when he developed his intellectual, literary and subsequently revolutionary mind. His two prison terms, both in confinement with Chinese inmates, must have allowed him much focused time to learn the Chinese language and learn about things Chinese. Nonetheless, his command of written Chinese makes me suspect that he may have had some form of study in Confucian schools in Vietnam, which in his days were some of the best schools besides colonial institutions.

Many of his poems during that period of incarceration lamented about his hope of regaining freedom. When he was free in between the two jail terms, Ho Chi Minh visited Yan’an, wartime Capital of the Red Army. There he met with Zhou En-lai and Deng Xiaoping, old acquaintances from his early Paris days.

Later he traveled in disguise as an attending soldier to Lin Biao and went south where he served as cultural and propaganda officer within the Eighth Route Army of the Chinese communist. A little later, he joined General Ye Jianying’s New Fourth Army and was elected general secretary of his Party cell. There is no question that he held these relationships to the Chinese communists dearly and gained much important experience as part of his developing years as a revolutionary, not least in how to fight guerilla warfare. His many visits to China in the 1950s and 60s are testimony to this close relationship.

It is also quite natural for Ho, like Mao and Castro, that upon success of the revolution, each of these revolutionary leaders’ native countries would turn with the tide. Hailed for their success, each respective country and its people would gradually turn from being internationalists to becoming nationalists. Perhaps as a result, Ho Chi Minh’s connections to China, and his eloquence in Chinese, are largely forgotten today, by design rather than by chance.
Sign Post Number One. Here is the starting point of China’s long inland border which stretches for over 22,000 kilometers, as well as the beginning of its lengthy 14,000 kilometers coastline. The Post was first erected in the final years of the Qing Dynasty as a demarcation between China and the French colony of Tonkin in northern Vietnam. A kiosk was built over it to shade it from the weather, be it sun or rain, just unlike what the two countries have gone through in their relationship over the years.

Along this coast and land border with Vietnam are patches of mangroves. By a village called Rongshu (Banyan), the tide comes in and recedes as villagers head out onto the mud flat on foot to dig for clams and even oysters, served at local restaurants. Large flocks of chickens and ducks are raised here, naturally without fences, and the ducks move in and out of the coast according to the tide. The chicken are sent to market or slaughtered locally and served in the restaurants. Ducks, however, are not served on the table, as they are only used to lay eggs, which are then salted, and sold at nearby market. There is even a newly renovated Catholic Church. The French must have made some inroads during colonial times when they controlled neighboring Vietnam.

Nearby live a small minority group of China, the Jing people. They originated from neighboring Vietnam, and have a total population of approximately 22,000 people in China. Actually, this minority in China is the same as the majority Kinh of Vietnam. Some are now living in a small cluster of villages here and maintain their livelihood by being coastal fishermen and farmers.
Their boats, mainly for operation near shore, are made from logs bound together. Some bamboo ones retain the look of a raft, though the bow and stern are tilted upwards.

We continue our exploration of the southern border. Most border crossings are only for organized trade of larger scale, with huge truckloads going through, or for small time exchanges by local villagers with bicycles or push carts. Tourists from further inland or third country nationals are not allowed to cross. One exception is Panchangshi, a sizable city near the famed Friendship Gate. This is the gateway from China to Hanoi, capital of Vietnam.

During friendlier times in the 1950s through the 70s this was where much of Chinese war supplies, as well as military advisors, crossed the border into Vietnam in support of the Vietnamese resistance against first the French, and later the Americans. By the late 1970s, the tide turned and the two communist neighbors became hostile to each other as several border skirmishes and clashes led to all out wars. Strange enough, both countries’ air force sat out the entire war without any engagement. I surmise that perhaps there was some unsaid protocol on both sides to limit the war to the border, thus curtailing damage and destruction to cities further inland.

Today peace has returned to this border and daily there are visitors and merchants crossing back and forth. We took the opportunity to make a crossing to visit a nearby town, Dongdang, which is only three kilometers away from the border. The grass may not be greener on the other side, but the coffee and bread certainly tasted better, and we stocked up our supplies for the upcoming long trip.

At a less obscure border, our road skirted a small river which formed the border between the two countries. We stopped by a roadside stand to buy from the locals some pickled vegetable. I asked the owner Li Da how it was during the border conflict. “I was still a boy and we were told to move inland for two kilometers as the Vietnamese started shelling our side from the nearby hills,” he recounted. “The ordnance fell right over our head whereas if we stayed where our home was, it was too close to be shelled. So we moved back home,” he added.

“At one point, the PLA stormed the other side and found out that all the shelling and firing coming from nearby hills were just from two female Vietnamese soldiers. They were captured and our soldiers found out they each could maneuver all types of ammunition; rifle, machine gun, grenade, pistol, quite an all-
round soldier.” Li Da spoke with some admiration in his voice.

Around here, most male names go by numbers, and many shops and restaurants are with someone’s last name with a number added behind. So Li Da is the oldest and from there on Li Er (two) and Li San (three), so on and so forth. And a form of Cantonese dialect is spoken all across southern Guangxi, even in smaller villages.

We drove for long distance in a road paralleling the border, and up to many small border crossings. Almost all were only for local use, and guarded. I enquired at most crossings what were the local transactions and merchandise. At larger crossings like Xingshi and Panchang, they sent over hardwood furniture. For medium size crossings like Shuikou, there were Vietnamese “French” perfume and packaged dried fruits. At Lihu it was cart-loads of cinnamon stacked up high, and near Aidian it was plastic bagful of pine resin coming across. Almost in all cases, the Vietnamese came over to purchase daily sundries and small electrical appliances.

Finally at a remote place with a few stone houses marked as Gen Ao, somewhere hidden among karst hills and just 500 meters off the main border road, I found an unguarded and obscure crossing. Sign Post 895 stood lonely at the end of a dirt road where two large cement blocks were placed to make sure nothing larger than a bike or motorbike could pass. From there the road became a foot path into Vietnam. A banner on a dilapidated house warned of penalty if illegal crossings are made. I saw a few locals hurry along with loads on their back. Suddenly, my favorite motto “easier to ask for forgiveness than permission” flashed through my mind. Without much hesitation, I went ahead and crossed this little-known border without bother of immigration or customs. Such intrepid excursions always feel like a small triumph and provide quiet joy for an explorer, worthy of a small fine should I be apprehended.

Leaving Guangxi Province into Yunnan, we also saw mule caravans, a rare sight these days. They were used to bring bundles of banana from high hills to the roadside for loading into trucks and sold to cities further inland. These days, because of popular dietary care by better
educated city folks, the fatter and more wild type of banana commends twice the price of the thinner ones.

Along the border of Yunnan, we stopped by Hekou and spent a day exploring Lao Cai across the border. What used to be a crossing by the small gauge train between Kunming and Hanoi has been suspended for many years. Twenty years ago during my first visit here, there was a flourishing street market filled with bush meat and wild animals. These are now nowhere to be seen. Bill Bleisch surmised that either the new policy of animal protection must be taking effect or the animals were simply wiped out. In resignation, we concurred the latter was more likely.

One of the last stops before the Vietnam border ends inland is Jinshuihe, a river border at the southern tip of Jinping County. Here is a crossroad of many minorities. At a tiny village with only twenty households, there are five nationalities. Yang Xiaohui, a Hani man told me, “The Miao, called Hmong on the Vietnamese side, live in the high hills. The Yao inhabit the mid-hills, whereas the Dai stay at the bottom. There are also Lahu around here. But now we can all come down to the plain to live,” said Yang. “The Vietnamese side is much poorer, sometimes not even with enough to fill their stomachs. They have more women than men, so at times the women marry into the Chinese side,” he added.

Just 100 meters from the border control office is a huge sign. On it are images of Chairman Mao and President Ho Chi Minh. The writings are both in Chinese and Vietnamese, calling for long term peace and cooperation between the two countries. At least here in Jinshuihe, cross border marriage is the quickest way of realizing that dream.

**CLOCKWISE FROM UPPER LEFT:**
FROM THE TERAI TO THE HIMALAYAS

by Paul Buzzard, PhD
Shangri-La

MAIN: Api-Nampa Himalayas (by N. Koju)
TOP: Tent village (by N. Koju)
BOTTOM: Trail to Api-Nampa Mountains
There was little rest for the weary: After 2 and half weeks in Myanmar (Burma) and a night in Kunming I flew to Kathmandu, Nepal. The next morning I flew to Dhangadhi in the oppressively hot Terai lowlands that border India in SW Nepal. Shaking off the fatigue I quickly put on my game-face because I was excited to be joining Dr. Mukesh Chalise and his PhD student, Narayan Koju to the remote and newly established Api-Nampa conservation area in the Himalayas bordering India and China in NW Nepal.

I was particularly excited because Api-Nampa is still relatively unexplored biologically. Mukesh and Narayan made the first biological survey to Api-Nampa last year, and according to Mukesh I would be one of the first foreigners and probably the first American to visit the area. We would be travelling through alpine forest to plateau, potential habitat of species that are priorities for conservation such as red pandas, clouded leopards, musk deer spp., dholes (Asiatic wild dogs) and snow leopards.
I was also eager to collaborate with Mukesh who is a prominent figure in Nepali conservation and has extensive experience with primates, musk deer, snow leopards, and birds among other fauna. He is also somewhat of a conservation rock star and was often recognized from television appearances where he has discussed various conservation biology issues including one where he claimed Api-Nampa as the most beautiful place he had been, high praise indeed.

From Dhangadhi we drove north up through Nepal’s middle highlands to a dam being constructed on the Chamali river. On the drive through sub-alpine forest and grasslands we were fortunate to observe golden
jackals and Nepal gray langur monkeys to whet our appetites for the upcoming hike. We started a relatively easy hike along the Chamali with a distinctly sub-tropical feel because of the banana plants and a number of lowland birds including the yellow throated Barbet that I have often heard in Lao PDR as it plaintively cries for “Beer Lao, Beer Lao”.

After a couple days the hike got much more challenging as the trail narrowed and continually went up and then down again through quaint villages with terraced fields and then forests. The lodging got more challenging as well and we began to sleep in people’s attics or cow sheds. My legs are still recovering from flea bites, but it was well worth it as we eventually reached the source of the Chamali River at the base of Api Mountain.

During the hike, our schedule was a bit rushed but we were still able to collect some biological data. We identified potential clouded leopard and bear scat early on and snow leopard scat later near the source. Interviews consistently indicated that two musk deer species were present (one black and one similar in appearance to the Siberian species) as well as clouded leopards, red pandas and dholes. We also spent several hours observing pikas. We saw displacements where one pika took over a preferred sunny spots from weaker individuals and took photographs that suggested two species of pikas were present or at least two color morphs. We also collected pika dung pellets for future genetic analyses. Interviews also indicated that herders sometimes consume pikas and they impart an effect similar to that from alcohol. On the way back we also observed Assamese macaque monkeys and gathered scat and urine for genetic analyses.

In addition to the interesting Biology there was also a very intriguing cultural aspect to the trip. As we hiked through the villages I was constantly struck with how much the western Nepalis reminded me of the Roma or gypsies of Europe with their dark, swarthy and attractive appearance often with nose piercings and copious jewelry. There were also 400-500 year old palace ruins from a former ruler of the Chamali valley. The ruins were at the top of a peak, and unfortunately time did not allow for closer investigation. Probably most interesting, though, was the manifestation of a much more recent cultural phenomenon: caterpillar fungus. Thanks to the rise in the value of caterpillar fungus there is now a temporary tent village for fungus hunters near the base of Api Mountain complete with hotels and a cinema.

I am very excited about future research at the Api-Nampa conservation area and collaboration between CERS and Mukesh in Nepal. Api-Nampa is undergoing rapid change with dams and roads and eco-tourism plans so we are eager to deploy camera traps next year to document the current situation and monitor any changes. I am also eager to learn more about Nepali culture and positively impact conservation through community outreach. Mukesh and I discussed wildlife conservation in Nepal at a village school, and I explained why musk deer are special (e.g. their ability to feed in trees, their tusks, the historic and present of value of musk) and how they are studied with camera traps. Hopefully more schools can be included in the future to motivate future conservationists. In addition, Mukesh will be joining the CERS education program this summer to see our musk deer and snow leopard research sites in NW Yunnan and to inspire more conservationists.
The monk in red robe stomped out of the car and rushed toward us. “What are you doing here?” he asked. “Having a good time fishing,” I answered though I was just lying on the sandy beach on the bank of the upper Yellow River. I never fish nor do I like eating plateau fish, usually filled with tiny bones. However, Qiju and Zhou, two of our team members, had been fishing here yesterday and today. In fact, just this morning Zhou pulled in the largest catch in his life, a fish measuring about one meter and weighing two and a half kilo.

“You cannot fish here,” the monk barked as he grabbed Qiju’s fishing rod out of his hands. With a big swing motion, he threw the rod into midair and it landed way out into the Yellow River torrent. “You can at least ask nicely, and there are no signs prohibiting fishing,” I protested. The more calmly I spoke, the more furious the monk became. After all, his driver, a tall Tibetan young man, was standing at a respectable distance as spectator. He must finish his tirade of accusation with glamour and drama. Next he took up the plastic bucket holding our catch, some five or six fish, unzipped it and poured out the fish by the bank to release them. With yet another big swing of his hand, he threw the container into the middle of the river.

Neither Qiju, our senior Tibetan director, or team member Zhou made any protest and just watched in awe. After all, no one wanted to escalate an already volatile situation, especially not in a Tibetan area where the recent political climate was already tense and boiling. Here where three provinces, Sichuan, Qinghai and Gansu, meet in the Tibetan plateau, security measures had been tightened following the self-immolation of over a hundred Tibetans. To start another incident, no matter how small, could have magnifying effect, with more combustible result.

Most fortuitously however, an hour after the monk left the scene, both the fishing rod and the plastic bucket miraculously floated back to shore. I took that as an omen for us to continue fishing, though smartly not at the same site in case the ill-tempered monk should return.

Over the last few days, we were all developing a quiet sympathy for local Tibetans, monks in particular, because of the many stops we had to make to answer and register at police check-points. At one branch of the road toward our planned destination, a remote monastery, we were turned away because no foreigner or Hong Kong citizen is allowed into the area. This Jonang monastery is the last of a historically important sect in Tibet, surviving hidden inside Zamtang County in northwestern Sichuan. I visited in 1988 and wanted to make a return visit after 25 years. It was not to be, given a young Tibetan woman of 21 immolated herself in April and the entire region is now tightly closed by the police.

PLATEAU BLUE
A ten-day camping trip through Tibetan region
by Wong How Man
Jiuji, Qinghai
My team and I had driven over a thousand kilometers to get here, and added several hundred kilometers of detour to reach our second destination, Nyibu Yutze sacred mountain in Qinghai. In between, we have to pass through Aba Yutze, another town where several politically-charged incidents happened recently, not least more self-immolations. After being stopped and registered with the police at one end of town, we were escorted through the long boulevard to the other end of town, where we were registered once again, just to make sure we did not stop or loiter. At the main intersection of town, I saw not only barricades, but also several fire extinguishers put at the center of the intersection. They must anticipate more show of defiance. Many monks in red robe still roam the streets however.

While I don’t agree with the government’s heavy-handed approach to stamp out ethnic discontent, there is little we can do except hoping that a new and better educated generation of leaders in China would take a more tolerant and civilized approach. History has shown that force, no matter how strong, will wane at some point. A union by respect and caring would be far more lasting. Having put in forty years of work on studying China’s minority regions and having conducted numerous conservation projects among them, I hope the damage is not done beyond repair.

Self-immolation, while it should be condemned and not condoned, is no doubt an act of despair and desperation. It should not be simply interpreted, or misinterpreted, as due to coercion by others. Calling any ethnic strife ‘terrorist acts’ or ‘separatism’ is oversimplifying the problem. High officials in government should not forget that before coming to power, the communist were likewise simply called Red bandits by the Nationalists of Chiang Kai-shek. Now that they have been in power for over sixty years, they should not repeat history, but instead learn from their own past.

Arriving at Nyibu Yutze Sacred Mountain is just as disappointing as not reaching our first goal of Jonang monastery. The pristine snow-capped mountain with a lake at its foot is now filled with tourists bussed in from Sichuan and Qinghai. Everyone was stopped at a simple gate and asked to pay a ticket price of Rmb120 to enter, drivers included. I don’t know when prime sacred sites, or as a matter of fact all scenic sites, became commercial profit generating machines. Busloads of colorfully clad tourists loudly roamed the grounds and there were maybe scores of tents the caretaker monopoly had pitched to rent out to visitors. It was, like a zoo. We had a quick picnic lunch, hiding ourselves behind a huge rock, and left soon after.

Not unlike a college student changing major half way through his course of studies, I made a sudden change and took our expedition on a detour toward a bend of the upper Yellow River, somewhat nearby. I thought any unknown place on the map would beat the over-crowded and new-found tourist destination. Along the way, seeing several huge mastiffs tied to a nomad’s home seemed an encouraging sign that we were off the well-trodden path. Yak dung was padded down and made into courtyard-like walls to enclose the houses, and relief motifs were carved on the dung. Here, dung is more than waste, it is treasured as fuel for the nomads. It was near here and along the bank of the Yellow River that we had our earlier encounter with a mad monk.

On the weather front, we had been lucky despite the arrival of the rainy season, and had seen more sun than rain. It only hailed once and snow stayed only high up on the mountains. Caterpillar fungus (chong cao) season had also arrived and all towns on the plateau were filled with vendors and buyers of this little worm-like Cordyseps, costing up to Rmb100 a piece. Qiju and Drolma, our Education Officer, bought some small ugly ones for less than Rmb20 a piece and thought that a great bargain. Both being Tibetan, they must know the little ones are actually more potent than the big worms.

While camping out for seven consecutive nights, Bill Bleisch, CERS Science Director, was always the first to wake up in the morning and went searching the nearby hills for bird calls and animal tracks. By the Yellow River bank, he came back with some very long feathers, remains from the carcass of a long dead Lammergeyer, or Bearded Vulture. Xavier, our filmmaker, tired of waiting for a marmot to show up from his underground hole, turned his attention instead to recording how camp was set and a lustrous dinner prepared by my support team.

As night fell, a new moon shyly came through the clouds, as if peeking from behind a veil. The stars compete for attention as they seem to shine brighter than the crescent moon. Though Chengdu and the first hotel of our last night is still a couple of days away, I can already dream of the hot shower awaiting my anxious body. That, perhaps, is the final consolation prize for a ten-day expedition.
The Beijing Public Security Entry-Exit Service Centre, which handles visas and residence permits for foreigners in Beijing, sits imposingly on the Second Ring Road in Beijing, rising as a windowless cylinder from the second floor, looming like a fortress over the street below. It evokes for me Franz Kafka’s description of The Castle in his nightmarish tale of the same name; “It was as if some melancholy resident, who by rights ought to have kept locked up in the most out-of-the-way room in the house, had broken through the roof and stood up in order to show himself to the world.”

The Castle was Kafka’s last unfinished novel published after his death in 1923. It details the ordeal of a journeyman surveyor – today we might call him a visiting technical advisor - who is summoned to work in a distant village by the Castle, which directs all village affairs. He is not given any duties, however, but instead is constantly frustrated by the indecipherable system. Never able to enter the Castle itself, where the unapproachable officials live and work, his meetings with various lower ranking secretaries, messengers and assistants only succeed in contributing to the astounding amount of paperwork generated by the Castle’s bureaucrats.

Filling out form after form, waiting in line after line, traveling through Beijing’s hazardous air from office to office, my quest for a one year family visa gave me plenty of time to ponder. What a difference from life in our CERS expedition camp, just one week before…

I am woken in my tent by songs of larks in the morning; first two dedicated vocal artists who began singing at 5:06, and then by 6:00AM, as the first light of dawn appears on the horizon, a rousing chorus of dozens of exuberant birds, singing their hearts out from the long grass. They wake me in time to see the peaks of Nyarong’s sacred snow mountain illuminated in the fresh light, just before a cloud rolls in covering our hillside camp with fog.

Inspired by the birdsong and the sight of snow mountains in the early morning, I vow to get up and get ready before dawn each day so that I can have at least a short hike before we strike camp and start on the long day’s drive. Our tight driving schedule only allows quick observations out the window or a few moments snatched by the roadside. One such brief stop reveals brilliant crimson poppyworts (*Meconopsis punicea*), with their drooping petals as redder than the Chinese...
flag. Ruddy Shelducks appear near the road in singlets, pairs and triplets. We drive north in deep gorges along the tributaries of the Dadu River, where Blue Whistling Thrushes are common, then follow one of the main tributaries, the Jiamuzu River, as it climbs gradually up to rolling hills and grasslands before the border of Sichuan and Qinghai.

Soon after crossing the provincial border, a pair of Black-necked Cranes appear by the roadside and we stop to film. The cranes, male and female, dance together, synchronizing their movements in an angular pas de deux, leaping into the air on long legs, pointing at the ground, then throwing their heads back. After several minutes, they drift apart to forage and preen. The bright Kessler’s Thrush, an alpine relative of the Blackbird of European lawns, is common in the shrubby grasslands here. Tiny Alpine Pikas or mouse-hares scurry across the grasslands to their holes as we approach. A pheasant with dark blue head and bare red skin on its face walks beside the roadside, surprisingly tame. It is the Common “Ring-necked” Pheasant, but the subspecies found here lacks the white ring around its neck.

As the day ends, we set camp on a broad flat next to the river surrounded by high rounded hills, yaks and nomad households in the distance. An unmistakable Ibisbill forages at the riverside, its black face and the black band around its chest contrasting with its light body. It is a shorebird related to stilts and avocets, with a long, deeply curved bill like that of an ibis – hence the name.

Near our next camp, bright red rose finches and sweet-singing buntings forage in the flowering shrubs of a protected gully. This camp sits at the confluence of the Yellow River and a smaller stream that drains the glaciers of sacred Nianboyuze - a mountain massif that straddles the divide between the upper basins of the Yangtze and Yellow Rivers. Not a sharp peak like Kawakarpo or Mount Kailash in Tibet, Nianboyuze is a long outcrop of naked rock that rises up from the grasslands. One of the highest peaks, at 4925 meters above sea level, is fronted by a pristine alpine lake, Ximen Co. Flowers dot the meadows around the lake, and a Black-necked Crane and a flock of Ruddy Shelducks forage in the wetlands nearby. Chinese tourists pose for pictures and local pilgrims picnic on the grass.

These mountains are sacred to Tibetans and are especially important to the nomads of southern nGolok in Qinghai Province, who come for pilgrimage to walk the long kora around the mountains. The stunning view from the flower-carpet meadows on the lake’s shores brings to mind the writings of John Muir, America’s most famous writer on mountains and conservation. He became poetic, even spiritual, when describing the wonders of another stunning spot, the Yosemite Valley in the Sierras of northern California:

... no temple made with hands can compare ... Awful in stern, immovable majesty, how softly these rocks are adorned, and how fine and reassuring the company they keep: Their feet among beautiful groves and meadows, their brows in the sky, a thousand flowers leaning confidingly against their feet, ...

China’s wilderness temples are everywhere under threat; from over-development for tourism, infrastructure and mining, but there is still spiritual inspiration to be found out there for those willing to explore.

But this all seemed far, far away as I sat in the Beijing Public Security Entry-Exit Service Centre, waiting for my number to be called.

As I moaned with a fellow sufferer in line about the dehumanizing torment that we were going through, a Chinese man in another line piped up, saying it was just as bad when he tried to enter the USA. “Reciprocity!” someone said; “They do it to us and we do it to you.” It sounded just like the smug reaction of some of my American friends living in China to the revelation that the US government was secretly hacking Chinese websites and accumulating data on the phone and internet habits of Chinese citizens.

Small consolation to think that there is equality in all this, as the world everywhere becomes more like Kafka’s Castle and less and less like Muir’s wilderness temple.
For me, this expedition through the nomadic areas of Sichuan province and the border areas with Qinghai was not only a chance to travel to new places where I have never been before, but also an opportunity to enjoy what nature has to offer me and to ponder the changes that are happening.

Even though I grew up in a small Tibetan village, I had never before been on the highest parts of the plateau to see majestic grasslands decorated by lively yaks, horses, sheep, and of course their herders’ black tents, made from yak hair. They are all little dots against the vast grassland and so are we.

There were also the joys of finding new species of birds and plants. The most enjoyable part for me, however, was camping in the wild. I slept under the companionship of millions of stars blinking their eyes against the ever deep blue skies. I rose when the sky started lighting up on the edge. There was no struggle to wake myself up because splashing my face with cold water at an elevation of more than 4000 meters is much more effective than the several cups of coffee that I usually take to wake myself up every morning.

Even when there was no intimate interaction with nature, like sleeping under the stars or having picnic on the grassland, just being on the road and taking in every single object or scene that passes my eyes also brought a comforting feeling that only comes with the expedition mode of my mind. Besides admiring and absorbing the beauty of nature feeling absolutely free was another reward of being close to nature. No need to worry about phone calls, emails and the hundreds of things one gets bothered by in a city on a business day. No shower, no changing clothes everyday, but you feel perfectly okay.
However, being on expedition also means being off the road and setting foot on lands that have been barely touched by other human beings; or at least they have not turned into tourist hotspots. We were successful most of the time to avoid crowds of tourists because our expert leader, How Man Wong, deliberately chose the routes. Still, on our eighth day we visited a sacred mountain near Jiuzhi County in Qinghai. Once a pilgrimage destination for Tibetans nearby, it has now turned into a national park. We had to pay 125 yuan each person just to get in. Once we got inside the park, the entrance was filled with mass-produced tents.

We could hear a crowd of Chinese tourists even before we saw them. Worse still, when we started walking towards the lake at the foot of the sacred mountain, one Chinese woman ran towards us screaming at the top of her voice; “Lao Wai! Lao Wai!” She was asking Dr. Bill Bleisch in our team to take a group photo for them! Would she react like that if she saw Dr. Bleisch, an American scientist, in a metropolitan city like Beijing or Chengdu? Maybe it is the romanticism of being in the wilderness and of being on the Tibetan plateau that encouraged her to approach a “foreigner” in that way. We were annoyed. First of all, it is still a holy place, where countless Tibetans come on pilgrimage to pay their respects. Secondly, she can romanticize about being in the wilderness, but it does not mean she can impose that on other people, who might be visiting for other reasons.

This is not a new phenomenon that I ran into first on that day. I work in Shangri-La. The original name, “Zhongdian,” was changed just for the sole reason of attracting tourists. Monasteries and even local Tibetan homes were turned into tourist destinations so that tourists from inside and outside of China could fulfill their fantasy of experiencing Shangri-La, the utopian dream world described in James Hilton’s book *Lost Horizon.* Local culture and religion all become performances prepared for tourists to see and experience during a quick visit of a few days. The whole purpose behind all this was to boost local economic development, and the immediate financial benefits have been promising. However, the dilemma is that when cultures and beliefs become just performances, the authenticity is gone. It is only about meeting tourists’ pre-conceptions and stereotypes of Tibetan culture.

If the millions of tourists were no longer interested in these kinds of performances, however, what would happen to the local people, who used to have their own culture and way of living? It is a complex question, but something to think about.
It had been a long day’s hike, some of it quite steep. We rested in the evening on a tree-top platform outside the thatched hut, watching the stars, listening for owls in the dense forest all around us, passing around an old soda bottle filled with local rice liquor. Our young guide, Mr. Tua, picked up a simple bamboo flute that was lying among the cross pieces of branches that made up the platform. The flute wheezed and blurted out a few sorry notes. I tried as well. The flute was in a style I had not seen before, not like Chinese flutes, held horizontally, but rather made like a recorder, with a whistle-style sound hole cleverly carved and topped with an adjustable bamboo ring. But the bamboo was old, and I could not get the adjustment right.

Old Khong, our local Khmu guide, took the flute from my hand. He tried to play, but could also hardly get out a note. He quickly made an adjustment and the whistle sprang to life. Then he pulled out his large knife. He measured three finger widths below the last hole on the flute, and cut the end off at exactly that point. He adjusted the mouthpiece and fipple and tried again—a pure high tone rang out. He brought out his knife again and carefully carved two new holes. In no time, a melody soared out of the flute, the notes perfectly in pitch.

Like Old Khong, Mr. Tua had grown up in a Khmu Village, but unlike the older porter, Tua had then gone out to get an education. He had received training in college to be a tourist guide, and he spoke good English. I had a
pair of degrees to my name, and I knew a bit about wind instruments. I had studied clarinet for years and collected flutes and reed instruments from all over the world. But I did not know how to make a basic flute. The old porter had learned to do this long ago, just as he could do so many other things. And he did it all so effortlessly – creating water carriers by lashing two stout bamboo tubes together, starting a fire from bamboo shavings, unsheathing the tender rattan shoot from their outer skin, covered in ferocious sharp spines.

The Khmu people are the indigenous people of northern Lao PDR. It is said that they are descended from the oldest settlers in the region, having migrated north into Lao several centuries ago. They were later made subservient under the vigorous Lao and Dai migrants from the north, but they are still the most numerous minority group in the north of the country, with about a half million people. Khmu is not recognized as one of China’s official minorities, but they are counted as one of the 160 minorities recognized by the government of the Lao People’s Democratic Republic. The country, known as Laos among foreigners, but better called Lao PDR as the local people prefer, has been slower to develop than its giant northern neighbour. Paul Buzzard and I were visiting for a 2nd time to plan a research project on the impact of eco-tourism on the wildlife in the forests of Luang Namtha Province, the country’s northernmost province. Our little party of 4 had been trekking for two days, and we were deep in the forest now. In fact we were almost in China, just across from China’s Xishuangbanna, which we could see from the ridge-top trail this afternoon, a trail the locals called the Elephant Trail, and it is occasionally still used by the international herd of wild elephants that migrates back and forth across the China and Lao border.

We did not expect to see any elephants this time of year; they usually appeared in the summer rainy season. Besides, our friend Mrs. Noy, had just returned from a business trip to Xishuangbanna, had found out that China was spending a fortune providing the elephants with tons of salt, an elephant treat, to keep them on the Chinese side. Noy and her husband Mr. Chittapong run the Namtha Riverside Guesthouse, an idyllic retreat made of wood and bamboo that sits comfortably on a quiet stretch of the Namtha River.

While there were no elephants, there were plenty of other animals in the forest. Mr. Tua, despite his years in classrooms, proved to be an excellent spotter. Just like the other forest guides and local people we had met, he was also an encyclopedia of jungle lore – how to get water from the joints of the green bamboo, which plants were useful as medicines or food, which plants to avoid.

As we sat on the platform in the dark, letting the rice wine take effect and drain away the aches and pains of carrying heavy packs all day, Mr. Tua told us that his father is a shaman, and Old Khong is a part-time shaman. The Khmu believe that there are hundreds of kinds of spirits in the forest, so shamans are considered very important. The Khmu are reputed to be very skilled at magic. Mr. Tua said his father knows how to treat diseases by appeasing the spirits, and even knows how to cast lethal spells, although he avoids using those powers. I asked him if he intended to study from his father; he answered that he did not want to learn. Old Khong also spoke up and said his children were not interested in learning. It seems that, within another generation, another shamanic tradition may be lost forever.
We had seen a sign on the trailside before saying “National Biodiversity Area: Not allowed to remove plant or animal life.” I joked that it was OK to eat in, but no take-out. In fact, we had eaten quite a bit of the local biodiversity from the protected area on our treks; bamboo shoots, rattan shoots, wild banana flowers, fish from the river. We had also met local people collecting in the forest, whether for personal use or for market. The morning market in town was always a treasure trove of rare and unusual wildlife, most of which must have come from the protected area.

In Lao PDR, the forest is still used by minority people to provide building materials, fuel, food, medicines and even poisons. In China, as in many part of the world, the traditional knowledge of how to use the forest is dying out, partly because young people are not interested, and partly because the older generation is no longer allowed to collect in the natural forests, which are now mostly in strictly protected nature reserves. Protection is a necessity, since there is so little natural forest remaining outside of the nature reserves.

Our trekking ended the next day with a long walk down the mountain through dense forest dominated by *Lithocarpus* oaks. As we approach the Namtha in its valley, the forest becomes progressively more degraded, then gives way to plantations of rubber as we near a resettled Akha minority village. It seem that the hillsides of Luang Namtha are everywhere being covered with plantations of rubber and bananas, partly encouraged by a Sino-Lao project to replace opium poppies with more acceptable cash crops. The ancient practice of swidden agriculture, letting fields lie fallow for a decade or more before returning to clear them, is being discouraged in favor of permanent plantations. It may not be long before the pressures on the remaining natural forests, mostly now inside the Nam Ha National Biodiversity Area, is too much to allow traditional collecting to go on.

Ultimately, both traditional knowledge and biodiversity are threatened by the same force, the over-whelming, un-opposable rush of modern development. It is not hard to understand why young people are desperate to catch up with the outside world, and no longer have the time or interest to learn traditional knowledge from their parents.

In Luang Namtha “jungle trekking” provides an income to local tour guides and porters, and brings more tourists, those interested in birds, butterflies and trees. Tourists in turn support the service industry of locally owned guesthouses, restaurants and coffee shops that has sprung up in Luang Namtha to cater to the foreign visitors. If the visitors keep asking to see rainforests and wildlife and local minority traditions, it may just create enough of an incentive to encourage Old Khong and Mr. Tua, and others like them, to keep the old traditions alive and protect the forests and their wildlife.
"SAME-SAME BUT DIFFERENT"

by Paul Buzzard, PhD
Kunming

The titular phrase is one Science Director Bill Bleisch and I heard often while in Laos, for example, when our trekking guide described the 70 species of bamboo as same-same but different. The phrase sums up well not only the laid-back nature of Laos but also the close relationship of Laos to China. For example, the city of Muang Sing near the Mekong River and the borders with China and Myanmar (Burma) was an important site on the tea-horse trail that continues north to Shangri-la and Tibet and shares many features with China’s Xishuangbanna. The same ethnic minorities and wildlife live on both sides of the border. The Miao minority in China is known as Hmong in Laos, and the Dai minority in China is known as Tai Lue in Laos while the Aini of China are called Akha in Laos. Elephants, Asiatic Wild Dogs and White-Cheeked Gibbons are among many species that roam or once roamed on both sides of the border. ➤
The Lonely Planet travel guide for the Greater Mekong Region characterizes the essence of the “same-same but different” phrase well:

“Laos is different to its neighbors. Where Vietnam and China are intense and entrepreneurial, Laos is the essence of laid-back c’est la vie.…For travelers, Laos apparently serene way of life is a tonic for the soul. It’s southeast Asia’s most relaxing destination, somewhere to shift down the gears while at the same time soaking up a heady mix of culture and ecology that’s fast disappearing elsewhere.”

In Laos, forests still cover about half the country and are protected in 20 National Protected Areas (NPA’s). Eco-tourism (for soaking up that heady mix of culture and ecology) generates more than half of Laos’s annual tourism revenue of US$150 million. I think there is potential for more eco-tourism revenue, and I also think this is where CERS can help. In particular, CERS can help to enhance the eco-tourism experience for tourists and ensure that wildlife and culture are conserved in keeping with the CERS mission.

To assess the current eco-tourism situation and its impact on wildlife Bill and I went on two 3-day wildlife treks with trekking companies operating in the Nam Tha NPA in northern Laos. On the treks we hiked from 8-13 km per day primarily through lowland and upland forests and stayed in simple jungle camps. We braved leeches and ticks but were fortunate to observe wildlife such as Black Giant Squirrels, a herd of half a dozen wild boars, and a muntjac deer.

Our first major sighting was a Black Giant Squirrel (which can weigh up to 3 kg) running and jumping through the forest canopy as its huge horse-like
tail disappeared. On the next trek a herd of wild boars practically stumbled upon us; we had just examined and photographed dung piles on the trail when we heard loud rustling in the undergrowth; we stealthily approached and got good looks of their curly tails before they ran off through the forest. The muntjac was too quick, though, and only our guide saw it, but he was able to confirm the sighting later with photos in the guidebook.

We also saw and heard a variety of birds. We saw charismatic Crested Kingfishers flying over the river and the long, diagnostic tails of Lesser Racquet-tailed Drongos, which could not be mistaken. We frequently heard Grey Peacock Pheasants calling in the forest and found direct evidence of a recently killed male Silver Pheasant, striking black and white feathers. We also heard the “cockle-doodle-doo” of cocks of the Jungle Fowl (the wild relatives of chickens) and even got a close look at a flock that exploded from the brush when flushed. Later, we saw another that hid in deep cover as a serpent eagle circled overhead.

Unfortunately, we didn’t see any non-human primates and didn’t hear the morning duets of the critically endangered gibbons. We did hear an unsubstantiated report from tourists of a caged gibbon mother and baby in a nearby village. The Nam Tha NPA is potentially very important for gibbon recovery, which could in turn be the flagship attraction for wildlife treks.

To improve eco-tourism in northern Laos we plan to initiate a research and training program with several trekking companies. If local tour guides can be trained to recognize gibbon calls and to point out animal sign such as tracks and scat and encouraged tourists to walk more quietly, they can make a better experience for tourists and attract more visitors. This in turn could increase the incentives for everyone to protect the wildlife and their forest habitat, as tour companies compete to offer tourists the most exciting wildlife experience.

I will return to northern Laos in April for a pilot study to set some camera traps, find additional areas of the Nam Tha NPA to study and to observe the water splashing celebrations of the Lao New Year. I will also explore the potential for a CERS research and education program in Laos to explore a fascinating area and an approach to the conservation of nature and culture that is “same-same but different”.
The first experience at the border is not a good omen. With my team, we walked up the steps to Border Post 29, a buffer zone of perhaps 400 meters between both the Chinese and Laos border immigration buildings. I had taken pictures standing next to this Post 29 some years ago, and it is a favorite spot for many tourists crossing the border between the two countries.

Before I raised my camera, two PLA soldiers in camouflaged uniform and machine guns walked up and stopped me. “We are conducting official exercise and no one can take photos here,” said one of the soldiers with a grim face. More soldiers were seated on the ground a few meters away, obviously taking a rest from their duty. The fact that we had a foreigner with us, Dr Bill Bleisch, didn’t help the matter in such circumstances.

If crossing the Chinese border is relatively smooth with standard procedure, entering Laos is a different matter. What seems like a line up to the window is only symbolic. Any hands could come right up front and passed on a stack of passports, usually with a banknote, openly or inadvertently, but always conveniently, slipped between those documents.

CROSSING BORDER IN AND OUT OF LAOS

by Wong How Man
Namtha, Laos

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP:
Border crossing at Mohan of Yunnan. Town of Namtha by night. A monastery of Namtha.
Our cars entered through a different process, having to secure multiple papers, insurance, and fees. Then there was need to spray and sterilize the wheels and bottom half of the cars. There is a form to fill up, but don’t bother with that. Just pay at the hut by the road where the spraying machine was left standing, and you’ll be waved through, without the spray.

Such laxity in documentation and health or pest control has certain significance in bringing about prosperity to a nearby border town. The fees would be taken, but record and actual routine waived, or compromised. I could see that many beautiful and new homes were being constructed near the border. This is due to a much busier border, be it for trade or tourism, flourishing here in tendon with China’s recent economic rise.

In fact, data keeping or the writing-off and erasing of such data can become a very profitable side-line business for many officials. When the record is gone, likewise disappearance of the money paid. No traces, as if some of the humans and vehicles never entered or left the country. The more the paperwork and bureaucracy, the more loopholes there are to manipulate and profit from. With the computer age, the “delete” key can become quite busy and worn at times. But such matter should only be considered a product of my imagination, should I expect to continue crossing such border to a Welcome to Lao PDR sign.

After all, I went in and out and got my work done. Persona non-gratis I should avoid becoming.

Oh yes, I almost forgot the immigration form. Like entering most countries, a form has to be filled out. A column always asks where the visitor would be staying. I often fill in the most luxurious and expensive hotel I know of. After all, writing a posh hotel often receive better treatment and eyes of respect from the officers at the counter. Common sense would tell me that such information is never used or consulted upon, thus a free-for-all blank to fill.

Growing up somewhat defiant, I refuse to go along answering routine, useless and at times stupid questions, making me also an idiot. For example, when was the last time one saw an officer comparing your passport signature. As I often said, if the system respects what they ask of me, I would more than gladly comply. But if the system is dysfunctional or down right archaic, I often buck the rule. Of course one must make sure that he can afford the consequences.

As a motto I often advocate, and used quite a few times, “it is easier to ask for forgiveness than permission”. And here in Laos crisscrossing a porous border, legally or illegally, such mentality seems to apply well.
“Let’s go lunch,” quipped John in his usual quiet voice as he poked his head into my cubicle. That was back in 1995 and an act repeated many times over a two year period when CERS and I had a couple squatter spaces at the Coca-Cola office on the 38th floor penthouse of Times Square in Hong Kong. We usually went downstairs to Heichinrou, a dim sum restaurant where the two of us would chat away while enjoying our meal.

I had just moved back to Hong Kong from the US a year before and CERS was a tiny outfit, with few friends and supporters. At my mom’s home two blocks away in Causeway Bay, I literally slept on the floor for over a year as we began building CERS almost from scratch. Tiananmen 1989 had blown away all the support we managed to muster in the US. Daniel Ng, then Chairman of both McDonald’s as well as for CERS, prompted me to move back to Hong Kong and reorganize our effort, believing that here people would be more sympathetic to our cause.

We had only four Directors, John Farrell being one of them. Despite Times Square wasn’t as hot a property as it is today, it was still a respectable address for CERS to be temporarily housed there, giving us a lot of credibility. After all, to say we share an office with Coke certainly raised some eyebrows. Having both the McDonald’s Chairman and Coke’s President on the board...
carried a lot of weight. Two floors below was Shell China, another of our big name sponsor/patron. Thinking back, it is not your usual CEO who would dare invite a largely unknown NGO into your office. Only a leader with real decision-making power would make such a move, confident of our future success.

Not only I got the use of an office, John and his family lived in Red Hill, across from my home in Tai Tam where I moved into in 1995. I used to hop over now and then for a meal, enjoying the fine cooking by his wife Linda. The two girls, Jamie and Katie, were still young and attended HKIS a few steps away. John used to joke about looking down from his house and seeing our little dingy crossing the bay in rain or storm.

John’s red sail boat was moored in Tai Tam Bay. On weekends, he at times took it out to sea when the wind was right. I got invited along on some such sailing trips, just the two of us. I confessed I knew absolutely nothing about sailing. John would console me, “No worry, you don’t have to do anything, just sit”. Sat I did, and he managed rigging everything even when sometimes the swell was quite high as we rounded off toward Cape D’Aguilar. John handled it with calm as he told me he started sailing as a kid.

John enjoyed photography very much. We often chatted about cameras and photos. We both used the same Nikon brand and duplicated some lenses. In 1995, we went on an expedition trip to China together. David Brooks, a young Coke executive and current Coke President in China, was along for part of the trip. We visited the matrilineal Moso village where CERS had conducted project. Seeing the dilapidated primary school with little to no furniture, John promised, on the spot, to donate a Coke Project Hope School. It was completed a year later.

At the Tiger Leaping Gorge, we hiked to the narrowest section of the upper Yangtze and saw the huge torrent of water plunged through a gap with huge boulders. Few tourists had seen this site in those days when foreigners were not allowed beyond Lijiang. The perilous path was still carved out of the marble hillside. At one point, a large rock tumbled down from above and narrowly missed John. He went through it without panic and joked about it even in later years. Zhongdian, albeit Shangri-la today, was not open to foreigners. We penetrated to the Tibetan plateau without proper permit. To be away from view, we set camp with our tent well hidden from the road. He seemed not too concerned if the President of Coke China be caught straying off the permitted path. I, on the other hand, have always thrived by taking such forbidden forays.

Even after John and his family moved to London in 1999, we met at least once a year when I visited Europe, or when he stopped by Hong Kong. He and Linda even came through Hong Kong during our CERS Annual Dinner. I remember his London home near Notting Hill, as he used to accompany me to the Portobello Market near his home.

In 2008, their daughter Katie joined CERS at our Zhongdian Center during her gap year from college. She dutifully read all the books I assigned on women explorers to China and helped put together a permanent exhibit by that title in our Exploration Museum. Today Katie is attending Wharton Management School. As John said to me, “I don’t know how she got there”. But I knew his quiet influence must be present. Last year John and his younger daughter Jamie visited Hong Kong and we spent a most wonderful day together, visiting my studio at Cape D’Aguilar and even Tai Tam where he remembered well every little detail of the Bay.

John passed away on April 29 at the age of 58, succumbing to cancer. His last email to me was December 29 of last year. In it, he said “Big trips are unlikely for a while, but I can always plan for one,” adding that for the time being he could only follow my exploits vicariously. On my next expedition, I know John would be along, in spirit.
CERS IN THE FIELD

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT:
Condiments and spices from field kitchen. Dr Paul Buzzard and Dr Mukesh Chalise in field with local Nepalese. Campsite on the plateau. CERS guests Kevin Rollenhagen, Wallace Ngai and Li Jianshen dining on HM Explorer. Xavier Lee filming Tashi Rinpoche at 7th Dalai’s home. Cao Zhongyu sitting for ID photo at Vietnam border. Dr Bill Bleisch with tall poppy on plateau.
CERS in the Media

- Geo magazine English edition published an article by How Man about the illustrious aviation career of Chinese centenarian pilot Moon Chin.
- Dr. Paul Buzzard, CERS Field Biologist, co-authored a paper in *Popular Ecology* on Camera Trapping of an ungulate in mountain forests.
- Dragonair Inflight magazine published a lead article on How Man’s exploration endeavors.
- The Hong Kong Tatler published an article about How Man’s multiple exploration and conservation projects.
- The South China Morning Post interviewed How Man for their Shangri-la Magazine with an article “World of Discovery”.
- Cable TV and RTHK aired an hour-long interview with How Man based on his lecture for the Chinese University EMBA program.
- Economic Times, a leading Chinese newspaper in Hong Kong, published a full-page article highlighting How Man’s lectures exploration “Dialogue with CEO” regarding exploration and innovation.
- Dr. Bill Bleisch was an invited speaker at the Eco-Forum Global 2013 Conference held in Guiyang and Libo of Guizhou. He spoke on the international experience with management planning for protection of karst-cave world heritage.
- How Man lectured to the Dept. of Clinical Oncology of the Pamela Youde Nethersole Eastern Hospital in Hong Kong.
- How Man delivered a lecture on Myanmar to the Royal Geographical Society in Hong Kong as part of our annual lecture series. It was attended by Myanmar Consul General Wailwin Than.

News

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- Following a research trip to the UK, CERS has acquired some exceptional early images and maps of Myanmar as part of a permanent display at the CERS Exhibit House in Inle Lake.
- Animation film “Yak Cheese” produced by students of Yung Yau College took First Prize in Australia in the 3D Animation IT Challenge 2013 Competition. This is the sixth consecutive year that the school has been winning awards, taking 1st, 2nd and 3rd prizes in the International Category this year.
- Anne Kao of Taiwan led a group of mainland Chinese artists visited CERS Zhongdian Center and nearby project sites.
- Dr. Bill Bleisch, CERS Science Director, facilitated the entire planning process and compiled the Strategic Management and Operational Plan for Phong Nha-Ke Bang National Park World Heritage Site in Vietnam for submission to UNESCO World Heritage Management Authority.

NEW EDUCATION BAMBOO HOUSE AT INLE LAKE

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Loke Wan Tho Memorial Foundation made a three-year funding commitment as matching fund to CERS latest work on the biodiversity study of northern Lao. Loke’s sister Lady McNeice Yuen Peng who passed away in June 2012 at the age of 94 was a CERS stern supporter for over a decade.

Eu Yan Sang continues its support of CERS as corporate patron, in addition to providing matching fund to our multi-year study on the Musk Deer, and beginning this year joining CERS in support of archiving data on early Cantonese Opera in order to include studying the history of this performing art within Southeast Asia.

Coca-Cola China again supported beverage and gifts for the Lisu Crossbow Festival which took place this year again at the CERS Golden Monkey/Lisu project site.

Shun Hing Education and Charity Fund continues its support to CERS with one of our most substantial annual funding.

Betsy Cohen, Founding Chairman of Bancorp, has become a valued patron of CERS.

The following patrons have renewed the support to CERS for 2013, Gigi Ma Arnoux, Dr Joseph Chan, Ingrid Ehrenberg & Joe Chan, Victor Hsu, Christabel & Ricky Lau, Afonso Ma, David Mung, Daniel Ng, Betty Tsui, Wellington & Virginia Yee, Joe Horowitz, Chote Sophonpanich, COL, Eu Yan Sang and Omega.

A subscription to this newsletter is US$100 for three issues. All proceeds support CERS projects. Please contact us directly if you are interested in signing up. See the bottom of page two for contact details.

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- Dr Joseph Chan
- James Chen
- William E. Connor
- William Fung
- Victor Hsu
- Hans Michael Jebsen
- Anish Lalvani
- Christabel & Ricky Lau
- Danny L. Lee & Amy T.Y. Fung
- Sammy Lee
- Afonso Ma
- Albert Ma
- Patrick Ma
- David Mong
- Daniel Ng
- Dr William So

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- Maria & Giovanni Tomaselli
- Betty Tsui
- Patrick Wang
- Dora Wu
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- Wellington & Virginia Yee
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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.

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