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President's Message

Recently a ravaging fire descended upon Old Town Zhongdian, albeit Shangri-la. More than half the town was burnt to the ground, destroying over 250 houses. Police and government were eager to find the cause, purportedly started by bad electric connection in one house.

I used the word “fire descended upon” with great caution, referring to the age-old tradition of Tibetans spiritual beliefs. From a quiet and historic town I first visited in 1981, Zhongdian has degenerated into a highly commercial shopping, dining and hotel mall with the word “Old” being merely a cliché. Furthermore, almost all such shops, hotels and restaurants are operated by Chinese from outside. The nightly circle dance at the town square was organized and promoted by the local government for cosmetic effect, in order to bring in more crowd, and thus money, to the area.

It may seem insensitive, but perhaps the many Tibetan gods would like to offer some help to the government and give the place a bit of a facelift. Just last year, CERS was informed by the government that they intended to clear about 20 historic houses in order to make way for a hotel investment group from Lijiang to come in. Our Exploration History Museum with six “permanent” exhibits, small theater and library, was located at the edge of Old Town and among those to be cleared.

Having worked in China for 40 years, I understand well that both nature and culture would succumb to development. There was no point in putting up a fight even though we were asked in the first place by the former Party Secretary to help revive Old Town by bringing in some cultural aspect to the area. We made plans to vacate a nicely restored courtyard house that we owned, and was given a meager compensation of 1.06 Million Rmb. I thought it an interesting case study and policy statement of China in removing a museum to make room for a hotel!

The fire spared “our” museum house, being on the edge of town. It also left Eufung’s Karma Cheese Shop/Restaurant, perhaps the only Tibetan shop with unique local flavor, was burnt to the ground. Friends contacted us to offer help, but everyone is waiting for a government plan for the future of Old Town. Meanwhile, to mitigate risk, CERS would divide our very exclusive and fine collection of artifacts into different places, including relocating some to Hong Kong.

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An earthquake in Lijiang in the late 1990s put this town on the map of the world, by being designated a World Heritage site. Today it is like a “Disneyland of the East”, being given warning by UNESCO that the listing may be pulled if no serious improvements were made. May the word “Shangri-la” not just be a brand or a curse, but a blessing for the future. But only if we were to learn a lesson from our past.
The mise en scène is best set by a few quotes from an excellent book *The River of Lost Footsteps: A Personal History of Burma* by Thant Myint-U, the grandson of U Thant, the beloved former Secretary General of the U. N.:

(Morning: 19 July, 1947): “Aung San’s Executive Council—the interim government—was made up of many, if not all, of the country’s most promising new leaders. The Council...decided to meet at the Secretariat...The Secretariat is today surrounded by a high wall as well as an outer fence...but in 1947 there was no real protective barrier...the car that sped in...carrying men in army fatigues...was unchallenged by the sentries on duty. Three of them, armed with Sten guns, then raced up one of the stairways...opening fire immediately. Aung San...was shot first with a volley in the chest...Only three of those in the room survived. Aung San was dead.”

“Independent Burma would very soon enter this world with several of its key leaders, including its nationalist hero, dead, its principal minority (the Karen group) demanding its own independent state, and another nationalist leader getting ready to lead a Communist rebellion. It was not to be an auspicious start.”

(Aung San is the mostly undisputed hero of Burmese independence. This helps to understand why his daughter, Aung San Suu Kyi, is held in such high esteem and why she creates so much angst for the current regime.)
“The Burmese...asked that the formal handover occur at four twenty in the morning on 4 January, 1948...Speeches were given, the Union Jack was lowered for the last time, and the new flag of the Union of Burma was hauled up, the faces of the young Burmese politicians beaming with happiness...A few hours later...the last company of the King’s Own Yorkshire Light Infantry trooped onto the waiting British cruiser...A band played “Auld Lang Syne”, and Sir Hubert, with his wife and aides-de-camp, just like (Burmese King) Thibaw sixty-two years before, walked across a narrow plank and sailed away never to come back. Burma was independent. *The country was also already at civil war.* (emphasis mine)...The Burmese civil war is the longest-running armed conflict in the world and has continued in one form or another, from independence to the present day.” (This was said in 2006-7 but remains true today, albeit under the surface.)

**In an Afterword to the 2008 version, Thant Mying-U writes:**

“I say all this...to underline that Burma is a complex place, and until there is an appreciation of that complexity, international policies will continue to come up unhappily against Burmese realities...If change comes it will not be through the front door but through the back, as part of a changing economy and changing society...Burma has had a lot of bad luck for a very long time, ever since (King) Thibaw’s government refused the terms of Lord Randolph Churchill’s ultimatum (in 1885) and the country collapsed into years of upheaval and conflict.”

Thant Myint-U’s words: “Burma is a complex place”, stuck in my mind as I attempted to organize and summarize my thoughts on what I saw and experienced in a three week trip to Burma/Myanmar. Three weeks? Isn’t it the height of hubris to attempt to render opinions, let alone conclusions, based on such brief exposure? I proceed.

First, those minorities who are not Bamar/Burman; i.e., those who’ve gotten the short end of the Myanmar stick, as it were, prefer to use the old name, Burma. I choose to do the same, for comfort as well as camaraderie.

My observations no doubt will annoy Hollywood’s “Joan of Arcs of the Cocktail Circuit”; however, these thoughts were formed via unavoidable comparisons between “repressive” Burma and “democratic” countries such as Mexico and Ethiopia, countries about which I can claim deeper fluency.
Moreover, for nearly two decades I have been embarked on what I call my “Battered Society Project”. This has taken me to many countries newly emerging from totalitarian dictatorships, societal repression, or ethnic strife as bad or worse than Burma. Examples of the worst: Albania, Romania, Cambodia, Rwanda, Georgia, Ukraine, Turkmenistan, East Germany. I’m not exactly a first-time, wide-eyed American ingénue.

One of my key questions on this trip was: how was it possible for Burma to move so rapidly toward development in such a short period of time, dating in part from late 2007-2008 but especially since 2010-11? I’m told that the number of tourists visiting Burma has quintupled in the past 3-4 years! Yes, the shortage of electricity remains a key problem and, yes, the main feature in front of almost every shop in Yangon/Rangoon is a large generator. But only once or twice was I ever inconvenienced by the lack of electrical power and then only briefly. An even more amazing thing was the wide-spread availability of Wi-Fi, and my travels took me into some fairly out-of-reach places.

It wasn’t long before I had to concede that things were considerably better than I had expected from all the media write-ups and better than what I had seen in other places, especially rural Mexico and Ethiopia. As a sweeping generality, the rural roads seemed to be in better shape, the housing more substantial, the people better fed and healthier looking, the hygiene standards moderately higher, the schools in better shape and the public places cleaner and better maintained. The cars were clean and appeared to be maintained with pride and driven with care compared to the macho road jockeys of Mexico. Indeed, I never saw a single accident in many long miles of travel over three weeks. Never mind that while, officially, they drive on the American side of the road, most of the cars, brought in (smuggled perhaps?) from other Asian countries, had steering wheels on the opposite side! Moreover, the most ingenious concept, not seen in any other country, is that in circuitous mountain areas, often there are two narrow lanes going up and two others separately meandering down. Goodbye to the ghastly head-on collisions common in the hills and mountains of Mexico where a curve is considered an invitation to pass.

It was hard not to conclude that, whatever their socio-economic and humanitarian failings, the military regime appears to have paid at least some attention to the infrastructural needs of the people; i.e., they apparently did not squander everything on themselves. I stress again that this is in comparison with what I had seen in other countries newly emerging from decades of repression and mismanagement--and this includes some “democratic” ones as well.

On the other hand, the new capital, Nay Pyi Taw, is the poster child for unrestrained arrogance and grandiosity run amok. The waste of resources is beyond description, especially in the context of the relative poverty of the country. I was reminded of the grandiose white marble palace/government complex that Nicolae Ceausescu tore from the heart of lovely old Bucharesti in Romania. Ditto with Turkmenbashi Niyazov in Ashgabat, the capital of Turkmenistan. This empty, kitschy “city” with its vast grand (and empty) boulevards, empty buildings and dozens of empty hotels, was built from scratch on what must be hundreds of acres of former farm land. (I wonder what the farmers got out of this.) Indeed, we became badly lost within its boundaries and the irony of all ironies was
that there was no one to ask! There were police kiosks sprinkled everywhere and all were, you guessed it, empty.

I think the existence of a basic infrastructure (except electricity) is one of the reasons for the seeming ability of the Burmese to rapidly ramp-up development, particularly in the area of tourist infrastructure. I was both surprised and impressed by the availability and quality of hotels, etc., in such a short period of time. But there’s another major reason: the people of Burma themselves. They are sweet, wonderful, gentle and resourceful people not yet corrupted by tourism. (Of course they will be. With the regime appearing to loosen things up, Burma is rapidly becoming the destination de jour for Beverly Hills.) At the same time, I was struck by the contrast between my impressions of the people and the unrelentingly blood-soaked history of the country. A read of that history can only be downright depressing leaving a nagging sense of hopelessness. One can only pray that this time it’s different.

But they also appear to have a healthy entrepreneurial streak, aided and abetted by the Chinese, Indians and Thais, among others, especially in the Eastern tribal areas. They have been quick to take advantage of the regime’s newly expanding “stamp of approval” from the world’s major democracies and “activist” celebrities and all that goes with that. Indeed, it is my guess that, in terms of economic growth, Burma will outpace many other emerging countries over the next few years; sort of a coiled spring set free. Among the areas that may benefit most from this growth will be the rebellious tribal states in the north and east; the Shan in particular but also the Karen, the Kachin and others. These areas have been cut-off the most from the world over the past several decades and yet harbor some of the richest natural resources, including teak wood, for which Burma is both famous and infamous.

We had the lucky chance to meet and talk with a Karen logger who has been at this for many years, despite tremendous obstacles, and who spoke English fairly well. He is an example of an entrepreneur writ large and appears to have been operating within the “rules”. He’s both concerned and excited about a new law that comes into effect next month (March, 2014, eds. note). From then on, no raw teak logs may be exported from Burma; only processed teak wood/lumber/furniture. This is a dramatic shift from today where almost nothing but raw logs is shipped out of the country, mainly to India, China and Thailand (a large part of which have been illegal). He expects a flood of outside investment in lumber mills and teak processing facilities in the coming years, creating jobs and retaining more of the value added from the logs for the benefit of the people (in principle, I hasten to add). I’m guessing this also might have the added benefit of pulling more of the industry into the “daylight” by perhaps making it easier to catch and punish raw teak poachers at the borders. Hmm! I try never to underestimate the limits of human ingenuity--but it’s basically a very progressive idea.

As a wine enthusiast, I was surprised--dumbstruck is a better word--and duly impressed by the quality of a few Burmese wines. In tropical Burma? Apparently, there are two significant wineries in the country, both up in the eastern Shan hills at an elevation above 4,500 ft. One is run by a German, the other by French interests. I tasted all their wines and found two--a Sauvignon Blanc and a Cabernet Sauvignon/Shiraz blend--that I thought easily could hold their own in the world market. Both were cleanly vinted and both were made by the German. We were so impressed that we bought three cases and brought them along with us; thus, we did not lack for decent wine the entire trip, something I never would have imagined.

I will close with a few observations on the touristic aspects of my trip. A clear highlight for me was the newly available freedom to travel into the east and north, areas previously sealed off from foreigners, allegedly for safety, but mainly for security and political reasons. For me, this was the “sweetest” part of Burma. When we reached a town deep in the Karen/Shan area,
we were hosted by the Anglican Bishop of the Province, a bright, thoughtful, truly nice man. A Bishop? Anglican? In a strictly Buddhist country? It turns out that, over the years, a surprisingly large number of the ethnic groups in these areas have become Christian, mainly fundamentalist Baptist, Anglican and Roman Catholic, a left-over effect from frenetic missionary activity during British colonial times; indeed, it is said that the large Kachin group in the north, famous for fighting the Japanese in World War II, is over 90% Christian! Luckily, the Bishop had obtained permission from the local military commander for us to stay the night and said that we may have been the first white tourists for more than two decades with permission to stay in the town. I think he was right, too; I discovered how it feels to be of one color in a sea of another color, complete with polite but curious gawkers and wide-eyed, often frightened children. A second highlight was the opportunity to spend some time with my idiosyncratic but dear friend, Howman Wong, exploring the activities of his China Exploration and Research Society (CERS) at Inle Lake. We also had the pleasure of meeting the charming and highly talented businesswoman, Yin Myo Su (Misuu), who runs the Intha Heritage House and Vocational Training Center. This houses the justly popular Cat Cafe and Howman’s increasingly famous Burmese cat house. (;-) Howman is attempting to restore in Burma the nearly extinct “pure line” of the ancient royal Burmese “cat of kings.”) It also is a very well-run, top-class vocational school that trains young people for the Burmese hospitality industry, introducing a more eco-friendly manner. As you might imagine, the demand for such skills is at a premium as the tourist industry expands at warp speed throughout the country, but especially at Inle Lake, a major tourist destination.

Another highlight was commandeering for five days How Man’s snazzy, new boat, the unctuously named HM Explorer. We tried to go as far as possible up the Chindwin River, the largest tributary of the Ayeyarwady River, the water “freeway” that runs the full length of the country (Burma is longer than the distance from Vancouver, B.C., to Baja, California). The Chindwin runs north/northwest out of Mandalay, into some areas which only recently were opened to foreigners. But it was the dry season and that made things difficult. We were doing just fine until the evening of our next to last day, when, suddenly, we became grounded on an uncharted sandbar. When I say grounded, we broke one propeller and two propeller shafts trying to extricate the boat from the sand. Finally (and I can imagine ignominiously), our poor captain had to call for a tug boat. In the meantime, we had to be evacuated and sent on our way by land in, well, a Land Cruiser of sorts. Nevertheless, it was a fascinating and highly original experience.

Finally, the most vivid impression I have of Burma is a phenomenon I have observed throughout the years of my Battered Society Project: While it certainly is possible to crush the human spirit, virtually grind it into the dirt under the heel of fear and repression, the instant the heel is lifted, the human spirit will take root, sprout and bloom again. For the sake of Burma and my new Burmese friends, I sincerely hope that things truly are different this time.
As we finished our first interview, in Myitkangyi Village, we asked for any news of dolphin mortality. The village head and other informants responded that one female dolphin about 4.5 feet in length had been killed in Jan. 2013. He went on to say another had been killed in May near Yallin Village. I moaned and put down my pen, but he was not finished. Another dolphin, 2 and a half feet long, so almost surely a calf, was killed in August in Tha Yat Bin. And another... By the time he was done, he had listed a total of five killings, all in 2013, including two calves. All five had been electrocuted, killed by electrofishing.

We are inside the Ayeyawaddy River Wildlife Sanctuary, a 74 km stretch of river that is protected by the Department of Fisheries in Mandalay. This wildlife sanctuary, already identified by the Ministry of Environment as a highest priority for investment in conservation of biodiversity, is officially protected with regular river patrols to stop illegal fishing and restrictions on infrastructure development up to 1 mile from the banks.

The trip this far had gone smoothly for a change. After arriving in Mandalay from Kunming on January 2, I joined Henley Leung in the baggage claim, who had arrived from Hong Kong via Bangkok. We were joined the next morning by Mr. Aung Myo Chit, an independent wildlife biologist, who came up by bus from Yangon, and by Su Lai Chit, a biologist with an interest in forest restoration along the river. On January 4 at 9:26 AM, we all set out from the sandy quay in Mandalay heading up the Ayeyawaddy River on board the good ship Dolphin, with Captain Myo Lwin Htay, an experienced river pilot, at the helm, and his wife and daughter and young baby in the galley. While mom played with baby in the cabin, we began our visual surveys from the top deck at Min Kun, the site of a massive ruin, the base of a never completed pagoda, destroyed by an earthquake in 1839. Min Kun also marks the southernmost boundary of the wildlife sanctuary.

By 12:30, we had already spotted our first group of Irrawaddy Dolphin, just 19.8 km above Min Kun. Their blue grey shapes broke the water with a whoosh as they gracefully caught a breath before diving back below. By Mr. Aung’s tally, this group included 3 mother-calf pairs and 3 individual dolphins, for a total of 9 dolphins at least. Like nearly all of the groups that we spotted over the next 4 days, these dolphins were...
in a deep pool in the river, and appeared to be fishing, surfacing regularly in a small area. They did not actively avoid our boat, at times approaching to within 10 meters, but did appear to stay below longer when other boats passed quickly through the area. Thanks to the keen eyes of Mr. Aung and the captain, we contacted 5 groups of dolphins, with a minimum total number of individuals of 28, including 4 calves. If correct, this would represent over 25% of the estimated total dolphin population on the river.

Since 1996, dolphin surveys by direct counts have been carried out regularly by the Department of Fisheries with support from WCS. Another survey is scheduled for 2014 February [sic]. Until his departure to study in at James Cook University in Australia in 2012, Mr. Aung was involved in the surveys, working closely with Dr. Brian Smith from WCS. Our main purpose on this trip was not to repeat that work, but to explore possible projects in the villages along the banks that could build local support for the sanctuary and for protection of the dolphins.

We conducted interviews of village leaders and fish contractors in several spots along the banks of the dolphin sanctuary. We were particularly interested in those villages where fishermen fish cooperatively with the dolphins. Dolphins and fishermen have learned to work together to the benefit of both. Dolphin will respond to signals from the fishermen and herd fish into the range of the fishermen’s cast nets on cue. In return, the dolphins have an easier time catching the panic stricken fish that are not caught in the nets. Cooperative fishing has been reported from several villages in the middle Irrawaddy; from Seinpangone, Myayzun, Myitkangyi and Sithi. The river has recently changed its course, however, leaving Seinpangone and Myayzun village inland and isolated from the dolphins. We concentrated our interviews in Myitkangyi and Sithi. We also interviewed several fish contractors who had won the bids for 3 years of rights to fishing concessions along the river.

We had already prepared a list of questions for the villagers. Mr. Aung asked questions in a semi-structured interview format, with Henley’s prompting to insure that we had covered all the issues. In two villages, we also carried out an informal transect survey and mapping exercise of the village.

Villages along the rivers have a mix of farmers and fishermen. Land is scarce, less than a tenth of a hectare per family. Farmers here grow mainly peanuts, and also beans and maize, with squash, bananas, tamarind and mangos in the fence rows. The pale humped Brahmin cattle are ubiquitous here, as are chickens. Fishing for most people is a seasonal occupation, during the peak season of August and September when the river floods. But some people are hired by the contractors to help them catch fish trapped in ox-bow lakes isolated from the river during the dry season.

We watched the fishermen bring in one afternoon’s catch, pulling in row upon row of gillnets stretched across the narrow lake, and at the end of the day, delivering a heavy load of wallago catfish, featherfin knife-fish and carp. This scene is repeated twice a day, day after day, proving just how lucrative the concessions are, and explaining why contractors would bid up to 40 lek (about $4,000 USD) for the rights to three years of harvesting.

In addition to giving us a basic background to the lives of the villagers and the economics of the fish concessions, the interviews also revealed some shocking recent news about the dolphins.
By using an electric charge from a car battery and two electrodes on the end of bamboo poles, fishermen can stun or kill nearly every fish in the water. Electrofishing was formerly carried out occasionally by individual fishermen at night in secret, since it is illegal in Myanmar. It has now reached a crisis. In the past, village patrol teams stopped several of the electrofishermen and confiscated their gear. Now, the electrofishermen have formed a criminal gang, travelling together in 6 to 10 boats. Using gill nets rigged to shock the fish and armed with sling shots and baked clay pellets, this criminal gang began openly fishing during the day. They warned at least one village that if villagers reported them to the authorities, they would retaliate and burn the village down.

Reports from other villagers and from fish concessionaires up and down the river confirmed these accounts. Cooperative fishermen in Sithe Village reported that the dolphin are now too afraid of fishing boats to cooperate with them. We learned that the poachers all came from a group of 14 villages on a tributary of the Irrawaddy, each village name starting with Mwe (snake), named after an important monastery in their midst, Mwe An Do.

The population of Irrawaddy Dolphin in the river was known to be about 72 in 2004, and it cannot be much more than that now. Most of the dolphins were found above the Second Defile, outside of the wildlife sanctuary. These dolphins are believed to give birth only once in every three years, and it is likely that only one third of the population are reproductive females. That means that fewer than ten calves are produced each year on the entire river. Some are killed when they become entangled in fixed gillnets left untended. Electrofishing greatly increases the mortality. If more are killed than are born each year, it will not be long before the population on the Irrawaddy goes extinct.

We travelled there and interviewed several village leaders. Henley and I were a bit nervous; entering into the den of the criminals, but the villagers welcomed us and talked openly. Mr. Aung was careful not to bring up the topic of electrofishing, but one of the leaders volunteered the information that the poachers are wanted by the police, who arrived with a warrant for the arrest of one of them. That poacher has fled. Hopefully the news will scare the others enough to make them stop their activities and give the dolphins a reprieve.

The situation is not hopeless. Local people support the conservation of the dolphins, and the cooperative fishermen in particular benefit from their presence. They try to protect them in every way they can. The cooperative fishermen have said that they would be happy to give up gillnets for more traditional cast nets if they could get financial support for the nets. Made from silk and weighted with lead, a large cast net costs less than 20 lek (about $200 USD). Only cast nets are used in cooperative fishing with the dolphins. Once more widespread, Sithe and Myitkangyi are apparently now the only places where this traditional practice can still be seen. Tourists might be willing to pay into a village development fund for the right to see this unique gem of the cultural and natural heritage of Myanmar.
Burma, or Myanmar as it is now called, always has had some special connotation for me. Firstly, I am from Yunnan, a Chinese province that has frontiers with Vietnam, Laos and “Siam Burma”. My family, especially, comes from an area that for generations had produced traders that did vast business in Burma, involving tea, jade, gems, silk, etc. In fact, our dialect also borrowed some Burmese words!

I remember while I was young visitors and friends of my parents coming from Burma bringing us gifts like salted fish, velvet sandals, longyis, woven ethnic shoulder bags of silk and cotton, rattan baskets, and even Yunnan deli food made by Yunnanese in Mandalay. In fact, Lai Shio (Lashio) and May Miao (Maymyo) are cities that were inhabited by many Yunnanese.

Most importantly one historical connection, the “Burma road,” had greatly contributed to the Allies and Chinese soldiers during the Sino-Japanese War.

Having those memories in mind, I also heard a lot about the colonial influence, like the Strand Hotel that my parents wanted me to see when I made my first trip to Yangon in the sixties. Well, things are very, very different now, and Myanmar has made headlines while opening up to the World in its most basic and original manner, striving towards democracy.

I had the opportunity to travel on the river boat *HM Explorer* last month with a few friends. I chartered the boat trip and was very glad I could see river life from another angle, having the advantage of experiencing the new boat in areas to which big cruisers would not be able to navigate.

**TOP:** The author and her entourage.  
**BOTTOM:** A perfect sunrise.
Howman wants me to write something about this trip and just today, sent me a reminder of my commitment. Well, I am somewhere in northern Norway now, trying to enjoy the spectacular northern lights, nature’s magic, at -25°C, but I will dutifully relate some observations made during that hot exploration journey.

Firstly, one of the agendas, if we were lucky, was to see the playful dolphins in the upper Ayeyarwaddy River. Well, we were lucky; we saw a few schools of dolphins. Each group had 3-4 dolphins playing, frolicking genuinely around us. The Captain made circles just for us to see better. However, I didn't see them ejecting water for breathing and they didn’t emerge long enough for us to take pictures.

Evidently there are still dolphins in many areas without enough information and write-ups. These mammals definitely deserve more attention and protection. The life cycle of the Irrawaddy dolphin is worth some international studies comparing characteristics of different dolphin species.

Sun set and sun rise were great, especially sun rise on the river scene; watching the mist above the horizon gradually disappear while the sun climbed higher. Sun rise started around 6:00 AM in the month of December. It projected such tranquility; feeling the cool damp air, hearing ‘cockadoodle doo’ and seeing children walking to nearby piers and jetties to board crammed motor boats to school.

Sun set was a quicker scene and the tug boats that glide away implied the urgency to quit for the day. Barges full of timber, whole teak tree trunks, were the major users of the river. They were not pulled by
more powerful ships, but were pushed by tugboats, either up-stream or down-stream. Other commodities included sand, rice, etc. Sand is important for city building, and major cities, like Yangon, are in full blast of construction.

The river experience was something quite unique and we got to know the kinds of river life, of local inhabitants, their pace of life and most important, how we responded to the local culture, so that we could understand more of ourselves and accept ‘local species,’ ‘life concerns,’ and ‘spiritual indulgences.’

“Local species” refers to, for example, the flying ants that swamped our boat at night. Every flying ant wanted to squeeze its thin, tiny body through the cracks; and all flew blindly against the window because of the lights. By 10:30 PM they were too tired, and less active by mid-night, but on the next morning, the deck was carpeted by the soft bodies with wings, as if covered by a 6 lb. all-wool Tai Ping carpet.

For “life concerns,” I can mention the pursuit of technology. The crew and staff all wanted to sample the technology of iPhone, iPad and cell phone. Satellite antennas stand side by side with pagodas.

“Spiritual indulgences:” The pagodas and monks we see every day signify that Burmese are not only religious; they attain their peace of mind and conduct life according to Buddhist teachings. The religion is about ‘giving.’ To me, it perhaps is the simple interpretation of Buddhism as a discipline to bring up a child; a religion that is part of daily life.

I can see the crew has been put through some training. They are good at taking orders (perhaps as a left-over from colonial tradition). Whether they fully understand is another matter. Anyway, their broad smiles, and gestures indicated their willingness to serve; we almost did not have to lift a finger. The hand-rail, ‘man-made’ in the strictest sense, was a bamboo pole held firmly between two crewmen. It came about so naturally every time when we boarded or disembarked from the boat, and it left a deep impression.

There is nothing better than to lie around and read a book during most of the time on board. In fact, there are numerous interesting books on the deck. I started on one and, since I did not finish reading it, I selfishly took it with me. Don’t worry, Howman, I will return it in Hong Kong.

I think CERS research into tributaries of the river can help the outside world to gain access to remote parts that have not been polluted or spoiled, with charming stories to tell. I can only see the river in the way it gave me insights to appreciate simple things, gifts from nature, and historical reminiscence that were ushered into my imagination.
A SURVEY OF OVERSEAS CHINESE IN NORTHERN MYANMAR

by Professor Lau, Pok Chi

In 1984, I spent one day searching for Chinese in Mandalay. I failed to find a single one.

In 2013, under the guidance of auspicious people, within the ten days between December 18 to 28, I encountered events and histories crossing countries and centuries, time and space. This unexpectedly dense experience exceeded my 40 years of visual research on overseas Chinese. I sincerely thank CERS for the support, and all entities for their trust.

The Burmese Chinese I met were the average middle class. From the viewpoint of developed countries, they live on the edge of poverty. Half of them can converse in Putonghua, while older generations can speak other dialects. Their ancestors migrated to Myanmar for better livelihood, willing to become second and third class citizens. They endured centuries of war, losing families and friends, and repeatedly rebuilt their homes, often elsewhere. Hidden under the chaos that blocks our vision lie their stories, to be extracted. This requires incessancy, reading, establishing a respectable network of people. Then the oral history project, scheduled for March, 2014, can commence.

After Burma gained independence of Britain, socialism set in and military contras reined. Some ethnic Chinese schools, clan buildings and temples were impounded. Burmese endured even worse during the UN embargo. Economic and cultural development in Burma lagged way behind neighboring Singapore, Malaysia and Thailand.

From what I had encountered, the Burmese Chinese lifestyle is far from luxurious. The majority does not have air conditioning in their life. Electric fans are plugged into voltage transformers tied to batteries in every households since electricity supply is not constant. Therefore doors are always open for air circulation. Chicken-feather dusters are a must in any household. It is said, however, that 95% of Burmese Chinese own their homes. They work hard, are self-sufficient and quite content. I speculate that the attainment of such qualities has to do with Buddhism.

Students attending Chinese schools start their day at 5 AM, being there at 6 till 8 or 8:30, then to another school for regular Burmese school education until 3:00 PM. They resume Chinese school at 3:30 PM. English tutoring begins at 6. Home for dinner around 7:30, they do homework before bedtime. Imagine the hardship on parents. Some in America would
call it abuse. As my 100-year-old friend, Moon Chin, would say; “I’d be hollering bloody murder!” Then the extra lessons: tai qi, calligraphy, exercises, computer, orchestra, dragon lion dance – more -- Buddhist and ancestral worship, Qingming, September 9th grave sweeping and Winter solstice, on and on with Chinese traditions. Then the Burmese Water Festival and the emerging holidays of Christmas, Valentines and Easter. Somehow, my American life feels monotonous and lost.

Times are changing. Family clans and societies are fading. Some had to make special arrangements just to get the doors of the clan hall open. Spider webs are abundant. Dust is so thick that one can write text messages. Light is dim. Things fall apart and are deserted. The exceptions are Yunnan and Fujian societies; each maintains a ceremonial banquet hall, parking, basketball court, and temple. Fujian society has a school with two 6-story buildings and a full service daycare center. Yunnan society has a lecture halls, a coffin factory (about 180 in stock) and funeral service hall.

I wonder if native Burmese would be jealous if they knew, calling for another uprising in the future.
I’d like a window seat,” I demanded to the agent as I checked in for my flight. “Every seat is a window seat,” the agent snapped back. Soon I walked out to the tarmac where a small plane was parked waiting. It was a well-used plane, a Dornier 228, something I knew familiarly as STOL, meaning Short Take Off and Landing type of airplane. Narrow as the plane was, indeed all 19 seats had a window next to the passenger. I’ve only flown private jet with such configuration.

As the twin propellers revved up, I could hear the high-pitch engine noise next to me and some small forward jerks. The pilots must have kept the brakes on hard, waiting for the right moment to release it. Momentarily the plane pulled off with a bigger jerk, and shortly thereafter we were airborne. Out the east coast of Taiwan, the intermittent clouds were hanging low. I was told this entire month had seen rain, all the way from Taipei to the coast here in Taitung. For the last two days before I took my flight, no plane left the airfield for the islands due to bad weather condition. The sun must be shining on my behalf just as I arrived.

For a small plane, the turbulence could be felt vividly, jostling us a bit up and down as we glided out to sea. I looked down at the ocean and saw the chopping white surf, in between some shades of cloud. I quickly leaned forward and took some pictures of the receding coastline of Taitung. There was no door separating passengers and the cockpit. It was a rare treat to see how the pilots were handling all the controls. Even the center piece radar was visible to my view since I had Seat Number 2C, barely two rows from the open cockpit. The seats were packed full.

Just as I wanted to lay back and enjoy this short ride, I felt a hand at my back. Pulling forward quickly, I turned and looked. There it was, a slender hand of some lady seated behind me, grabbing my backrest tightly to stabilize herself. Perhaps more to stabilizing her mind than her body, she must have never flown on a small plane. While I took this as a joyride to heaven, she must have taken it as a daredevil journey to hell.

Soon I could see the radar in the cockpit showing a tiny speck of an island, rather colorful as far as such digital images are concerned. We had been airborne less than twenty minutes though it must
have felt like an hour, or more, to the lady behind me. Turning and banking the last corner next to the green hills, the plane lined up with the short and narrow runway before letting down. More turbulence hit the plane, as ocean wind hitting the mountain must constantly make waves in the air. Looking down I could see real waves hitting some big rocks along the coastline.

A tiny airport Lanyu, or Orchid Island, has. The plane parked about a hundred meters from the main building and we disembarked. Once inside, I could see a digital machine next to the exit door. Above in large and moving digital display was the current radioactive discharge level at Lanyu. A monitor showed a picture of a factory-like plant where Taiwan dispose of its nuclear waste. Several indices next to the picture displayed in decimal point reading of radioactivity at the entrance, exit, and main building of these premises. I assume it is supposedly reassuring to visitors like myself, that today the overall reading was at 0.0276 uSv per hour, whatever that index meant to us laypersons.

A guy in flip flops held up a sign with my name. He was from the hotel I booked. A group of Taiwan tourists squeezed into his waiting van. The driver, the flip flop guy, gave me the key to a motorbike standing next to the van. He knew I wanted to rent a bike. His van won’t start, so I had to wait to follow him to the hotel. Soon another guy appeared in a bike, fiddled under the hood a bit, and off we went.

Less than half a kilometer out, my bike coughed and choked before the engine died. That’s when I noticed the gas tank was empty and the red light was on. I waved frantically and the van stopped. Not for me, but the van too, had broken down again. The guests were asked to walk the short distance to their hotel by the coast. I somehow got the engine started again and coughing its way to stagger for the last 400 meters to my hotel.

A metal framed hotel that it was. Two storied and I was given my key to an upstairs room. From the outside several rooms had its window broken and with frames hanging outside. And it dared call itself a Resort. Well, I didn’t come for a vacation, so be it. After all, I had the entire “hotel” to myself. The other group was staying somewhere else nearby. I had worried about winter weather off an island and motor biking around, so I had brought lots of warm clothes and even thermal wear, including two thin down jackets. But people were wearing T-shirts and Polo shirts around. Such extra clothing came in handy as I laid them nicely on my bed on top of dirty sheets. They would serve as my bedding, and the jackets as my blanket.
The owner/manager of the hotel siphoned a little gas into my motorbike, gave me a tiny map and directions, and off I went to the only gas station on the island. But this was not to be, half a kilometer out and the bike choked again. There was something wrong with this bike and I went back to the hotel and insisted on an exchange. Thus ended my motorbike episode when I finally cruised off to the gas station with another dilapidated bike.

With the ocean breeze on my face, I suddenly felt half my age. More accurately one-third my age, as I used to ride a motorbike while attending college when I was about twenty years old. At the time, I had an odd Austrian Puch motorbike, with two pistons yet only one spark plug. While I no longer have the body of a 20-years-old, my mind could still do some magic of transformation. That freedom feeling was beyond words as I whisked around Lanyu Island. The pigs, goats, chicken, and even the people felt part of the natural scenery.

Approximately 2400 indigenous Tao people live in Lanyu. At Yeyin and Dongqing, two villages facing the east, their underground traditional houses could still be seen. I woke up at 5:30am, drove off from my “hotel” at 6:15, and arrived there to observe the final sunrise of the Year 2013. As they say here, the sunrise here in Lanyu is the earliest for any place within Taiwan, or when they feel like inflating themselves, the Republic of China.

Just as the sun hit the first layer of clouds and painted a most wonderful mosaic in front, I stopped by a tiny shed, Moses Breakfast Cafe, operated by Hsieh Ching-kwan and his wife at YeYin Village. School kids were crowding the counter to buy their breakfast sandwiches to take along to school. Facing the ocean, I sat with my breakfast tea and a special egg roll that the mom and pop of this shed prepared for me.

Here at Lanyu by the ocean, there is always a big sky, and a big ocean. To have a tiny shed in a tiny piece of land in a tiny island feels like you
To own the whole world. After all, that big sky and ocean are just like the front yard of the little house. Wrapping up my thought for the year, I could not help but reflecting also on how tiny some land-grabbing people are, when compared to the sky and ocean right in front of me here in Lanyu. With such wonderful scenery, it seemed almost obscene to think of these mundane and irredeemable souls. But then, the natural world, beautiful as it is, has always been spoiled by us, people.

To end my 2013 on a positive note, let me transform myself to 25 years ago, when I visited an isolated Lisu village by the border of Yunnan and Myanmar. The Christian pastor led in singing their hymn song, Auld Lang Syne. Remote as they were, their spiritual belief thrived and permeated them with joy and happiness. Period.

Enjoy.
http://youtu.be/vW735EGvEPw
Come back at five in the afternoon and I will bring him out for a bath,” said Chen Fang-mei. Chen was referring to Bambi, a deer she kept in a tiny wooden hold next to her shop. And her shop is named Bambi, selling dried deer jerky. Walt Disney must be turning in his grave!

Indeed her website reads www.deerbambi.com.tw in case anyone is curious to find out more about her product line. Bambi is located at the end of an old village next to the airport of Lu Dao, meaning Green Island, but also phonetically same as Deer Island. It is thus at times nicknamed since some deer used to roam this island off the east coast of Taiwan. My flight here from Taitung took just 15 minutes in a small plane.

Perhaps once upon a time there were deer. Chen even had a small deer head, what appeared to be some kind of Musk Deer with two exposed fangs on the mouth, displayed at her counter. I drove a motorbike around the entire island and did not see any deer farm, nor did I feel there was much deer habitat left. I suspect the deer meat must be imported to satiate tourist demand once the name and the product were stuck with the island.

At my usual joint for breakfast, Su Rui-chuen was working the grill on a sausage egg burger for me. Su is 37 and as a child saw her parents raising five deer. But soon the work was too hard and labor intensive to be worth the yearly antler harvest and they, like others, slaughtered their deer. Today the deer meat Su has in her menu is from meat brought into the island. She did admit to some wild deer roaming the hills and there are specialized guides leading tourists to view them at night.

Quiet during the winter months, summer would see Taiwanese tourists swarming the place. I saw hundreds of motorbikes lining the pier where the ferry boat would call as port. With a tiny airfield servicing small STOL planes and with few flights, almost all tourists arrive by boat.

Rising on a hill next to the airfield is Lu Dao Lighthouse. Long closed to visitors and wrapped in mystery, it recently got a facelift of new white paint before being opened up to public beginning September 1, 2013, exactly four months ago. It was first built 75 years ago as a gift from America, following the rescue of over 500 passengers of the luxury liner President Hoover which struck a shoal along the coast here in 1937.
Lu Dao is barely 33 kilometers off Taitung’s east coast. At its longest is 3 kilometers and widest at 2 kilometers. It was formed by volcanic eruption thus the exposed rocks along the shore are black and looked burnt. While the west coast of the island has now been developed into a tourism strip, the north and east shores are still uninhabited and totally pristine. There are many home-stay houses on the strip, as well as some small hotels lining the west coast. Restaurants are plentiful though most are closed for the winter. Next to my hotel is Victor’s Bistro, boasting French cuisine. The many times I drove by, the Closed sign was still hanging. Finally I saw a motorbike in front with the door open. Pulling up to check, a man came out with a cigarette in hand and his Golden Retriever wagging his tail. “Sorry we are closed,” said Victor.

There were two 7-Elevens on the island, one real the other fake, though both had the same tri-color brand banner outside. The real one doubled up as a local cafe with some booths. The fake one is near the Amany Hotel. There were also many curio and souvenir shops. Most are selling deer meat, dried flying fish, seashells or T-shirts. A handful of stores have comic characters painted outside. These comics depict some caricatures in black and white striped prison outfit. Lu Dao is also famous for its prison, once a center where the government exiled undesirable political prisoners. Famous names like Shih Ming-teh, former president Chen Shui-bian and vice-president Annette Lu Hau-lien had all been inmates here.

Lu Dao is also famous for its coral reefs. Many divers come here just for that. Others are here ➤
learning to dive. Everywhere there are dive shops. These days, tourists coming here seem to be mainly the younger crowd, with many lover couples. For the locals however, given there are only about 3000 full-time residents, young adults looking for a match must have very limited opportunities and choices.

I took a ride around the island as my way of celebrating New Year. Leisurely stopping and snapping pictures, even perching high on a cliff to watch the tide advancing and receding, what usually takes an hour to go around the island stretched out to two and a half hours. I was especially captivated by the scenic beauty of a rough terrain on the east coast. Waves pounding the rocks could be heard from my perch over a kilometer away.

The view was so spectacular that I went back a second time early morning before dawn, hoping to catch a sunrise. But the overcast sky soon turned into drizzles and I beat a retreat after staying forty-five minutes watching the ocean. After all, it is no fun being caught in the rain while riding a motorbike.

At port, I observed fishermen sitting around with their lines. But not much fish can be caught these days. Indeed, at the Fisherman Seascape Restaurant, the lady told me that her boss from Taipei opened the place because he used to come often to fish, catching so much that he could serve them at his own restaurant. Today he rarely returns as fish has become fewer, much fewer. With her hands, she gestured how small they have become, from spreading her arms to spreading two fingers to measuring the current sizes. “It is sad that they even take home tiny fish they caught,” she lamented.
She said that Lu Dao has become highly commercialized, not like nearby Orchid Island which she praised with admiration. “The people there held on to their tradition, only taking as much as they need to subsist,” she said. “When they caught fish that are too small, they put them back into the ocean. When they got a bit too much, they share it with others,” she added. “Some of their rituals are very secret and very old, like during funeral services. Women are not allowed to be present during some of the secret ceremonies,” she kept on talking as there were no other customers around. “During the high season, we opened both floors and there were guests lining outside waiting,” she boasted.

Being alone, I ordered a dish of clams and some sautéed chicken. As I quietly ate my food with a beer, I felt pleased that I had chosen to come during the winter, as it was like having the entire island to myself. After all, I have emptied a tankful of gas in my bike, and the engine was choking a little. I must have gotten my money’s worth!
I woke up at 6 o’clock in the morning, awakened by a dog barking, but found that I had slept well in the Living Buddha’s home. This seemed odd, because last night, a headache due to altitude sickness did not allow me to sleep until late.

This was already the fourth time I stayed at the home of Tashi Rinpoche, the Thirteenth Living Buddha from the Renkang family of the Seventh Dalai Lama. What kind of a person can have such a high standard of treatment? As a logistics staff of CERS I have had the honor to accompany our founder, HowMan Wong, to visit Litang, this center of Tibetan Buddhism, several times in the six years since the first encounter in 2005 between CERS and Tashi Rinpoche.

Tsangyang Gyatso, the Sixth Dalai Lama, wrote in one of his romantic poems: “Oh you white crane, please lend me your wings, I will not go far nor linger long, just a short stay at Litang and be back.” Soon after was the birth of the Seventh Dalai Lama to the Renkang family in Chema Village of Litang County. The Seventh Dalai Lama (1708-1757) created an unprecedented glory in Tibet’s history. As a teacher of Emperor Qian Long, he consolidated the dominance of Tibetan areas and expanded the Potala Palace during the Qing Dynasty.

His first meeting with Tashi Rinpoche had been described by Mr. Wong as a magical encounter. It was indeed a rare chance. In 2005, when CERS carried out the exploration of the source of the Yangtze River, our car broke down in Litang. While we were waiting for spare parts to be delivered to Litang, Mr. Wong led us to visit the Renkang House, the birth place of Seventh Dalai Lama. It was a coincidence that Tashi Rinpoche was there. During a short chat, the Tashi Rinpoche mentioned to Mr. Wong that the roof of his old Renkang House was leaking. Mr. Wong immediately decided to help him to repair the house. Restoration was completed in a few months. Since then, the relationship between Tashi Rinpoche and CERS has been a tight bond.

In many people’s minds, Shangri-la is a magical beautiful utopia; where there are majestic snow mountains and galloping rivers; where Tibetan girls sing songs and serve barley wine and yak butter tea. In the mind of westerners, it is a most mysterious place --- a heaven on earth. There is an advertisement about Napahai of Shangri-la:
Litang is 430 km distance from Shangri-la and it can be reached by two routes. One is to take the Zhongxiang Highway, climbing snow mountains of various sizes and making straight to Sangdui Township in Litang. Another route starts from the junction of Zhongxiang Highway and Garze Township, climbing over Dilong Snow Mountain Pass to Yading and Daocheng Township by way of Langdu. Do not underestimate these 430 kilometers; the road conditions are very bad. We started our journey from 8 o’clock in the morning, and I drove one of the CERS Land Rovers. We drove 12 hours straight, arriving in Litang at 8 o’clock at night. The whole day of driving made me so tired that I almost forgot we were at the home of the Living Buddha. That is, until a cup of wine at the dinner helped to freshen up my spirits.

Tashi Rinpoche is the Thirteenth Living Buddha of the Renkang family, the reincarnation of a Living Buddha from Outer Mongolia. At the age of six, he started practice in a temple. He studied butter sculpture for six years, scriptures for 12 years, tangka for 10 years. His studies included learning under the present Fourteen Dalai Lama in India for 20 years. At the age of 32, he achieved the Geshe degree in India and returned to Litang. He does not look like a Tibetan because of his round face and full head. It would be difficult to imagine him as a Tibetan Living Buddha if you did not look at his yellow robes, because he speaks fluent Mandarin Chinese.
Litang Monastery, also known as Changqingchun Ke’ersi Monastery is located in the northern hills of the county. Formerly it was a monastery of the Black Sect, but the Third Dalai Lama changed it to Yellow Sect and held a ceremony for the monastery when he passed through the place during the Ming Dynasty. With gradual expansion, it became the largest southern monastery of the Yellow Sect in Kham. As the head of Litang Monastery, it is natural that Tashi Rinpoche took us to pay a visit.

Under reconstruction and renovation, Litang Monastery has expanded many fold in five years. It is the grandest Tibetan temple that I have ever seen. Outside is a most spectacular granite floor plaza which is surrounded by a promenade. To the end of the promenade, from left to right, there are three main halls: Zongkaba Master Hall, Buddha Hall and Guanyin Dalai Hall. The building is an integration of ancient architecture with addition of many modern building materials: beautiful glass doors to keep in the warmth, electric pumps and even kitchens equipped with electric mixers.

According to legend, Baita Park in Litang was built more than one thousand years ago when King Songtsen Gampo conquered the Wood Dynasty. He discussed with Princess Wencheng and decreed to build stupas, both to commemorate the victory and at the same time to promote Buddhism among the Kham in Litang County. A stupa was built in both Maoya Prairie and Xinduqiao Town of Kangding County. Inside the stupa, Buddhist scriptures were wrapped with white cloth, colored cloth and black cloth. Because stupas in Litang county were wrapped with white cloth, inside of which were precious religious artifacts, glowing pearls, fire dragon balls and other rare treasures, the grand stupa was named Baibao Ta - White Treasure Pagoda. Later people began to call it simply Bai Ta - White Pagoda. It has since developed into Baita Park, with numerous white stupas in different sizes surrounding the central pagoda. To the right of the stupas, a building was under construction and almost completed, designed to house a huge prayer wheel. It was said to imitate the design of the prayer wheel from Old Town in Shangri-la.

In the afternoon, we drove to the pastoral areas under the guidance of Tashi Rinpoche. The Jinzi Scared Mountains embrace the boundless prairie, a winding river and black yak tents. My memories of this pastoral area are that, as soon as a person or a vehicle came close to a tent, a mastiff tied at the entrance would give a fierce bark. But the owner of the black tent was delighted with the arrival of the Living Buddha. They offered us the best Tibetan carpet to sit on and served us all yak butter tea. The Living Buddha talked with the herdsmen and acted as our translator to help us understand their domestic lives. Homes of the herding people are very simple, and the only home appliance was a solar TV. It seemed that it was from the government. Nothing more was there besides the carcass of a yak, which had been slaughtered yesterday. It had been stripped of its hide and flesh and the flesh split into chunks of beef. The hostess told us that the beef was being prepared for the winter. A 3-year old girl was standing on a pile of yak dung at the entrance and playing with a taught rope which tied the yurt. She was not shy at all; instead she played more excitedly than before. When we left, we helped the family to take their beef back to their home in Litang. This saved the herdsmen a lot of trouble.

Most people walking down the main street of Litang are Drokpa, which means ‘herder’ in Tibetan. Litang is mainly a grazing area in the highlands. It has been known as the “Equestrian Village” because on the street you can see for sale not only ordinary Tibetan merchandise but also a lot of strange horse
tack. Occasionally you will meet a Khampa man wearing a red hair tassel in a hero knot. You can guess from his tall and burly figure, decked with a long knife, as well as from his bold eyes that he is a member of a once-sturdy nation. No wonder there is a saying that Khampa in Litang are the descendants of King Gesar. But whether it is a Drokpa or a Khampa, when you see their hands holding Bodhi beads, you can feel more than a hint of piety from their deep dark eyes and faces.

We stayed in Litang for two days. When we prepared to return, Tashi Rinpoche was also ready to leave for Chengdu on the same day. He told us he would be leaving at 7:30 in the morning while we had planned to depart at 8 o’clock. It was strange that this arrangement was entirely by coincidence. We guessed that there must have been a little divine intervention in it.

As Tashi Rinpoche prepared to leave, we all went down to see him off. All of a sudden, a lot of white silk hada scarves with Buddha scriptures on them appeared. One by one, he put one on the neck of each one of us. He said goodbye to each of us and told us to be careful of all details. He boarded his car and left with a smiling face in our sight. Obviously we were the ones to see him off, but the feeling was vice versa.

By 8 o’clock we were in our cars and on the long return trip. We took the route from Sangdui to Daocheng to Yading, crossing E’chu Mountain and Shizi Gong. By 6 o’clock in the afternoon, we arrived safely at the CERS project site at Langdu. The following day, we climbed over the 4,700 meters altitude pass through the Dilong Snow Mountains, and arrived back at the CERS Research Centre in Shangri-la at 3 o’clock in the afternoon.

Again, I came to the balcony outside the office of the big Tibetan Hall on the second floor of the CERS Research Centre, sitting at my old place in the sunshine. The taste of my first sip of coffee was not the same anymore. Looking out to the Yila Prairie of Napahai, suddenly I felt my heart had been left in Litang.
My quest for the indigenous “wild” divinities of explicit “nature conservation” began in August 1999 next to the Upper Yangtze, in Bengda County, Sichuan Province.

It was triggered by the assertion of a Khampa farmer; “If we take care of the local forest and animals Jo Bo will be happy and bless our community. If not he will be angry and our crops will fail, our livestock will die and we will suffer.”

The farmer went on to describe the role of Jo Bo, the resources and villages he presided over and the geospatial extent of the domain he inhabited. I was surprised that the farmer spoke of a divinity being happy and blessing the community, but I realised immediately that he was describing an animistic phenomenon.

This view contrasted with the symbolic approach adopted by one of his neighbours. She expressed her beliefs in the following statement; “If we take care of the local forest and animals it will provide an ideal locale to “pay our respects to Lord Buddha”.

My Dilemma

The farmer’s statement left me in a dilemma. Jo Bo, meaning “Lord” in Tibetan, appeared to be a “wild” divinity who presided over a “wild” landscape. How could this be explained under the rubric of Buddhism? I thought that the local gods had all been tamed by Buddhism and lost their territories. I thought the landscape had been tamed, “de-souled” (bdag med) and re-mapped (or mandalized) on the basis of Buddhist ways of conceptualising space?

Although I realised I was dealing with an animistic phenomenon, I lacked a conceptual framework to explain it or the nomenclature to describe it. The writings of local scholars did not help much. Animism is regarded as “superstitious” by the state and as a despised “tamed” tradition by much of the Buddhist clergy.

The word “mi-chos” is used in the Tibetan literature to describe the “dharma” or the spiritual path of human beings, but it is a literary term not understood by villagers. Nor did nature worship (rang byung yid rton in Tibetan) explain what I had encountered. Eventually, as a result of my research into western scholarship, I realised that the phenomena was best described as a “territorial cult” and was presided over by local gods. Far from being tamed, either by Buddhism or by the modern state, this ancient indigenous tradition is being revitalized by nomads and farmers as an expression of “Tibetaness” and of territorial ‘place making’ and attachment to the land.

1Animism is predicated on the assumption that spirits exist not only in humans but also in animals, plants, rocks, and natural phenomena such as thunder, geographic features such as mountains or rivers, and other entities of the natural environment.
Following my initial discovery in Bengda I was able to gather cognitive evidence of territorial cults from 86 sites scattered all over Eastern Kham and traverse a landscape that was punctuated by “cairns” dedicated to territorial divinities.

Staggering Discovery

In 2009 I was asked to write chapters in two books, one on sacred natural sites in Kham and one on place attachment in Tibet. For both studies, territorial cults were pivotal.

In the process of writing the chapters I discovered that the pre-Buddhist territorial cults affect 567,000 km² of land in SW China. They exist not only in China, but also among the Tibetan diaspora in Nepal, Sikkim, Bhutan, India and even Switzerland. They are also found in Mongolia and northern Pakistan.

I also established that territorial cults are presided over by a “numina” or “spirit of place” known commonly in Tibetan as a หญิงล่ำ (yul lha) or a หญิงษี (gzhi-bdag), who inhabits a domain, often the upper part of a mountain, characterized by ritual protection and explicit nature conservation.

I was staggered to discover that, although there appeared to be 567,000 km² of ritually protected sites in SW China, they were not recognized nationally or internationally even though they are examples of explicit nature conservation. I am unsure if the lack of recognition is due to monocultural myopia or just an oversight, but one of my aims since has been to address this shortsightedness. Firstly, however, I had to establish the facts and be sure that the traditions and practices that underpin territorial cults were still on-going.

A bio-cultural Audit

During the summer of 2013 CERS provided me with an opportunity to conduct a bio-cultural audit of the Yuben Valley in the Kawakarpo Mountains and examine the geospatial distribution of territorial cults in eleven villages in Zhongdian County.

I was able to establish that 60% of the Yuben Valley is ritually protected. The upper slopes of six snow mountains are dedicated to and inhabited by territorial divinities (gzhi-bdag) and are largely undisturbed. Grazing is permitted on three forested mountains although they are “doubly protected” from any other disturbance because their upper slopes are inhabited by a gzhi-bdag and they are “sealed” (或 ri-rgya) by a Buddhist Lama (from Deqin).

The domains of the gzhi-bdag divinities in Yuben Valley appear to be refuges of biodiversity (both alpine and temperate) with recognized geospatial extents. There is even evidence of volunteer patrols in Yuben and the Kawakarpo range by local people who seek to protect the environment.

It appears that eco-spiritual wisdom and the protection of ritual territory is still being passed from generation to generation. I am concerned, though, that the transfer of indigenous wisdom and culture is being undermined by tourism, globalisation, remote formal education, the “closure” of a monastery and the introduction of a possible road. Until recently Yuben had a viable school and the school master still lives in Yuben, but now students must travel a long distance to town to attend a new boarding school. Such is the cultural erosion in Yuben that it took me a week of persistence to discover that the “Glacial Lake” known as zing hú in Chinese is known in Tibetan as “Quiet Residence” or shì bá gnas ma. Several Han Chinese tourists in Yuben commented that the Tibetan tour guides in Shangri-la were ignorant of their own culture.

In Yuben topocosmic harmony with the gzhi-bdag appears to be maintained by self-regulation and lay rituals. No priests or lamas are involved in incense (bsang) burning or chanting of scripture (bsang yig), which are conducted by ▶
the entire community on the 15th June and 15th July, and by individuals on the 11th and 15th of any month.

A number of people in Zhongdian County mentioned the role of a “Cangba” as an intermediary between the villagers and their divinity. I am unsure if the Cangba is a deity medium, somewhat like a shaman, and if the divinity actually “descends” on them.

In contrast, mountain sealing (ri-rgya) appears to be associated with Tibetan Buddhism and areas close to holy mountains (gnas ri). Although the practice is found throughout the Tibetan world it is not often associated with territorial cults. I am not sure how much longer the three mountains in the Yuben Valley will remain sealed, as the lower slopes are becoming contested as potential sites for cutting timber for hotel construction.

Territorial cults appear to be widespread throughout the Tibetan world on the basis of a review of the literature and my own observations. Of eleven villages I visited in Zhongdian County, most had three mountains dedicated to territorial divinities, with some domains up to 60km in linear extent.

The domains of territorial divinities are generally recognized as biodiversity “hotspots” even though a number of these sites in Zhongdian County are still recovering from tree felling during the Cultural Revolution and during the 1980 and 90’s. As a result of this past disturbance there are not always noticeable differences in biodiversity between the domains of the divinity and adjacent land. Several interviewees in Zhongdian County, however, mentioned the presence of “nabi” or tufted deer in the domain of a divinity.

Nabi are a good indicator for biodiversity because they are often hunted or caught in snares set for other animals.

As a footnote I should point out that sacred natural sites are not always protected. Sacred can equally apply to sites that are unmanaged or even over-exploited with little biodiversity.

It is ironic that when I started my quest in Bengda I had gone there to explore ecotourism in the context of a protected area recognized by the World Conservation Union, IUCN. In reality it was just a paper park created by outsiders without reference to the local people, who had no idea it even existed. Conversely IUCN ignored the presence of a ritually protected territory that was an exemplar of biodiversity.

Ways must be sought to enable outside interests to build on local examples of nature conservation, rather than ignoring them.

Territorial cults need to be recognized because they are part of the cultural heritage of the Tibetan lay people. They address “Tibetanness”, ethnic identity, community cohesion, attachment to place and biodiversity.

International protection should be provided for the ritually protected domains of the territorial divinities that are examples of explicit nature conservation.

Tibet’s wild landscapes and wild divinities cannot be ignored if we are serious about viable exemplars of earth-care and the enhancement of bio-cultural diversity in the 21st century.
"You have anything fragile," asked the lady at the airport counter in Kunming. “Yes, right here,” I answered while pointing my finger at Moon Chin behind me. “He is 100 years old and traveling with me to Burma," I articulated. I used “Burma” rather than Myanmar as Moon is dated from that age, better qualified as that vintage, before the British left and Burma had her independence. Last time he was in Burma was 1946, almost 70 years ago.

Before that, he flew his plane throughout China for over a decade, including back and forth between China, Burma and India during the War. Somehow word got around that there was a 100-years-old Captain on board the China Eastern flight from Kunming to Mandalay. As soon as we were on the ground, the young Chinese pilot and co-pilot rushed over to ask for Moon’s signature, and invited him on a tour of the modern cockpit.

Checking in with 13 pieces of luggage totaling 125 kilos at the airport counter is an understated trip for us. At times we carry over 200 kilos. After all, supplying equipment for work in Myanmar, a country just opening up, can be a logistic nightmare. Much of what is considered sundry can become a rare commodity in that country, especially upcountry where it is remote and with few roads. Thus our special mode of travel, by constructing and outfitting our own exploration boat, allow us to work ahead of changes to a fast-changing country. It is interesting to note that during the War, Burma was considered a land of plenty, when supply for resistance went the other way, from Burma to China. »
But this time, we have a special piece of luggage, a folding wheelchair, just in case. Also traveling with us is Wunna, a Burmese doctor, again just in case. Moon can still walk reasonably well, despite his senior age. At home, he gets on his treadmill every morning for a 1.5 miles walk, fast walk, that is. Though he carries a cane, it is more cosmetic than for use. He often walks ahead of his cane. Just about all his teeth are original, likewise his brain, sharp as a nail. A few months ago, he was still driving, from his home in San Francisco to Los Angeles. He doesn’t look his age, nor act his age. Inquisitive as a child, he is curious about everything around him. Hanging from the ceiling of his house are many airplane models, all of which he has flown, not as a passenger, but as Captain.

A centenarian needs no CV, and for someone like Moon, too long to list. Suffice to say he flew in China since 1933, pioneered passenger flight over the HUMP, was first to cross the Karakoram from Xinjiang to India, flew Chiang Kai-shek and Madame Chiang to Lanzhou, Qinghai, Urumqi and further beyond, evacuated General Doolittle out of China after the Raid of Tokyo, and founded two airlines after the War, one still in operation in Taiwan today. Moon has been longing to return to Burma, and I thought traveling at 100 is a good round number of choice, and of luck.

Moon’s War year’s memory stuck. He had repeated to me many times that Inle Lake was one long lake in the summer, and became two lakes during the winter dry season. He should know, seeing it from high up in the air. Curious as he was, and still is, he once flew off course in order to have a look at the famous ruby mine of Mogok, from above. The military in charge radioed headquarters and instructions were passed down quickly, “Don’t let that guy fly around here again.” Moon must have used his plane to “buzz” the mining camp.

Looking at a map of upper Burma, Moon pointed at the town of Lashio, which had, and still has, a sizable Chinese community. “You know, they used to have an airplane factory there, assembling the Loening plane.” Moon is probably one of the very few pilots remaining who had flown such early airplane of the 1930s, an amphibian which could land on water. The open cockpit was above the plane with maybe four passengers sitting below deck.

“The only time I have slept in a bath tub was in Lashio,” Moon remembered with a chuckle. “We flew in with a family evacuating from the fighting, and the couple had a tiny baby with them. There was no hotel and we landed in the evening, as onward there was no landing light in Calcutta, so we were stuck. I had a room but decided to give it up to the family and I myself ended up sleeping inside the bathroom tub.” A very considerate Captain Moon indeed was.

“In those days, us pilots wear side-arms, pistol that is,” continued Moon while pointing to an old picture of him in my book. I knew some of those Cowboys preferred revolvers. “Mine was given to me by Dai Li, the KMT intelligence chief,” Moon whispered
into my ears. Dai used to single out and track down traitors who collaborated with the Japanese, and order their execution, or assassination. “When we go to restaurants or bars, they would take away our guns at the entrance, just in case we have a drink too many and went a bit crazy,” Moon qualified with a laugh.

We had a wonderful three-day cruise on the CERS boat, HM Explorer. During the entire time, I was entertained by many old stories, which our new associate Professor Lau Pok-chi recorded on film. Moon’s wonderful sense of humor kept the trip very lively. “Seventy years ago, it was just the same,” quipped Moon with his fingers pointed at a bullock cart as we parked our boat along the bank. On the matted canopy of the cart was painted “taxi”. “Hey, it has a twin engine,” Moon added with a smile. The cart was pulled by two oxen. In just a moment, he added, “seems like the guy had pulled the engines out”, just as the oxen were unbridled and grazing next to the cart.

Later we spent three more wonderful days at our CERS site at Inle Lake. At the Inle Princess Resort, we walked by a large kiln used to bake pottery for the resort. Prof Lau quipped to Moon that it would be great to use for roasting a pig, favorite dish for us Chinese. With his usual short and quick reply Moon said, “You get in there”. Humor at 100 must keep the mind young.

Speaking of young, I told Moon that I too have learned some humor from him, as related to his old friend Jack Young. We are planning a small reception for Moon to meet CERS friends once we get back to Hong Kong. I have the intention of inviting also his former War time co-pilot Jack Young. Jack later became full pilot, and was among those who defected with 12 airplanes from Hong Kong to the PRC in November 1949. Fortunately for him, he stayed only for two months and decided to return to Hong Kong. The fate of some of those early patriots did not fare too well over the next several decades, especially during the Cultural Revolution. Jack now lives in Montreal, but usually come back to Hong Kong during the long winter. By coincidence, Jack Young, a Chinese like Moon, is also 100 years old, just a few months behind Moon. “I will introduce him as Jack Old,” I told Moon.

As we finished a sumptuous dinner prepared by our local partner Misuu in honor of Moon, we walked out into the chilly night. Moon looked full and contented from his supper. I looked up and for this night, the 17th of December, there was another full moon in the sky. “How wonderful, two full Moons on the same night,” I remarked to Moon. He laughed out as I recorded this special moment with my camera!
CLOCKWISE FROM TOP:
The Hsing Yun Life-time Achievements Award was given to Wong How Man on December 1, 2013. This is the first time this prestigious award was given to a Chinese outside of Taiwan. Master Monk Hsing Yun handed the award in front of a gathering of 2000 guests in Taipei.

CERS hosted Mr Stephen Urquhart, President of Omega, at our HK Hok Tsui Studio.

CERS hosted Christopher Eisgruber, President of Princeton University, during his visit to HK. Joining him is CERS Advisor William Fung who is a trustee of Princeton.

CERS hosted former HUMP pilot Captain Moon Chin's return visit to Burma. A reception for 100-years-old Moon at the Helena May Club was joined by another centenarian pilot Captain Jack Young.

Aung Myo Chit, an experienced Burmese biologist, joined CERS as an Associate and began collaboration with Dr Bleisch on the Irrawaddy dolphin and other wildlife of upper Myanmar.

Prof Lau Pok-chi joined CERS as an Associate and began working on the contemporary history of Chinese communities in upper Myanmar. Prof Lau recently retired from Kansas University.

On December 9, 2013, Dr Bill Bleisch gave an invited presentation about participatory tracking of management effectiveness for protected areas at an international workshop held in Qiao Jia County Yunnan hosted by the Yunnan Provincial Department of Forestry.

Franziska Weiser joined CERS as a consultant, conducting wildlife biology in northern Lao PDR for our long-term study of hunting and ecotourism there.

Su Hlaing Myint, a Burmese field biologist, joined CERS as our first staff in Myanmar to spear head our work on the Irrawaddy and Chindwin Rivers.

Will Ruzek, GIS and remote sensing expert, will again join CERS on expedition as well as preparing new maps of our various sites, including Shek O in HK.

Several CERS friends and supporters sailed on the HM Explorer during recent months. Among them are Moon Chin, Don Conlan, Dora Wu, Cheung Man Yee, Derrick Quek and Zhengyu Huang.

How Man delivered multiple lectures during the last quarter of 2013 and first quarter of 2014. These include speaking to the Young Presidents Organization (YPO) Bangkok Chapter, the HK Rotary Club Causeway Bay Chapter, the Jebsen Company in Shanghai, over 800 students of the HK Marymount Secondary School, as well as in Yangon at a private gathering.

An in depth interview with Bill Bleisch about the Ailao Shan Trail was featured on the Wild China Explorer Grant website and blog.

Irrawaddy, a respected magazine on Myanmar, published two articles related to CERS projects, one on the reintroduction of Burmese Cat to Myanmar and the other on Captain Moon Chin who flew the HUMP and the last evacuation flight out of Myitkyina during the War.


CERS IN THE MEDIA

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Fu Tak Iam Foundation made a two-year grant to CERS related to education.

Loke Wan Tho Foundation continued its support for a second year of a three-year grant.

Dora Wu, a long-time friend of CERS, pledged HK1M over the next five years.

Chote Sophonpanich is CERS’ first patron from Thailand and recently attended our annual dinner in Hong Kong.

Zhengyu Huang became our newest patron and visited CERS field sites in Myanmar.

Ester Goelkel, and their family’s Moritz Foundation, has been a major supporter of CERS for many years. Beginning 2014, they pledged to double the amount of their giving.

Wayne Tam, a collector of Second World War era artifacts, donated many valuable items to CERS for display in our soon-to-be-open Exhibit House in Shek O of Hong Kong.

HCG Taiwan donated toilet equipment to our project at Alishan in Taiwan.

Hsu Wen of donated her time and expertise in translating two of How Man’s latest books.

After over four years as CERS Field Biologist, Dr Paul Buzzard moved back to the U.S. and has taken up a new position with the Detroit Zoo. We thank Paul for his dedicated service and time with CERS.

CURRENT PATRONS

Hong Kong
- Gigi Ma Arnoux
- 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
- Afonso Ma
- Albert Ma
- Patrick Ma
- David Mong
- Daniel Ng
- Dr William So
- James & Mary Tien

Overseas
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- Dora Wu
- Sonny Yau
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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.