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Thank You

COLORWISE FROM TOP:
President's Message

Daniel Ng, long time CERS Chairman, left us in August 2013. But in some ways, he hasn’t left. His three children, Kenneth, Laura and Kelly, have decided to continue their father’s legacy in philanthropy, and to continue to be a CERS patron as Daniel Ng’s Family. This is very soothing, not only to me, but also for many of our long-time colleagues and board members who knew Daniel well.

Another similar case is Lady McNeice of Singapore, an old friend and supporter who passed away two years ago at 94. Her children decided to continue support of CERS through their family foundation. I mourn the passing of old friends, including Father Savioz of the Saint Bernard Mission of Switzerland, at the very senior age of 94 last year. It reminds me, however, to value my time with those who are still alive.

This issue has many articles, some contributed by our associates, others from staff. One article in particular is by our friend Adrian Fu, who wisely or otherwise, bid at a CERS annual dinner to go on expedition with us to Tibet. He came for the driving thrill and adventure, as he confided to me. But for a veteran race driver to take our Land Rover through such terrain brought even the vehicle on its knees, protesting by popping up with multiple warning signs on the dash board.

A NEWSLETTER TO INFORM AND ACKNOWLEDGE CERS’ FRIENDS AND SUPPORTERS

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A VIRTUAL DISCOVERY TOUR IN TIBET

There are many different preferences when it comes to taking holidays. Some people can go from cruise to cruise and leave their itinerary planning to the cruise operators and their suitcases to the cabin crew. There are those who like to travel in groups for security and company. Then there are those who look for new challenges like biking in Bhutan and climbing Mt. Everest. My wife and I like to combine both. We really enjoy taking 10 days off to a new destination to find out how much we can tolerate each other. If, at the end of the holiday, we eagerly look forward to the next one, then we know either our choice is right or our tolerance level is raised or both. This year we came up with a new idea. We would do a driving tour of Europe staying in comfortable hotels in small cities new to us. Before the trip we would compile information on the net and book hotels and some popular restaurants along the route. It was a success thanks mainly to my wife’s thorough research and our free wheeling approach to travelling. Arguments were few and tender moments were plenty, so we must have mellowed in our old age. That leads me to my latest solo trip with C.E.R.S.

Wong How Man and I met three years ago in CERS’s annual dinner party; prior to that I knew next to nothing about How Man’s work. The party was very informative and I decided to find out more by bidding for one of the trips on offer. Due to various complications it took two years for this trip to happen.

Day one - I arrived in Lhasa late evening from Hong Kong without a hitch. With all those years of heli-skiing under my belt, high altitude thankfully is not an issue. The hotel House of Shambala was a delightful work of restoration, and...
after a good night’s rest we were ready to hit the road.

Having participated in a few World Rally Championship rounds I was not a stranger to off-road vehicle preparation. But what How Man and his crew did to the Land Rovers was truly professional; I knew we were in for some serious off-road motoring.

The drive from Lhasa to our first camp site up north was quite uneventful, done mainly on paved roads with very strict speed control and numerous police check-points. En route we stopped for a delicious supper in a high street restaurant. The first camp site was on a plain running along side a stream not far from the main road.

The team set to work quickly and efficiently. Within 20 minutes all tents were set up and we retired to bed early. It must have been a few decades ago when I last slept in a sleeping bag and, suffering from a mild headache, it was not the most restful night.

Day 3 - we hit the road after breakfast and followed the route east towards Nagchu. As we were entering a politically sensitive region, security was extremely tight, causing many unscheduled stops to have our IDs checked and re-checked. The good news was that the terrain was becoming more interesting and the Land Rovers were taking up the stride, soaking up the gravel roads with big pot holes, some of which were inundated. Soon we arrived at the Cordyceps growing region of Tibet, and the affluence became evident from the big houses and posh cars. After a steady climb to 4,500 m, we found our ideal camp site at the junction of two running rapids secluded in absolute privacy. While the crew was busy preparing supper I rushed down to the glacier water and gave myself a much needed scrub down. All of us were quite relieved after a hard day’s drive over some very treacherous stretches, but it had been masterfully handled by the team’s drivers. That night I found my niche in my sleeping bag and slept like a log to the serenade of the running rapids.

After a hearty breakfast, we hit the road in search of the next glacier lake. After 3 hours of rough gravel roads we saw what we had come for, a lake with floating mini icebergs. It was a relief to be able to get out and walk for the first time to stretch the leg muscles. A piece of natural ice carving picked up from the lake got everyone quite excited, so a snapping session ensued. More excitement was in store. The next point of interest was Bianba, a little travelled spot in eastern Tibet that is predominantly Tibetan Buddhist Territory. The following day’s journey took us through a vast country park with mostly paved roads and well-trimmed forest. It is also a favourite spot for cyclists and hikers from neighbouring provinces as the scenery and road conditions were both conducive. We were now coming to CERS’ home turf, winding down the mountain into a river basin. At dusk we camped alongside a local resident whose herd of cows, pigs, and poultry provided plenty of imagination for menu planning. We spent our last night out in bowing wind and in high expectations for a comfortable drive homeward bound.

It is hard to imagine that in the heart of Tibet there exists a catholic church built by self-sacrificing French priests some hundred years ago. By sheer co-incidence our convoy arrived on a Sunday morning when the local diocese gathered for mass. Having just gone through a major renovation the church was in excellent condition inside and out. The local “priest” (his official title is committee member) was delivering a sermon to village catholic families who were neatly separated by the aisle with females on one side and males on the other. An unique experience for a land dominated by a religious leader.

After our usual gourmet breakfast we headed south towards the Yunnan border. It is hard to imagine that in the heart of Tibet there exists a catholic church built by self-sacrificing French priests some hundred years ago. By sheer co-incidence our convoy arrived on a Sunday morning when the local diocese gathered for mass. Having just gone through a major renovation the church was in excellent condition inside and out. The local “priest” (his official title is committee member) was delivering a sermon to village catholic families who were neatly separated by the aisle with females on one side and males on the other. An unique experience for a land dominated by a religious leader.

The trip was an education for me from beginning to end; a virtual discovery tour. There is so much work to be done in this vast region to preserve its natural resources and wildlife, which must begin with education of the future generations of the local population.
TIBET, NORTH TO SOUTH

by Wong How Man
Lhassa, Tibet

MAIN: High lake of Nima.
INSET: Campsite by high lake.
Kailash is considered the home of Lord Shiva by Hindi and the most sacred of all mountains by Tibetans, both considering it the navel of the universe. 2014 is the Year of the Horse and Kailash’s special pilgrimage year, happening once every twelve years as the Tibetan Zodiac rotates. I was fortunate to make the 2002 pilgrimage, and had been preparing for this year’s return visit.

Disappointment came in stages and varied dosages, like a slow poison killing one’s spirit. First, eight of my foreign friends planning for this trip were denied permission. Next our Taiwan friends were told not to bother. Lastly myself and my China team, were given the “no go” indication in the guise of a long delaying procedure that made any more waiting senseless.

As the government tightened up and refused permission to practically everyone who tried to make the pilgrimage, I wondered if the gods of Kailash were on my side after all. It would have been a most trying pilgrimage if I, at 65 years of age, were to make the 53-kilometer circumambulation of the mountain at extreme elevation, at times climbing over 5600 meters above sea level. Fate at the end saved me from such a punishing journey.

With an injured arm and two eyes recently operated upon, the final decision came somewhat as a relief rather than a disappointment. But we still had to make the best use of the time I had put aside for Tibet. So off we went to northern Tibet, part of the Changtang Plateau which used to be no man’s land. That is, until 1976, when the government decided to move two thousand nomads and their livestock into the huge wilderness, or emptiness, which had been considered by naturalists the last paradise, and refuge for Tibetan wildlife.

The drive north from Lhasa was exasperating, as far as scenery goes. Paved road stretched out into the high horizon, then finally gave way to dirt and rougher road. Now and then, one road would break out into half a dozen, though all would go in the same direction over the scant pasture of the plateau. Spring was only just approaching and vegetation was sparse. Soon herds of domestic yak and sheep also gave way to small herds of wildlife like Tibetan Gazelle, Tibetan Antelope, and Wild Ass. Unlike previous years, such animals were now finally well enough protected for us to drive by without them nervously scattering about in stampede. At times, we passed to within 50 or 100 meters of the animals. At one location we came close to a herd of over fifty Blue Sheep as we crossed a high pass. Their camouflaged color blended well with the surrounding hills. Even a Tibetan fox was caught in my camera at close quarters. What a wonderful relief about the state of situation for the wildlife!

At the south end of Sining Co (pronounced Cho), the second largest lake of Tibet, we spent three lovely days, where the salt lake came to within a few hundred meters from a neighboring freshwater lake, Co Or. Appropriately we pitched tents on the freshwater side and team members were able to fish from the lake. Within one afternoon, we caught 23 fish totaling about 15 kilograms. The fish were mating, with the females laying eggs while the male fish rushed to spray sperm over the mass. It became almost routine as Zhou Laohu and Wang Jian, our two fishing addicts, cast lines and continuously pulled the catch in.

We had so many fish that some were salted and dried on our car roof as provisions for the days ahead.

We had exceptionally nice weather over the two weeks in the field. Even the usual summer snowstorm at high elevation was nowhere in sight. Clouds hung low and water on the lake was almost still. Wind usually picked up by mid-afternoon but generally subsided by evening, returning the lake again into its pristine state. I could see from the reflection that my beard was blossoming. But why bother to shave, as I was meeting no one except similarly scruffy-looking team members. A small herd of female Tibetan Antelope made a foray into the lake’s water a short distance from our camp. They must have been stopping over on their migration route to the calving ground in the north. After all, calving season was just around the corner, before the end of June.

Unlike previous years, we could make a few side trip excursions, now that the government prohibited anyone from buying extra gasoline or diesel and putting it into jerry cans, a cautionary measure ever since self-immolation had become popular in Tibet. Hopefully the situation would improve in the future. But for now, we felt our range of activities had been curtailed. ▲
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as my recently operated eyes took the toll far worse
harder to acquire, and eventually unavailable. These newly collected items
we always felt we must collect now before such handicrafts became rarer and
the roof of the cars. Prices had gone up tremendously from a decade ago, but
dialect, was able to approach nomads and collected some more yak products.
Team member Drolma, speaking fluent Lhasa Tibetan besides Kham and Amdo
during high season, there might be a hundred or so visitors.
inside our large tent, my chefs
The ultra-violet light seemed more acute than ever,
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I hardly visited it. Somehow that previous urge for snacks had disappeared. I
quietly applauded myself for having consumed only one bottle of Coke during
weeks. Instead I had downed several bottles of my favorite C+ beverage,
also a product of our friendly Coca-Cola supporter.
At a remote location, we stopped by one Nyingma (Red Sect) monastery. Around
ten monks and three nuns took refuge in this distant locale with a
commanding view of the surrounding lakes. Faraway as this was, there was a
civilian police guard stationed there, ready to take down registration of our visit.
Our highest camp was a salt lake at 5000 meters elevation. But that turned
out too extreme for our lungs and we soon descended again to take up more
comfortable lakefront sites with other waterfowls. At one lake we saw many
birds nesting, some within a few meters from each other. Bar-headed Geese
as well as Ruddy Shelduck had hatched their young, and chicks were seen
following the parents around. Black-necked Cranes were pairing for their
mating season and it was another relief to see them at times so relaxed about
our close-up presence. Xavier, our filmmaker, was able to catch one pair on film
from less than fifty meters away.
CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT:
Palcho Monastery and
surrounding village at
Gyantse.
Great Crested
Grebe nests at lake front.
Close-up of Great Crested
Grebe in nest. Bar-headed
Geese with chicks.
Tibetan Fox relaxing.
Blue Sheep over skyline.
Tibetan boy silhouette.
Nun of northern Tibet.

would further enrich our already substantial collection kept at our
Zhongdian Center.

By now we had been camping for over ten days and had been
without a shower for as long a period. From Nyina in northern
Tibet we turned south trying to get to Gyantse where a bed and bath
were waiting. There in Gyantse, CERS had supported restoration
of an ancient building, converting it into a boutique hotel for the
future. The structure, adjacent to the famous Palcho Monastery
first built during the Ming Dynasty in the 1400s, was a former
monastic distillery where the monks made barley wine for pilgrim
offerings. Today the restoration is complete and it would soon
be ready for business. Such investment into a responsible social
time into the future.

Gyantse, historically a most strategic Dzong or Prefecture of
Tibet, was the access point from India through Sikkim to Lhasa. This
was the site of the major battle when the British invaded Tibet
in 1904. The Younghusband Expedition carried out a massacre here when, with their latest issue Maxim guns, they mauled down
Tibetan soldiers running away from the battlefield. It was through
this battle that the door to Lhasa was finally opened, the Tibetan
government submitting to demands of the British in opening the
region to British trade and other political interests.

While there were hundreds of Tibetan Buddhists visiting the
famous Palcho Monastery and its many-tiered Kumbum, once the
largest chorten in Tibet, at the old fort we were the only visitors
paying Rmb30 each as entrance fee. The doorman said on a good
day during high season, there might be a hundred or so visitors.
The architecture was very unique and built along the hill that it sat
upon. It has been designated a national monument for protection
since 1961.

Both attempts to reach the Bhutan and Sikkim borders were
disrupted by police roadblocks set up to inspect border permits
which we did not have. What had been somewhat accessible
fifteen years ago has now become a closed border to those of us
from Hong Kong. I prayed that the situation would improve in
days ahead as we turned and headed back to Lhasa. We should
arrive just in time for the biggest religious observation of the year,
the full moon on the Fourth Moon of the Tibetan calendar. Maybe
after that, my luck would turn, and my eyes would begin to heal.

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after that, my luck would turn, and my eyes would begin to heal.
Bienba, Tibet

THE GODS

stood behind him, having come on the backseat of the monk's motorcycle. I felt like a 21st century Tin Tin in pursuit of some mystery, even if it came to nothing more. The monk obliged us, and I could imagine how magnificent the view must be from up there. In my usual style of defiance, I played tough and insisted on going in, but I supposed to be peace-loving and hospitable? Certainly not at this young jerk with a face mask, I answered myself.

Next I opened my file on DL and a series of pictures came on screen of my private audience with the Dalai Lama at his home in Dharamsala. Now those same frozen faces melted completely; their eyes suddenly looked so innocent and meek voice. “No, it will bring you trouble, maybe for a lifetime,” I answered in the negative. At the same time, the entire room seemed suddenly to become warmer. Even the tea served by a novice monk was sent by them to drive us off their pasture. After all, we looked too foreign, with our brightly colored Land Rovers, sleeping bags! And here was this humbug of a monk. Weren’t they supposed to be peace-loving and hospitable? Certainly not, he asked. “No, it will bring you trouble, maybe for a lifetime,” I answered in the negative. At the same time, the entire room seemed suddenly to become warmer. Even the tea served by a novice monk was sent by them to drive us off their pasture. After all, we looked too foreign, with our brightly colored Land Rovers, sleeping bags! And here was this humbug of a monk. Weren’t they supposed to be peace-loving and hospitable? Certainly not.

a population of 3,000 people in Bienba, 1154 were lamas, a staggering 38.36%.

It was literally just minutes before that our three Land Rovers pulled up to the meadow on the edge of a fast running rive, run-off from some massive glaciers. Hidden inside this valley were snow mountain ranges of the Himalayas, cutting a swath across the midsection of the Tibetan plateau. We had just passed the last Tibetan village and were ready to choose a most beautiful spot to set camp for the night. What more could we ask for, snow mountain to view and a glacier fed river to wash both our bodies and dishes before retiring into our comfortable tents and sleeping bags! And here was this humbug of a monk. Weren’t they supposed to be peace-loving and hospitable? Certainly not, or if a special button was pushed.

Soon my computer arrived and I turned it on. Hidden on Desktop2 were two folders I did not want casual onlookers to browse to. One was named “DL,” and the other ‘Karmapa.’ I first opened the file on Karmapa, the highest Rinpoche (Living Buddha) of the Karma Kargyu sect within Tibetan Buddhism. It showed pictures of me attending the Karmapa’s enthronement at Tsuglu Monastery outside of Lhasa in 1992. As an honored guest, I was seated with the Karmapa’s family, including his father, mother and siblings. Once I turned my computer toward the monks, their somewhat frozen faces began to thaw. I could see looks of disbelief and anxiety, as if a special button was pushed.

After some meandering and switch-backs on a rough dirt road, we arrived at the doorstep of the monastery. Three middle-aged monks were standing by the door looking down at the meadow below. They must have been monitoring us from afar. Perhaps the novice monk was sent by them to drive us off their pasture. After all, we looked too foreign, with our brightly colored Land Rovers, to be one of their flock of devoted Tibetan Buddhists. I now had to look serious, though I was tempted to take some snapshots of the grand scenery below me.

Walking up to the monks, I introduced myself as someone on pilgrimage to Kailash, though already turned away by a hostile constabulary, which was deflecting everyone from reaching the sacred mountain during this most auspicious year. To my surprise, one of the three monks looked rather friendly and asked us in for tea. Once we sat down inside a side room on the balcony, I asked the name of the monastery and its denomination.

“Dongpu Tsengteng Monastery, of the Karma Kargyu sect,” answered Sonam Tsering, who was the head monk of the monastery. I knew the opportunity should not be lost, and quickly urged my driver to go to the car and bring me my computer right away. I had a magic card up my sleeve.

While we waited, casually sipping butter tea, I could not help casting my eyes on our guest team member, Adrian Fu. This was his first ever cup of butter tea, more an acquired taste than the English breakfast tea he was accustomed to. But, true to his roots as someone who loved even durian, he gracefully drank it down like a gentleman, and a monk rose to refill his bowl.

It turned out Dongpu Tsengteng Monastery was originally a Nyingma (Red Sect) monastery started by the 13th Rinpoche of the larger Bienu Monastery in 1926. Later Bienu Monastery was turned into a Gelup (Yellow Sect) monastery, while Dongpu became Kargyu (White Sect). All this complex history was a bit too complicated for me to comprehend, but soon my computer arrived and I turned it on.

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Next I opened my file on DL and a series of pictures came on screen of my private audience with the Dalai Lama at his home in Dharamsala. Now those same frozen faces melted completely; and I could see solemn yet widely opened eyes in front of me. I glanced over to the last monk on the bench, our young angry monk, sitting with the Karmapa’s family, including his father, mother and siblings. Once I turned my computer toward the monks, their somewhat frozen faces began to thaw. I could see looks of disbelief and anxiety, as if a special button was pushed.

While we waited, casually sipping butter tea, I could not help casting my eyes on our guest team member, Adrian Fu. This was his first ever cup of butter tea, more an acquired taste than the English breakfast tea he was accustomed to. But, true to his roots as someone who loved even durian, he gracefully drank it down like a gentleman, and a monk rose to refill his bowl.
which had some exquisite murals. Soon the Chief arrived on motorcycle and led my team off to look for a prime site for the night. I choose to stay behind and have a more detailed look around.

In an antechamber of the assembly hall, the monks took out some rare sutras to show me. Many were stained and had watermark on them. “We hid these in a cave under some heavy stones during the Cultural Revolution, and thus they were damaged, though saved from being burned,” said Sonam. “Now we are in desperate need to preserve these, as some were very special to our own sect and history,” he added. I took a quick inventory and found that most were printed from woodblocks, but a few very special ones were actually handwritten. There was a set that even had many colorful images painted on select pages. I decided on taking a more detailed look around.

without much formality and fancy words, a deal was struck for CERS to be involved in funding the restoration. This project was small enough that it would not eat up much of my yearly 10% discretionary fund allowed by my Board. And certainly it fit well with the goals and mission of CERS despite being at such a remote location. We quickly agreed on a few guidelines, such as no cement, and walls should continue being made of mud with adobe-like finish. Some of the old drawings and motifs on the wall should stay pristine as much as possible. We agreed upon using two dry seasons to accomplish this work. Without delay, I handed over the money in cash, and a secular Tibetan, most likely the monastery’s Chief Financial Officer, was called up to count the money again.

Cultural Revolution left a special mark on Bienba, the county where we were. It was barely recorded and is little known these days. In 1969, when the frenzy of the Red Guards was largely over in Lhasa and other major cities, Bienba rose in riots. Conflict between two warring factions, both claiming to be the most authentic revolutionaries, escalated to become a crazed uprising, and the mayhem included killings of PLA soldiers stationed in the area and the murder of many Han and Tibetan cadres. Soon the PLA moved in to suppress the conflict, including meting out revenge to agrieve their comrades’ deaths. In the end, the mindless killing was classified by the government as an “uprising,” as if it was related with events that occurred throughout the Tibetan region from 1958 to 1959.

Next we took a short walk, perhaps two hundred meters away on a small footpath, and arrived at a rather dilapidated house, a small house with a tiny courtyard. Sonam wanted to show me this architecture for a specific reason. This was the meditation retreat where the first three Rinpoches of the monastery had spent time in seclusion, some for up to several years. Today it was in acute disrepair, and they were hoping to restore it such that the fourth and current Rinpoche could use it in the future for meditation. Sonam hoped we might help a little.

I sized up the house with three tiny rooms. The building style was fully traditional. Even the roof used mud over weed branches. There was absolutely nothing from modern days to speak of; no cement was used at all. It would be a wonderful small project to maintain the very traditional architectural style of remote Tibet.

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Like many of our other projects, this all happened strictly by chance. I have often said that, in order to do good, you still need some luck and opportunity. And with this good deed, we even got a prime camp site with a full view of the glacier as a bonus. As I walked back to the monastery, I pointed down the hill to some spinning wheels driven automatically by running water. “Those are our prayer wheels for rain. It has been too dry and the farmers wanted more rain,” answered Sonam. “That’s great. Just make sure that it does not come tonight at our camp,” I replied.

I met Wandeng when I first visited Gongbin in 2004. He was sixteen at the time and proudly told me that he was the eldest child in the family and, based on the local custom, he would inherit the family property. He also expressed a strong desire to rebuild the family’s house when he became head of household, a status he would assume when he had his first child. In the meantime, he said he would recommend that his father have their Tibetan style water-jar cabinet replaced with one done by Jiangchuan carpenters, who are famous for their delicate carving work.

Wandeng’s desire to rebuild is nothing special in Gongbin and is actually quite common in every corner of Tibetan Yunnan. Since the early 1980s, Gongbin has experienced at least three cycles of rebuilding; most families have reconstructed their houses at least twice in the last thirty years. If family resources are not sufficient to build a new house, many households renovate in various ways, e.g., adding a new wing or remodeling the interior. The most bizarre case, at least to me, was when one family replaced all the round beams in their house with squared ones. To enjoy this new fashion, family
members endured living without a roof for two months and spent 50,000 RMB on carpenters, never mind their own labor harvesting and preparing timber from the forest. For those who have participated in all three cycles, every ten years they have collected the timber and the cash to tear down and reconstruct their houses. They are virtually continuously rebuilding. Gongbin villagers’ obsession with their houses has been a puzzle to me since I first set foot in the village. After studying Gongbin for ten years, I have to admit I have not found a satisfactory answer.

I ask my Tibetan interpreter, Dingba, for the number of households in Gongbin today. He smiles at me and says he has to re-count. The number was 64 in 2004 but this new round of building, started in 2006, has been so crazy that we see not only new divisions of households, a typical scenario by which village household numbers increase, but also new conditions rarely seen in the past, like exchanges of land, the sale of houses, and attempts to rent houses to outside businesses. No wonder Dingba, a Gongbin native who knows every villager by name, cannot answer my question directly. This new cycle has also turned almost the entire village into a construction site, since there are houses constantly under construction or remodeling. In addition to the Tibetan carpenters, Han and Bai craftsmen who can do delicate carving and interior work are in great demand. Construction or remodeling. In addition to the Tibetan carpenters, Han and Bai craftsmen who can do delicate carving and interior work are in great demand. No wonder Dingba, a Gongbin native who knows every villager by name, cannot answer my question directly. This new cycle has also turned almost the entire village into a construction site, since there are houses constantly under construction or remodeling. In addition to the Tibetan carpenters, Han and Bai craftsmen who can do delicate carving and interior work are in great demand.

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Villagers do not seem to have a clear reason for their obsession. When asked, one says that it’s “simply what we Tibetans prefer doing.” Although he is joking, it does reflect the fact that accumulating material wealth is an important aspect of Tibetan culture, and a house is the most significant and visible symbol of wealth, just like cars are for people in many parts of the so-called modern world. But what pushes households to live under the constant instability and disruption of demolition and building new houses? It is said that declining numbers of big trees in the forest have spurred many to rebuild, since they worry that it will only get harder to do in the future. But this does not explain why a ten-year-old house had to be rebuilt, and anyway, many villagers are now purchasing large timber from Xiaozezhongdian nonetheless. “Competition” is probably the most persuasive answer. But why is there such intense competition amongst neighbors and relatives who clearly know who each other are, and why is it done in such an intensive, obvious, and grandiose manner? I do know that this seemingly irrational behavior has been closely linked to Gongbin’s engagement with the market economy since the early 1980s. Villagers’ entrepreneurship and economic success certainly fuel this mania. The comparative economic and social equality of today also intensifies internal rivalry, since now every villager is a potential competitor, unlike in the past when competition was aimed mainly toward members of the same class. Even so, these contextual explanations do not really solve this puzzle, though I readily admit we, the so-called modern rational actors, probably do not have clear reasons for our own obsessions, either.

Wandeng invites me to his new house. He is a local official now, no longer the young boy I met ten years ago. His house is located just by the recently finished highway, with the village’s sacred mountain at its back. And I have to confess, it’s a luxurious and very pretty house.
From 2008 to 2010, CERS spent a great amount of money and manpower to transform and maintain 19 thatch-roofed houses in the village. We built catchment channels to divert fresh spring water from the hills for bathroom and shower facilities. A number of experts, scholars and students joined the team to carry out research and to rescue Li traditional artifacts for conservation. We built a dining room, kitchen, cafe, auditorium, offices, dormitories, experts quarters and museum. In the museum, a large collection was assembled, displaying the original ecology of the Li people and their tools of livelihood and production. In the auditorium, we had documentary films produced by CERS and books about their heritage.

In the six years since we set up this Hong Shui Village Conservation Project Site, we have experienced many changes in the village. From the early days of muddy roads, taking baths in the river, and outdated utilities and poor communications, there are now good cement roads and reliable electricity, water and communications. With the help and support of the local government, which allocated a piece of land next to the village for resettlement, Li people moved out of the old village to new subsidized flat-topped tile houses. In spite of this, I still have a gripe about the local government. Since there was no other relevant supporting policy except moving all the people out of the village, all the old thatch-roofed houses were left abandoned and empty. The whole village became lifeless. Without the smoke from cooking fires and maintenance, houses were soon moth-eaten and more and more of them began to collapse. If the local government could have given the villagers a certain amount of financial aid each year, asking them to maintain their thatch-roofed houses, and encourage them to stay in the houses to make some traditional handicrafts, or slightly modify their houses to become farmhouse style B&Bs, this might have helped them to develop tourism business. If a scenic Li folk village can be set up, villagers can sell their handicrafts, traditional food and perform dances to earn income. In this way, much of the traditional culture can still be preserved. As tourism is the leading industry in Hainan Province, the government really should have given serious consideration to establishing a traditional Li folk village.

In December 2013, we visited the Hong Shui Village Conservation Project Site again. When we passed along the road, we saw many trees in the rubber plantations broken in half due to the fierce attack of Typhoon Haiyan. In our conservation project site, four roofs of the thatched-roofed houses were a total loss and three houses were partially damaged. I was deeply distressed by the scene, and also overwhelmed by the destructive power of nature.

How to better protect the primitive traditions and culture of Li people in Hong Shui Village and at the same time to ensure effective and sustainable development? It seems that there is a long, long way to go, but CERS is up to the challenge.
Hang in there and hold on, we’ll pull you up,” Laohu, our toughest climbing expert, called out to me. But his shout was barely audible, drowned out by the loud water rushing by. He really didn’t have to tell me, as I would never have let go of the safety line. Though my feet were having a tug-of-war with my body and hands, I hung onto the rope for dear life. The fast running current was sweeping my legs and feet downriver while my body and hands were hanging tightly above.

I had just crossed the angry river, after pulling myself hand over hand on a safety rope above me. Momentarily, but at the time it seemed like eternity, I reached the mid-section of a washed off bridge. Both sides of this bridge, previously around 200 meters wide, had been washed off two nights ago.

I knew my carabiner attached to the safety rope could hold the weight of over 1000kg and the rope itself could bear at least 750kg, whereas I weighed a meager 70. But the drag from the torrential river was still extremely intimidating. Both Vibram soles of my old shoes, tough to begin with, came off and were carried downriver. Nonetheless, I must try to look tough and undaunted, especially when our student interns were watching from across the bank about a hundred meters away.

Before I tested my luck with the water, we ferried across our gear, computers, mobile phones and more, in water-tight bags attached to four inner tubes tied together into a small raft. Each time, the current and the whirlpool flipped our raft and the “cargo” would turn upside down under the water while being pulled across, attached to a sagging zip line we managed to set up across the river. This same zip line later became our safety line as I braved my way across the river.

If our interns looked at my first crossing with anxiety, there was a second one to round out the excitement. This additional gap of the river to the bridge head on the opposite bank was only about five meters, but felt like a hundred. The gap was created when a concrete slap of cement was washed off from its hold. But for someone having to cross it, in this case me, it still provided quite enough trepidation. So I called up enough bravado and jumped into the river again to finish my relay. As I reached the other bank, I seemed to hear faintly cheers from the watching crowd behind me, imagined or real.

Rammasun had come and gone. Random as the name may seem, it was chosen based on a sequence of names submitted by nations in the Pacific affected by typhoons, used in long alphabetical rotation. Rammasun is a Siamese name chosen by the Thais meaning thunder god. The last typhoon carrying the same name hit the region in 2002. The current super typhoon Rammasun left a trail of deaths as it swept through the Philippines. No doubt it would also leave its spicy mark in the history of Hainan, an island in southern China about the size of Taiwan. Though traveling at a pace of only eight knots an hour, it hit Hainan with a force of over 200 kilometers an hour of wind speed, what Chinese meteorologists noted as Level 17 of wind force (60 meters/sec), the worst to hit the China coast in 41 years.

Just two days ago, we were congratulating ourselves that we beat this storm by hours as we reached our project site deep inside the mountains of Hainan Island. Here CERS had been busy restoring twenty houses since 2007, the last remains of such traditional houses of the indigenous Li minority group, now totaling 1.2 million people. Under a roof we were, but then, these were thatch-roofs. The image of the first encounter of the Three Little Pigs came into my mind. And this Rammasun storm promised to blow far fiercer than the Big Bad Wolf.

Luck had it that our village was well hidden inside a cul-de-sac of hills and we passed the night without a hitch when Rammasun hit Hainan. But the rain was pouring down as if we were living under a waterfall. Before dinner, all electricity was out, and we were told by the villagers that it was cut off as precaution in case a wire shortage could precipitate a fire. About the same time, all our phones went dead.
Next morning was time for a reality check when we went out to assess the damage of the typhoon. It was then that I understood why our village was named Hong Shui, meaning Huge Flood. Gushing water came down the hillside and the village stone path we paved a year ago had become a running stream. The nearby river overflowed its banks and the rice fields were flooded. Some vacated houses within the village, already dilapidated, collapsed because of the torrential rain.

Despite all these events, our students were diligently learning from Dr Bleisch about the biodiversity of tropical Hainan, having just descended from high altitude of the Tibetan plateau. The contrast these two experiences offered was rather extreme. After we saw some villagers electrofishing in the stream, which is prohibited by law, the students divided into two teams after dinner for a debate on this issue, one for and the other against. It was most interesting to see how each team came up with their reasoning. Ultimately, they all decided such matters should be brought up with the children, hoping that they would effect changes among their parents and other villagers.

If swimming across the bridge was hazardous and difficult, that was just the beginning of the ordeal for me to get back into the typhoon ravaged city of Haikou. I must get there to procure an inflatable boat, as well as enough life-vests so the students could cross the river safely when it would be time for them to exit our site in a few days. It took me a relay of five different cars, and a hike past yet another partly washed-off bridge to get into town after dark. What usually would be a three-hour journey had taken me all day.

Late that evening, we drove into a city almost unrecognizable, with few lights and no traffic lights at all. Trees were down left and right, and bill boards had been thrown around like paper sheets. Finally, after nine o’clock at night, I walked up the steps to the reception desk of the Taihua Hotel where we usually stayed while in Haikou. “We do have rooms, but there is no water, no flushing toilet, no air-con, and only auxiliary lighting,” said the lady at the counter. “By the way, there is no way to serve food, and don’t expect breakfast tomorrow morning,” she added. Super typhoon Rammasun had taken out much of the entire city’s utilities.

“Just give me the key, I will lay down now with a warm beer,” I replied.

What could motivate someone to give up the prospect of a comfortable life as official or entrepreneur in colonial Burma in exchange for struggling up trackless mountains and sliding down bamboo soaked hillsides as an explorer? Many of the early explorers were “soldier-diplomats,” with either obvious or hidden political motives for their expeditions. John Crawford, Major Henry Burney, Henry Yule, John Anderson, M.D., Archibald R. Colquhoun, and G.J. Younghusband, each of them left valuable documentation of the Burma that existed before British conquest, but each also played a role in that conquest.

Exploration was not purely a political game, however. The writer George Orwell, whose life was forever changed by his time in Burma, listed four motivations as the chief forces that drive people to become authors: 1) sheer egoism 2) aesthetic enthusiasm 3) historical impulse and 4) political purpose, and it seems that these motives apply equally to explorers, and particularly to the early explorers of Myanmar.

As the 18th century drew to a close, a new breed of explorer took to the road. Less intent on discovering opportunities for expanding empire or for amassing wealth through trade or conquest, these men (and they were almost exclusively men) were intent on another quest - discovery with the goal of increasing human understanding of the world. Charles Darwin (1809-1882) and Alfred Russel Wallace (1823-1913) are two examples of those who were driven by what I would call the “natural history imperative.” They are by far the best known exemplars, but naturalist-explorers were legion, and they combed the globe.

Perhaps no other explorer exemplifies this motivation more purely than William Griffith. Born in 1810, Griffith was educated in...
Griffith died in Malaca in 1845 at the age of 35, not of jungle fever, but of hepatitis. In his short lifetime, he collected about 12,000 plant specimens, as well as evidence for the existence of Manchuria between Sichuan and Tibet. Many of these species' names are still written with a simple emoji after their Latin binomial name, the five letter abbreviation 'Griff'. It means that they were first described by Griffith and it is generally assumed that he collected and described more species than any other botanist ever.

Griffith left his papers and collections to the British East India Company. They were transported to England and today they are held in Kew Gardens. His private journals were published posthumously as *William Griffith from the Proceedings of the Linnaean Society: with a few extracts from his papers on the Origin and Selection of papers on the hill tracts between Assam and Burmah*.

Other explorer-naturalists followed. Adolf Bastian, like Griffith, seems to have been motivated mainly by interest in China. There the similarity ends, for Bastian’s interest was focused on culture; covering archeology, religion and history. His rambling account of *A Journey in Burma* (1861–1862), written in his native German, is much more readable than Griffith’s terse journal reports, but they are still true to the natural-history imperative.

Bastian, with his often humorous account of his adventures, is a clear forerunner of Otto E. Ehler. Ehlers’ stage by stage account of travel over the land, he described the “Burmesian earth oil”) and before the opening of the first commercial oil wells in 1906, including 13 travel books and 4 collections of essays.

Why did he do it? Kingdon-Ward himself addressed his motivations as clearly as any explorer ever has. Early on in his career he wrote: “To traverse this faraway crust-belt, from the Yangtze in the east to the Irrawaddy in the west; to cross the great rivers and climb the great divides, was my ambition. Its object, to collect plants, and the seeds of plants which might be introduced to England, was very good at his job. He is remembered as the person who introduced 28

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A lone in my hotel room overlooking the serene Andaman Sea in Kawthaung, entry port into the vast Mergui archipelago, in the southern tip of Myanmar, I write to array memories of a month gone by in a whirlwind. The Mergui islands, comprised of more than 800 islands, is perhaps the last pristine, undiscovered island chain in Asia. It’s a mere 20 minutes by boat from Thailnd, and three hours drive from Phuket. The water is crystal blue with shades of jadeish green, and sandy beaches are a commodity on almost every island, laconically assigned three digit numbers for name by the government. Most if not all of the islands are uninhabited, and though there are recent murmurs of business magnates from around the world buying up islands to build luxury resorts rivaling those of Maldives; the process is still in its infancy, and the islands are largely left to a plethora of birds, lizards, monkeys, and other odd creatures that somehow made the hundreds of miles of swim to claim their dominion.

For a month I roamed the islands. I stayed on three islands open for business. The Myanmar Andaman Resort, in operations since 2005, is considered the only true island resort in the Mergui archipelago. The other two islands are quite close to Kawthaung, given to Thai developers, and made into casino resorts catering exclusively to Thai gamblers boated in from Thailand on a daily basis. I made my way around on a diving boat chartered from Thailnd, and enjoyed six days of four dives daily. I then ventured around on a sailing boat, a cabin chartered yacht with an Austrian captain trying his first season in Myanmar after years of operating out of Phuket. The scenery, like elsewhere in Myanmar, is one of life as it has always been, betrayed by hints of seismic change to come in new hotel constructions and strange new foreign faces. The moment will be brief, before the onslaught of business interests, foreign and domestic, upon these luscious green emeralds dotting the sea, trying their hands at the last undeveloped market in Asia.

We stopped at numerous diving sites but each site was progressively more disappointing in its scarcity of big fish and advertised biodiversity. The dive master chalked it up to dynamite fishing, killing fish and ocean mammals alike and severely damaging coral reefs. Every day we would encounter fishing boats, vessels only slightly larger than our diving boat but crammed with a crew of more than a dozen hunting for squid or fish or crab. It became my adapted routine to jump onto each boat and check out the various catch of the day, and upon a delightful find, trade beer or coca cola for the bounties of the sea. The fishermen themselves commented on the increasing difficulty of catching big fish.

As I watched blue ringed angel fish angle in and out of their colorful redoubts, largely oblivious to an otherworldly visitor enwrapped in heat retaining wet suit affixed with a tank of oxygen, I could not but ask myself, ‘who will protect them?’ The fisheries of the world are facing catastrophic decline. Scientists estimate that in mere decades, most people will no longer taste wild fish, only staple fish like salmon or tuna bred in fish farms, akin to the few land animals we have long domesticated and learned to breed and eat. Once some of the fish that inhabit our oceans are gone, they are gone forever. Who will protect them from us?

A key aim of the trip was to see the Moken people, sea gypsies who for hundreds of years operated without permanent settlements, moving from one island to another in search of fish and fresh water. Now many of them are domesticated, coerced by the government to dwell on designated islands. When we finally visited a Moken village we were greeted with curious eyes and hip hop music. This wasn’t altogether a surprise, as a previous trek into the wild terrains of Northern Myanmar had me assaulted by an endless visage of banana groves and the competing acoustics of Beyonce Knowles blaring out of a tiny wooden shed and the chirping of myriad indigenous birds. Islands we visited on the sailing trip, devoid of inhabitants, greeted us with signs of modernity in the form of debris and broken bottles left behind by wandering fishermen.

So it was the same in the Moken village, the people ubiquitously nice, but living amongst inordinate amounts of garbage. Tourists are often led to believe in a fantasy of a native people, lost in time, desperately clinging to their ancient ways, and struggling valiantly against the violent oppression of government and modernization. The truth I believe is a lot more nuanced. Even the proudlest people, when introduced to modern luxuries, such as beer or coca cola or motor boat or television, prefer them to their old favorites. They like us, must learn to live anew with nature. Many times, they took less from nature simply because they didn’t have the means to take more, but empowered with modern technology, they like us, need to re-learn their roles and responsibilities, to their past and their future. Seeing the Moken children swim playfully amongst plastic bags and plastic wrappers, I could not help think, ‘who will protect them?’

Are the Mokens or for that matter a developing nation allowed to make the same mistakes as us? To go through the same excesses until they discover for themselves the ill effects of overuse and under protection of their natural resources? Which parts of their culture will they maintain and which parts discard, in their and our unstoppable march to modernity? Who is to protect them from us? And who is to protect them from themselves?

With tastes of succulent lobsters and earthy barracudas still fresh in my mouth, with a mug of Myanmar beer snuggly in my hand, I ponder these philosophical questions only as a spoiled tourist overlooking a world about to change forever.
We are late, we are late!” exclaimed Berry as she rushed up to the upper deck of the boat. “What are we late for?” I questioned. “It is already ten past five and we almost forgot our Happy Hour,” shouted Berry. Indeed, the ritual of Happy Hour on the HM Explorer is taken quite seriously. After all, our boat comes with a rather impressive library bar.

Twenty minutes later, just as I was enjoying my Whiskey Coke, our Happy Hour was again cut short. There was a sudden commotion as our boat passed another nondescript sandy shore. “It looks like this crowd at the bank is slaughtering a cow,” said Professor Lau. They were waving at our odd looking boat as we passed by. Everyone had their binoculars trained on a rock by the bank where the slaughtering was taking place. Someone at the bow called out, “I think it is a sheep.” I went to the bridge and asked the captain to turn the boat around. “Be great to have some lamb steak for our new BBQ grill,” I told everyone.

Just as our boat got nearer, Aung, our Burmese biologist in the team, called out, “The skin is way too thick for a sheep, I think it is a turtle.” Turtle indeed it was. As our boat got closer we waved at the crowd and soon a small boat came over to take some of us to shore. While I watched from our boat, I could see someone raise high the large shell of a turtle so all of us could see it.

A Burmese Narrow-headed Softshell Turtle, as our scientists identified it. Very little is known about this turtle, so its status is not well documented. Local fishermen said they may catch one every four to five years. This specimen yielded over six viss or 10 kilos of meat. They wanted to sell all for 5000 Kyat per viss. We bought the best part for 25,000 Kyats, including the head Aung wanted to dissect and keep as specimen on the boat. The entire turtle would have been worth about USD100.

For dinner, we had turtle soup. Unlike chicken, the white meat is more tender than the dark. As Zhengyu, our guest, did not want any dessert, he asked for fruit. He chose papaya among others, but immediately our kitchen staff said that was not recommended. According to local lore, eating papaya with turtle can be detrimental or at least bringing back luck.

At Maukkataw Village, we went on shore again to check out the local morning market. It was so small that not much could be bought except some vegetables and Chinese style You Tiao. As we walked past a home, I could see the lady owner had a tiny pet monkey, so we stopped to check it out. This must be a well domesticated macaque monkey as it was very calm and allowed me to handle it. Soon it was over my shoulder just as Zhengyu came in through the fence.

“Well, that monkey must be from Yale,” said Zhengyu. As if on cue, the monkey did just that while raising its butt a little. Just at that moment, Bill, another Harvard guy, came in and snapped, “Put it on me, put it on me,” Zhengyu quipped with his usual big smile. I took the monkey and set it over the Harvard cap that Zhengyu was wearing. “I hope he won’t pee on me,” said Zhengyu. As if on cue, the monkey did just that while raising its butt a little. Just at that moment, Bill, another Harvard guy, came in and snapped, “Well, that monkey must be from Yale.” The lady of the house felt really embarrassed and apologetic. She took Zhengyu’s cap and went wash it down before returning it. As for Zhengyu, his well shaved head had to take the torching sun for the time being.

At every morning market where we could buy some fish, our three biologists got excited and chose from the assortment of species. Later they would measure these fish at a stainless steel lab table we had devised on the stern of the upper deck. What’s remaining usually went to the pot.

On one foggy morning, our boat pulled anchor and slowly cruised upriver. Suddenly we heard a loud speaker blasting Burmese religious music, and through the fog and mist came a large parade of boats, escorting a larger barge decorated with flowers and ornaments. It was a religious rite which went on from time to time. On land, initiation of novice monks is conducted after a parade to the monastery, whereas here on the river it is done by boat.

In the evening, Aung would choose a nice location where a small stream flowed into the Chindwin and set up our bat nets. Just in the third evening, we caught six bats of two species. Once the net was set up, the team had to go check it every half hour. In one of those...
raise money for a Buddhist monastery. Bambooheaded Softshell Turtle head. A river parade to
local market. Shells of freshwater turtles along
CLOCKWISE FROM BELOW:
saw many albino water buffaloes, six in all over perhaps four village hamlets, far
stopped to investigate two skins taken downriver on another local boat. We also
produced in former Burma supplied all of India’s needs for kerosene. Much of its later profit, as then Burmah Oil was headquartered in Scotland. Oil
of the British Empire turned from using coal to oil. Being capital intensive in its
British Petroleum Group. It was around that time that the marine and naval fleet
profitable oil company throughout the colonial empire, a predecessor of today’s
Burmah Oil Company, at the turn of the last century, was the most productive and
some historians noting its usage for centuries, and later during excavation of the
British colonial times. Today, offshore oil and gas of Myanmar are still under
contention of modern countries eager to get the much needed energy.
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exploration and refining, the Scots brought in much needed funds and also took
much of its later profit, as then Burmah Oil was headquartered in Scotland. Oil
produced in former Burma supplied all of India’s needs for kerosene.

While along this tributary, Aung collected a barking deer’s tail, as their boat
stopped to investigate two skins taken downriver on another local boat. We also
saw many albino water buffaloes, six in all over perhaps four village hamlets, far
out of proportion for such an abnormal mutations. When we got back to our mother boat, the crew had
taken out the drive-shaft and propeller for a much-needed repair of a twisted shaft, incurred during one of the few times we were grounded on sandbars
while negotiating shallower water over the last few days. A large fire was started on the shore using
wood and husks to heat up the shaft for the repair. Before midnight, the repair was done and the shaft
mounted and connected back to the engine.
The following day, we launched both of our Zodiac inflatable boats to explore further up the Chindwin.
This is the same river along which the British army fled upcountry before finally retreating into British
India during the Second World War as the Japanese army advanced northwards from Rangoon.
At the small village of Tanga, we stopped to check out the surroundings.

“It takes two months to assemble enough bamboo and build one,” said Zaw Win Aung on his
bamboo raft, which measured maybe fifteen meters in length. “From here floating down to
Monywa should take around twelve days now but during the rainy season only three to four days,”
Zaw Win answered my many questions. Tanga village is near the Indian border on the Chindwin
River of upper Myanmar. While each bamboo raft these days come with a small gas motor, they use it
rarely except when negotiating around tough bends and fast currents. Two rudders, one in front and one to the back help steer the raft. At times bow would
become stern, and vice versa.

“The bamboo are harvested from the mountain and brought down by bullock carts. They are sold to us for
100 Kyats each and by the time we reach market they go for 250,” Zaw Win told me, revealing the
margin they make in carrying out such work. In his village there may be five to six families engaged
with bamboo rafting. Each raft requires four to five persons on board. Life on the raft is necessarily long
and leisurely. At night they would tie up and cook their meal onboard. In all, they may make three
such journeys a year, with each barge/raft made up of ten to twenty thousand
bamboos. Zaw Win’s raft has ten thousand bamboos and can yield 1,500,000
kyat. That is equivalent to over 1,500 USD per run, three runs a year, a hefty
sum in such a remote village.

If what I saw of similar bamboo barges in the 1980s on the Yangtze River is any indicator, such rafts/barges will soon become obsolete in another decade or less,
as more efficient road transportation, as well as motorized boat traffic, would
one day overtake this age-old trade.

Momentarily Aung, Bill and Su (a young Burmese biologist) came back from
another full day outing up the Yue River, interviewing hunters and collecting
specimens. They had with them two turtle shells and a live catfish weighing
about one kilo. Such a catfish can grow to over one hundred kilo. After our
scientists studied the fish for a while, it went straight to our kitchen as
tonight’s dinner. As Bill walked past me, he quipped that they had seen
hornbills fly by during the day. He knew I’ve been craving to see one of these majestic birds
of Myanmar and must be trying to tease me. Disappointed as I was, I snapped
back, “Where’s the Hornbill, I am only seeing a noisy Bill.”

Bill won’t mind any sneer, as this reconnaissance up the Yue River has yielded
one of the richest sites yet with multiple possibilities for biological studies into
the future. Unfortunately for this trip, due to constraint of time, we have to start
back and retrace our route.

By now, five of us in a seven member team, those who are not insulated from
the outside world, have read the story in the current issue of Vanity Fair, with
a lurid article on Rupert Murdoch and his estranged wife Wendy Deng. Maybe
in time, our Myanmar partners would also be interested in such gossip from the
rest of the world. But hopefully not, as they are better off without such frivolous
information that has consumed some of our lives.

As we anchored again in Kalaew, there was another boat half our size anchored
next to us. On it was a traveling Burmese orchestra. They would go from town to
town and perform during festivals, religious gatherings, or civil ceremonies.
We invited them onboard for a performance after dinner. With multiple drums,
two intricate sets of gongs, cymbals and a flute-like wind instrument, the nine-
member team played some very traditional music. While it sounded new and
enjoying it thoroughly. Some of my crew even clapped along with the rhythm
and the beat.

I recalled my own childhood in the 1950s when street musicians were popular
in Hong Kong but gradually became obsolete and nowhere to be found when
more contemporary music took over. Hopefully, this would not be the case for
Myanmar, a country that has been slow to change.
I am from Hokkaido. That’s how I answer when asked if I were from Japan during my yearly visit to Alaska,” said Ando San with a smile. This is not unlike how Texans are not just American, or Taiwanese not being Chinese. “In fact, even within Hokkaido, we are two divided group depending whether someone is from the east or west, just like the geology which somewhat affected the flora and fauna is divided in the middle,” explained Ando emphatically.

Ando and I have become good friends, since this is my fourth trip to Hokkaido and the third time that I stayed at his barn-turned-hostel house. Like vacationers returning each year to tropical paradise, or ski slopes of Europe or even eastern Hokkaido, I come here to be in the snow, to be with nature and its wildlife.

Whenever Ando had a full house of guests, some ten to twelve people, he would give an illustrated lecture with his photographs. For this year, he had asked me in advance to prepare a talk on Manchuria, a place he has aspired to visit for a very long time. I promised to invite him along during my next foray to that border with Russia. His dream and romance of that arctic region came from the Kurosawa film on Siberia.

“Eastern Hokkaido is part of Alaska, and western Hokkaido, part of China. This is what happened when the two continents split off a bit and merged to become today’s Hokkaido,” Ando tried to tell me about the prehistory of this huge island to the north of Japan.

We were again heading to the coast off the east end of Hokkaido, hoping to photograph the most beautiful Steller’s Sea Eagle. It was not to be. The ice packs, floating south from the east coast of Siberia, are late this year. Perhaps a colder than usual winter delayed its breaking off. The eagles migrate with these ice packs.

The cranes are still around, relatively abundant at the four to five usual gathering sites during the day. Taking pictures of cranes is no longer challenging, especially photographing flocks of these stately birds when they forage on the ground. Even dancing cranes have become mundane. Instead I have refined my focus on just pairing cranes, especially when they are in flight. Such concentration provides much better results, and thus rewarding as well. To yield defining photographic images, I must brave the bitter cold for extended period. This year, I am just partly fortunate in that sense, though the geese offered up a good show.

The many deer in the forest has become an added incentive, especially when we ran into stags with huge sets of antlers. With Ando guiding, we located a tree where an Ural Owl was holed up. Closing in with my 300mm lens, I captured its open and closed eyes as the rising sun cast its first light on the tree.

While looking for Sea Eagles, we also chanced upon a Red Fox by the frozen beach. It must be very hungry, devouring a dead harbor seal while scavenger ravens stood nearby. Perhaps obliterated by the sound of waves pounding the coast, I was able to get close to within five meters of the fox before it gingerly turned and gradually walked away. As the fox retreated, it buried its nose into the snow to clean off its bloodstained mouth. It was an unforgettable show of nature, and a photo op not likely to be repeated.

One evening, a special guest checked in. Masato Nagai is a Rock singer, guitarist, and avid birder. His bird book is into its seventh edition with almost 700 bird species listed for Japan. With him is a young Japanese singer. After dinner and by the fireplace, Ando and Masato started jamming. I felt privileged to listen to this impromptu performance. One special song was written by Masato’s partner, and she sang it with a most wonderful clean and clear voice.

A mountain man, a forest man, a snow man, Ando San is all of that. With luck, I shall return another winter, maybe even before he has a chance to visit Manchuria.

Here is for sharing, Ando’s jam session: http://youtu.be/E4cmOwnRLbg

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CERS IN THE FIELD

- CERS has its board meeting at the newly restored Exhibit House in Shek O. The three-story building by the beach, built and formerly owned by Shek O Village chief, dated from the pre-World War II era of 1939. Exhibits featuring the important projects and milestones of the organization are on display. In July, we also hosted the first group of 25 university students at the site.
- Professor Yu Shuen-Der of the Academia Sinica of Taiwan joined CERS as a Research Associate.
- Sanda Simms, a former princess of the Shan State, returned to Myanmar from the UK and visited CERS Exhibit House at Inle Lake where she contributed many old family pictures as part of a historical exhibit.
- Dr. Bill Bleisch took part in an international action planning workshop at Bo Ao for the critically endangered Hainan Gibbon.
- CERS signed a Memorandum of Understanding with the Community-based Tourism Training Centre in Luang Namtha, Lao and delivered a training course on wildlife knowledge and conservation there for local tour guides and government officials.
- Suolang Dongcuo, a Tibetan graduate student from Bard College, joined CERS as a six-month intern for her final semester of studies.
- CERS caving team conducted scientific caving activities in Yunnan including Bao Shan, Gaoligongshan and Wenshan.
- Danchen, former Vice Party Secretary of Tibet and Yunnan as well as a CERS Advisor, met with How Man to discuss future CERS activities in Tibetan region.
- CERS started supporting Donggu Tsangteng Monastery, an ancient and remote monastery in Bionga County of eastern Tibet.
- We regret that long-time CERS friend Fr Alfonse Savioz of the Grand St Bernard Mission passed away at age 94. CERS has made a documentary film about the mission’s pioneering work in Tibet.
- Dr. Don Betz, President of University of Central Oklahoma visited CERS in Hong Kong.

CERS IN THE MEDIA

- CNN online story on How Man and CERS.
- Esquire Magazine in Hong Kong.
- How Man delivered his annual lecture to the Royal Geographic Society in Hong Kong with a topic “What’s Left to Explore?”
- How Man lectured to student of Diocesan Boys’ School in Hong Kong, the Columbia University Alumni Association, and for Omega in Shanghai.
- Yunnan TV, Kunming TV aired programs on CERS caving efforts within the province.
- Spring City Evening News of Kunming published an article on CERS caving activities.
The Shun Hing Group made a major support to CERS with a special arrangement such that a newly acquired 1939 house in Shek O of Hong Kong would be used exclusively by CERS for future exhibits. This is in addition to the Shun Hing Education and Charity Trust which makes an annual substantial donation to CERS.

During a visit by How Man to Switzerland, Omega president Stephen Urquhart donated a 1939 Omega watch from their museum collection to grace the CERS 1939 Exhibit House.

Eu Yan Sang continued as corporate patron as well as support on research of the Musk Deer.

Erich Beck and Grace Young of Great Bites Candy made special CERS label mints and candies to promote protection of the Irrawaddy Dolphins.

Eric Xin became a new CERS patron.

Thank you to the current patrons for renewing their annual support to CERS.

Chang Bai, a retired life-long fisherman of Tai Tam Bay in Hong Kong donated his sampan boat to CERS for education purpose.

The Jebsen Company continues its support of beer, wine and beverage to CERS.

Coca-Cola China donated beverage and prizes for the Annual Lisu Crossbow Festival co-organized by CERS and the Baima Snow Mountain Nature Reserve in Yunnan.

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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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