Pilgrimage Long Overdue

Authenticity: For Them or for Ourselves?

CERS Community Education Project

Return to Mount Fanjing after 25 years

Mekong and Tributary Exploration

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Jack Young, a Centenarian Chinese Pilot at 101

CERS in the field

News/Media & Lectures

Thank You

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP:

Temple of Fanjing Shan in Guizhou Province.

Hornbill at Second Defile of upper Irrawaddy River.

Nuns of Dongjulin Nunnery.

Golden Monkey of Fanjing Shan.
President’s Message

On behalf of CERS, I have received much good will, and in turn handed out a bit. But recent good will that I received, though as small as a HK$2 consideration, is a milestone. It however might not feel like much of a compliment if I were a lady.

Recently, I finally took the Star Ferry for free, having reached the age of 65. I took caution to look both ways, before I took the priority seat reserved for someone my age. Just in case others thought I was a fake.

I have ridden the Star Ferry since childhood, especially during my high school years when I had to cross the harbor from Hong Kong to Kowloon every day to go to school. I even chose to take the lower deck at times simply because passengers could rush off faster to the street, besides being charged half the price. So no one can doubt this free ride is a milestone, one that marks my age.

But with our work in exploration and conservation, I don’t feel at all that I am over the hill. In fact, I feel we are finally maturing, both in terms of experience and the financial stability needed to take our organization into the future. And as a writer, age seems more an asset than a liability.

I intend to march on, just like Jack Young whom I describe in the pages of this issue. He is marching on at age 101, likewise two of my other centenarian pilot friends Moon Chin and Peter Goutiere. Jack, Moon and Peter have inspired me, just as I hope to inspire our younger generations, through sharing of our experience.

One such member of a younger generation is our Vice-Director at our Zhongdian Center. Drolma is a Tibetan from a faraway village in remote Sichuan, but received her degree from Duke University and joined CERS three years ago. Her story in this newsletter is most gratifying, as she carries the spirit, and not least difficult goal of our work, into the future.

Wong How Man
Founder/President CERS
October 2015

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PILGRIMAGE LONG OVERDUE

by Wong How Man
Zhongdian, Yunnan

It seems strange that I should be making my first pilgrimage to Damuzong’s meditation cave only after it was burnt down by fire last year. Damu was considered to be the First Patriarch Master who brought Buddhism from India to China. I’ve been looking up at this cave from far below, from some 1000 meters in elevation lower down at the foot of the mountain, for well over ten years. Every time, several times a year, we drove past the foot of this pinnacle peak rising west of the Yangtze River, on our way from our Zhongdian Center to the Golden Monkey/Lisu Hill Tribe site.

The renowned Ming Dynasty explorer Xu X iake came this way on foot and horseback some 400 years ago. He came very close, arriving in Lijiang, but was turned back due to the political situation at the time. His ill health also prompted his return without achieving his goal, and he died soon after reaching home in Jiangsu at the age of 55.

Perhaps it was Damu’s kind consideration for an aging pilgrim explorer like me. Up until a month ago, it would have taken me up to five hours to hike that huge gradient, with inclines of up to forty-five degrees, to reach the cave temple, a trying endeavor for someone over 65 years of age. But recently, the situation has changed. A road, a cement-paved road, reaches the cave temple over a winding drive of 12 kilometers from the bottom. It was indeed a blessing for me.

On any usual day, there might be many pilgrims, but on today’s afternoon when I decided to venture to the temple, no one, not a single car, was on the road up or down the mountain. It seemed a huge relief, as I have heard of the huge crowds on some weekends or special festive days. For China today, it is indeed rare to be a single pilgrim to an important Buddhist site. Perhaps Damu was again giving his blessings to this singular supplicant.

Up and up, as the road winded up, the scenery opened up. Down and down, as I looked down, my eyes followed the Yangtze further down. It curved and meandered, before disappearing behind a hill, only to reappear momentarily, before fading again into the distant hills. With low hanging clouds, a Chinese scroll painting was in the making.
Near the top, there was an ensemble of houses, including a huge temple. But Damu’s cave was hidden around a corner precipice. I had no interest in grand buildings, but did turn a large prayer wheel inside a small old building, and went straight toward the meditation cave of the sage. A few more dilapidated buildings hugged the cliff face. The sound of drum momentarily started, as if welcoming my arrival. Tall steps brought me to a prayer chapel where a lone monk in saffron robe was attending to the oil lamps. I made a small offering in cash, commensurate with the small chapel. Tashi, a local Tibetan monk, pointed my way to the sacred site.

A short stairway with railings over the rocks brought me to where hundreds of prayer flags were fluttering. The rocks were scarred and darkened from incense and oil lamp offerings. I bowed and touched the rock with my forehead, later only to find out that this rock is where pilgrims come to make wishes for fertility. At 65, I hope my posturing would not be answered. The real cave was still a couple hundred meters around the cliff.

Major construction was going on though all workers had left, it being late in the day. A new multi-story temple would be finished by end of this year, hugging the cliff-face and enclosing the open cave. It would be done in time for the biggest pilgrimage next year in May. The Year of the Monkey in the twelve-year zodiac is the most important for Damuzong Cave. They are expecting tens of thousands would arrive, especially during the month of May, on the First Day of the Fourth Moon. For now, the cave was exposed and seemed cleared of all previous statues and offerings, having been burnt out. I bowed and folded my hands with a simple prayer, hoping that I could return next year for that special occasion.

On my way down the hill, I stopped at the Buddhist college affiliated to Damuzong Cave. Gongjiu, a lama at 48 years of age, was teaching a dozen or so young monks. We sat down for tea and chatted. He had been ordained thirty years ago as a teenager. A local Tibetan but with acute Han features, he had been here for decades. I was interested in his private abode overlooking the Yangtze below.

Could I stay there next May? He affirmed with a yes, and said it would be free. Free of charge only. As it may not be freed up in time by May, I would be most welcome to stay there. I prayed that the monk’s next cycle closing on nirvana would complete his meditation and exit by May, I would be most welcome to stay there. I bowed and folded my hands with a simple prayer, hoping that I could return next year for that special occasion.

On this trip, I was on a circuit pilgrimage to several sites of various religions, all familiar to me except Damuzong Cave. While I was visiting the Cave, our summer interns were busy observing the Snub-nosed Monkeys. Then the Lisu Crossbow Festival we organized yearly came and went. Next stop, the Church of Qizhong, founded by priests of the French Foreign Mission in the late 19th Century and later operated by the Grand St Bernard Mission of Switzerland between 1931 and 1951.

With my old friend Father Savioz’s passing away almost two years ago in Martigny, I brought along my memories as I attended a solemn Friday Mass in the evening. It was interrupted by electric stoppage, but it was quickly resuscitated by a small generator. Father Yao Fei, a China-trained priest, was known to be hot tempered. But he treated me with grace, even allowing my team to film inside the church during service, whereas posters on the wall prohibited even photography.

As we drove for a long stretch along the Mekong, something delighted me. From what used to be a raw river spanned only by cable or rope bridges, today there are many suspension bridges, making crossing by locals far safer and efficient. Many can even be crossed by cars or tractors.

But something else also bothered me. It seemed strange and illogical that several dams now cut across the mighty Mekong, providing electricity in abundance through hydro plants. Others are in process of being finished. Villages along the Mekong play host to these series of dams, with electricity generated and channeled into the power grid that supports entire big cities or is even exported to neighboring countries. Yet villagers have had to put up with electric shortage and outage regularly, every night, for ages, until even today. Something is gravely wrong.

An hour or so past Qizhong is CERS’ former clinic/teahouse. It was completed in 2003 to serve pilgrims during the special Year of the Sheep, when tens of thousands of Tibetans arrived from all over the plateau to circumambulate sacred Khawakarpo Mountain. During six months within that summer, our clinic served over 4,600 patients, and we offered thousands more cups of buttered tea. This year again is the Year of the Sheep, and pilgrims would arrive again in droves. But twelve years on, the teahouse is in a ruined state, having been taken over by the local villagers who did not care to maintain it; a case of poor custodianship.

I stopped for two nights at our former Tibetan Mastiff Kennel site. Guji is a pristine village with only five families, three of which are still practicing polyandry, looking directly at the spectacular Khawakarpo range. I had not stayed here for over five years, though I had passed...
Today, our beautiful site with several well-situated lodges had just found a new custodian. Yang Mei, a successful entrepreneur turned devoted Buddhist, intends to turn it into an eco-lodge catering to Buddhist pilgrims, monks on meditation retreat, and a stopover for NGO's keen on nature and culture conservation. We hope this would give this wonderful site a new lease on life.

My next stop was Dongjulin Nunnery. Here the CERS project was started in 1999 and lasted several years. Over that period, four dormitories were constructed for the nuns before another team could move in to restore the Assembly Hall, roof and all. Finally the ten walls of ancient murals were painstakingly cleaned and stabilized. Along the way, two books and one documentary film were made. At the time there was no road up the mountain and we had to hike for almost an hour to reach the nunnery.

Today a fully paved road ends at a monumental gate as entrance into the nunnery. Many new buildings, big and decorative, had been built, thanks to more substantial funding from the government and newly successful Tibetan and Chinese supplicants. I feel gratified that, at the time of dire need, CERS was here to support and facilitate conservation efforts.

The nuns were totally surprised to see me showing up. After all, it had been years since my last visit. I could tell their joy was genuine, as they poured me bowl after bowl of buttered tea. Through a doctor-nun who spoke Chinese, the head nun told me that “I”, meaning my team, was like their parents giving them a rebirth. I felt very moved that they should remember those hardship days. Balaganzong, the sacred mountain facing the nunnery, seemed to concur. It gracefully revealed its pyramid peak as our parting gift.

As my last stop on this journey, I took another detour and went to visit our Yak Cheese Factory. It seemed necessary to deliver in person the great news that we had received just two weeks ago. A customer in Beijing, without our knowing, had entered our yak cheese at the annual cheese contest in France. We were nicely surprised that our cheese took a Gold Award, not an easy feat in the culinary capital of the world. The blooming wild flowers in the high country seemed to join in celebrating this good news, making this moment even sweeter with fragrance.

As a finale to this pilgrimage, both to sacred sage cave and mountains, as well as to our many project sites, I decided to bring our most beloved mastiff back to our Zhongdian Center. Chili is now eleven years old, two years past the average age that Tibetan Mastiff are known to live. He had been retiring at our yak cheese site with his life-long partner Ah Yee. But Ah Yee passed away about six months ago, and Chili was left alone in his yard. I wanted Chili to live out his life with dignity. He joined CERS as a four-month old puppy at our Zhongdian Center, in 2004.

After all, he had been on a full page of the Wall Street Journal, and joined me on a front page story of that prestigious newspaper. He was on the face of a Chinese stamp. He appeared on CNN with anchor Richard Quest. Perhaps giving Chili, our flagship mastiff emeritus, a final home with happy ending may reflect on how I wish to find a worthy home for myself at old age.
It was 2002 when I first visited Lijiang. I stayed in the Old Town a few days to organize my notes after finishing fieldwork in a Tibetan village by the Jinsha River. Like most tourists, I was deeply fascinated by Old Town’s exotic setting. I took breaks to stroll the streets and shops looking for souvenirs having a distinctive ethnic flavor and enjoyed the traditional Naxi houses and the soundscape in which flowing water and tourist chatter mingled. Even though Old Town had become rather commercialized by then, I was not bothered. I understood that the red lanterns hung in front of the restaurants and hotels were not part of local Naxi culture and had been told that most of the shop owners were not natives. Nonetheless I enjoyed the atmosphere and exoticism of this border town.

Later on I learned that at least half of the old houses in Lijiang’s Old Town had been rebuilt after a devastating earthquake in 1996. A Naxi friend who owns a sculpture shop in Old Town’s Xinhua Street admitted to me that Naxi people did not carve, at least not in any way similar to what we saw in his shop, when I asked why there were no antique pieces. [It was even worse to learn that, in the face of Helen Rees’s book, which portrays Naxi guyue (ancient music) as a “living relic of Naxi culture” representing “the Naxi spirit,” this “traditional” music was actually borrowed from the Han majority. In other words, this famous and much-publicized “authentic” Naxi music is an “invented tradition” fabricated to cash in on “the motif of music-making minority.”]

As a cultural anthropologist, I am not surprised by these phenomena; I actually anticipate them, not because this is how the tourist industry works in
China but because what we call “culture” or “tradition” has always been undergoing changes and transformations. This is a lesson anthropologists have been learning since the early twentieth century, and this is what I like to share with my students when we visit the Lisu village of Xiangguqing and the Tibetan village of Yubeng. I am eager to tell them that we need to be cautious when stating that something is Lisu or Tibetan “tradition,” as though there was a set way living for Lisu (or Tibetans) before modernity or outside influences arrived. Instead, we need to pay attention to what we see indigenous people actually doing—such as flashing a “V” sign when getting their picture taken—and be aware of the impact of global culture brought in by the small satellite discs on the roof of every Lisu house. By the same token, fascinating old stories of horse caravans (mabang) should also show us that the outside world has long interacted with even the most remote Tibetan villages through trade. Thus when we try to make a record of traditional elements, for instance the wooden-lattice windows of the Naxi houses with our cameras, we should probably also take a shot of the “ugly” modern metal gates in front of every courtyard.

Xiangguqing and Gehuaqing, the two Lisu villages we visit, are located in the borderland where cultural exchanges among Lisu, Tibetan, and Naxi communities have been going on for centuries. While villagers in these two places all identify as Lisu, we notice obvious differences, at least in the architecture and religious practices of the villages. Gehuaqing villagers criticize Xiangguqing for being “Tibetan-Lisu” and claim that they themselves are “pure Lisu.” But I find villagers in Gehuaqing to be unclear about their religious practices, probably because their ancestors moved to the area as young people in 1941, and the current fifteen households in the village have all descended from that single family. Lacking transmission of religious knowledge from the older generation probably explains the Gehuaqing residents’ uncertainty about some religious ideas, despite their assertions of cultural authenticity.

When they encountered minority societies in the past, many anthropologists intended to discover cultural traits remained intact and ignored those having been transformed by outside or modern influences. We still tend toward this romantic notion, because the exoticism deriving from their cultural authenticity is exactly what interests us the most. We are also inclined to blame the loss of cultural characteristics, increased commercialization, and becoming opportunistic on minorities’ failure to cherish their own “traditional” cultures, while we seldom recognize our own constant pursuit of economic growth and take our own socio-cultural changes for granted. It is said that our concern with authenticity is a modern phenomenon, a reflection of our lack of it; since we have no control over our own social transformations, we project our anxiety onto minority cultures. When we visit Xiangguqing and Yubeng, we often cannot stop ourselves from adopting such an attitude.

Strolling around Upper Yubeng after visiting a sacred waterfall, I encountered local young men riding motorcycles on the narrow village paths. Apparently, motorbikes with fancy decorations and big mounted speaker(s) are the popular way young Tibetans show their boldness. They were annoying for sure in this little tourist village, especially once I had switched to a “this is an imaginary land, this is Shangri-la” mode to enjoy the place. But our own fantasies aside, the question remains, is our desire for cultural authenticity for our own good or for theirs?
Eight o’clock - I come to breakfast, thinking it is still a little too early. Four little boys are already waiting in the dining hall. “I said nine o’clock, why did you all come so early?” I ask. None of them replies. “Did you have breakfast?” I continue, to which they all shake their head in the negative. So, we prepare breakfast for them. While they sit and wait for their breakfast they are constantly moving, talking, singing, playing on phones; I don’t know how, but they do all this simultaneously. The same scenario repeats every morning for the next 10 days. When our gate is not open, the children stand in a row popping their heads over the gate, waiting for somebody to let them in. Although I know it is time for me to learn to be a parent, having several boys talk or move around non-stop at eight o’clock in the morning is a little too much. Quite the opposite are two girls, who come later and move quietly upstairs to the classroom. I hardly realize their arrival until class starts.

We are implementing the second phase of our CERS Community Education Program in Shangri-La, a program designed to increase appreciation of the rich cultural heritage and natural treasures of the region among minority people, while also improving the quality of local education for children. Alongside, we teach some basic English as an incentive for parents to allow their children to come and participate. We teach the children in Gongbin Village (where CERS Zhongdian Center is located) in August and in the CERS Lisu Cultural Village, Xiangquing, in December. During the summer, older local children are busy collecting mushrooms or leading horseback riding to earn some money. Last summer we had 40 some children in attendance, who were all pre-school or had just started school. This summer we limited the program to fourth through sixth graders. We only had seven students, but, from the amount of energy one needed to put in, it felt like teaching a class size with 30-40 students.

Nonetheless, we try to think of different topics that can fulfill our goal and introduce knowledge that is lacking in the regular classroom. We take them on nature walks with our field scientist to learn about their natural environment. They live in the midst of all the natural beauties one can imagine – rich forests, a big wetland, a botanical garden, and so on, but they can only name a few trees and birds. They all grew up in a Tibetan village, but there is not much difference between them and the children who live in the county town.

Because of the centralization of primary and middle schools, village schools do not exist anymore. Children everywhere go to a central school as soon as they start school and the central school is usually located in a big town which is far away from their home village. Therefore, children get separated from their parents from kindergarten on and live at a boarding school. On the surface, everything looks fine, but the loss of connection with home is evident in the children we teach. They use every single minute of their free time to play games on their phone, watch TV or ride motorcycles. Not just ordinary motorcycles, but racing mountain motorcycles. When we go on nature walks, they complain about getting tired and dirty. When it is sunny, they complain it is too hot. When it is rainy, they complain it is too cold and wet. Don’t they sound just like city children?
In order to carry out our plans, we have to ignore their complaints. The good thing about children is that you can make them do things even when they are not willing at first. For instance, we take them to Napa Lake on a rainy day to catch fish and study them. They all complain, but then they still get into the dirty water and look for fish with enthusiasm. In the end, we have a hard time getting them come back. We visit a national park to see old-growth forests and other natural scenery. It is pouring the entire time, but somehow they manage to ignore the long walk in the rain and remember instead the trees, flowers, birds, and squirrels that they see. It is this kind of re-connection we wish to make between the children and nature; and between the children and their parents. Every day, we ask them to go home and learn a story from their parents or grandparents. The story can be about anything, but they have to come back with one and tell the class the next day.

As an added benefit, we wish to use this program as a bridge to improve our relationship with the village. It certainly starts communication, but whether the communication is received in a good way or not is another question. Let’s put it this way; once you enter into the adults’ world, everything has to be complicated. With the booming tourism industry in the Shangri-La region even local people tend to measure everything in monetary terms and immediate paybacks. The irony is that last summer we taught 30 some children, but their parents complained that they did not learn anything. This summer we only focused on older children in order to improve the results, and yet the parents again complained and asked why we do not teach younger children. Yet children tell me that their parents do not know anything, they just make up things to say. Programs like this are our small effort towards conservation goals. We believe that conservation without local people’s active participation cannot be successful. For this program we chose to work with local children because they are easy to approach and eager to learn. They are also the ones who will have to face many more problems that are yet to come. Building awareness at an early stage in their life will better prepare them in making decisions and choices later on.

After 11 days, the program comes to an end. Even though the children say that they want to come for a few more days our teaching energy has run out for a period. However, their high enthusiasm to participate is the best incentive for us to keep the focus on the supplementary education of local children as an effort in cultural and natural conservation.

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MAIN: Temple and tourist court at the top of Mount Fanjing
We were each issued bright blue badges on red ribbons to hand around our necks. These announced that we were “Participants” and entitle us to whisk to the front of the line at the cable-way station. Eight to a car, we were soon dangling high above the deep green forest below. I can see some hikers below climbing the steps, reportedly 8,000 in all, from the road head to Golden Top near the mountain’s peak. As the cable car slowly travels up the steep path into the mountain mist, my thoughts turn back 26 years, to the first time I climbed those steps.

There was no cable way or road then. With a heavy camera and back pack and wearing a full Maine Warden’s parka from L.L. Bean against the cold drizzle, I was exhausted half-way up. I despaired of ever finishing the research project that I had just agreed to do. But I did make it to the top of Fanjing Mountain that day, and climbed it many more times over the next two years. The best part of the trek was the hike in along the beautiful freely flowing Hei Wan He, a mountain stream will pure clear water. By 1992, having completed the first long-term field study of the feeding ecology of the Grey Snub-nosed Langur (now also known as the Fanjingshan Golden Monkey), I was fit and confident and climbed those same stairs with ease and even joy. But by then, 1992, they had started construction on a road along the river and were preparing the cable way.

I am back at Fanjingshan National Nature Reserve by invitation, to participate in an expert meeting for the nomination of Mount Fanjing as a World Heritage Natural Site. Before the Expert Seminar, however, we are invited to inspect the site. For me, it is a pilgrimage to a place that I came to love.

The cable car stops just below Golden Top above a spot known as Hui Xiang Ping. I am surprised that I can recall all the local place names. Even the names of some of the plants come bubbling back up out of my failing memory. The slippery ancient stone steps.
have been replaced by a well made wooden boardwalk. At the top, I am not really surprised to see all the new development. The temples, destroyed during the crazy years of the Cultural Revolution, have now all been rebuilt in traditional style. The Buddhas and Guanyins within are quite grand in gold gilt. Dozens of tourists are relaxing around a large plaza with colourful chairs and food stalls offering ginger tea, rice wine, rice tofu with chili sauce, and hot tangyuan dumplings filled with sesame paste and floating in a bowl of sweet fermented rice porridge. Tourists line up to have their picture taken in front of the odd mushroom like formation at the top. Others clamor to have their picture taken with me, the only European-looking foreigner on the mountain. Some young girls shriek and yell from the tops of the cliffs – a standard practice at tourist mountains in China. A monk in saffron coloured pajamas chats with some visitors. I ask him whether he has heard about the World Heritage Site Application and what he thinks about it. He assumes that I am a foreign investor interested in opening another tourism venture. “If you build another temple, it would be a good thing.

But we already have a boss here. You would be better off starting at a new place that I know in Sichuan.”

We climb up to the last two temples, perched high on twin pillars of slate. The way has not been improved, and it is still necessary to hang onto chains that were bolted into the rock long ago. At the top, visitors wait their turns to kowtow before the Buddha images and to take a picture of the stunning view of the mountain and the forests below. After climbing down again, our group of experts walks on to the west, away from the crowded plaza. I searched this path many times before, listening for the distinctive “bah” calls of the golden monkeys from the steep forests below. This time, we hear no monkeys, and several people tell me that they have deserted this side of the mountain since the cable way was built. I see several White-naped Yuhinas, however, tiny birds with tall crests and noisy twittering voices. A White-browed Shortwing scolds me from a shrub, probably afraid that I could find its nest. It is a brave little bird, and stayed long enough for me to get some photographs.

It is hard to turn back even when the others in our delegation have all left; especially hard when I see the small side trail – still seldom used – that I know would take me along the knife edge ridge to the north and the down to my old friends in Lower Ping Suo Village. I have heard that our best monkey tracker and my best friend at Fanjinshan, Lao You, is now village head, and his two little sons have grown tall. But his legs are now bowed with age, and he can no longer hike up the mountain as fast as he did 25 years ago.

The next day, the nature reserve Director of the Nature Reserve, Yang YiQing, personally leads a small group of students and experts up the steep east slope of the mountain to AiGaoPing – which is nothing more than a small flat clearing on the otherwise uniformly steep slopes. It was there that we made our research camp of tents and tarps. I spent so much time there that the local people began calling me the Village Head of AiGaoPing. There is nothing obviously unique about AiGaoPing, but every April and May, hundreds of snub-nosed monkeys congregate here, where the females give birth.

China was so different in those days. My field reports to New York headquarters were written on onion skin paper, since that was all that was available in the stores. To get to AiGaoPing from the road head at Jiang Kou used to take two days. There was no road then, and we used to walk to Leng Jia Ba, the nearest village below, crossing the Da He river 12 times. It was there that I first learned the phrase, made famous by Deng Xiaoping, “Crossing the river by feeling the stones.” Deng used it as an analogy for the process of economic reform in China. For us, it took on a very literal meaning, as we waded through the cold, rushing water over slippery boulders.

We would spend the night in the village, a traditional Miao community. The food was fresh from the fields, the rice was fragrant and hot. It was a poor village, so they would steam the rice in a wok with potatoes underneath. After I was served pure rice with no potatoes for the third time, I asked why I never got any potatoes. The villagers were surprised. Honored guests should only be served rice, not potatoes, the food of the poor. I told them that in my old home, America, we eat potatoes every day.

There was no electricity, radio or TV, so the evenings were spent smoking around the fire pit. I had a long-stemmed bamboo pipe made for myself so that I could smoke the local ‘cao’ – sun-dried tobacco, fragrant and strong. Sometimes we would take turns singing. I studied a few American country-western tunes so that I could hold my own, but the best singers were all local villagers. Some of the songs were bawdy, some sad. One young girl sang a love song for her mother. One night, in the middle of the night, I woke to hear someone playing a mournful tune on the flute. I pulled my clothes on and went out to find the source, only to interrupt a courting couple, the flute player wooing his sweet-heart with music.
We climbed on. Sweating profusely, I began to feel disoriented and lost like a stranger. Perhaps it was because the trees had grown up in the old fields of bamboo and weeds, and I could no longer recognize the trail. Finally we reached the new research station, now a complex of pre-fab buildings with running water and solar electricity. I had no energy to even lift my camera. I collapsed in a heap on a bench, and only recovered after I drank an entire bottle of water followed by a few pieces of chocolate and a packet of life-giving salty cabbage pickles to restore some of the electrolytes I had lost.

We started down soon afterwards, as time was short. On the way down, both the local guard and I thought we heard the calls of the monkeys from the forest across the valley. I could not be sure if they were snub-nosed monkeys or Tibetan Macaques, but I knew they were out there somewhere.

Back with the other delegates the next day, I was once again wearing the bright blue badge, now taking minutes for the meeting. I was glad to hear expert after expert report that they had concluded that Fanjingshan had Outstanding Universal Value for its biodiversity – a critical condition for nomination as a World Heritage Site. For me, the site already had outstanding value – as a place I had come to love and cherish.

From the village we would hike up the steep slopes the next day 600 meters to our camp. We carried our kit in packs, while the locals would carry up our groceries – rice, eggs, pumpkins, live chickens and always a big plastic jug of local rice wine. Each month we spent at least two weeks at the camp. We would typically spend a week searching for the monkeys, then spend five days following them from dawn to dusk, “putting them to bed” each night and joining them again in the morning, arriving in the dark before they set off. What was left of the month was spent in studying the vegetation and mapping the trails. It was a huge effort, but a glorious way to live, with a crystal clear focus. I remember a moment of ecstasy on a ridge top when I suddenly realized that this was exactly what I wanted to do.

Climbing back up to the site with the Director now, I could only focus on putting one foot in front of the other, trying not to slip on the steep, wet clay. The climb was just as hard as I remembered, but I was just happy not to be the slowest in our party. I remembered some landmarks along the way – tall *Cunninghamia* cypress trees and a beautiful grove of rare *Fagus longipetiolata* beech trees. And it was just there that the local guard stopped and pointed to fresh fallen leaves on the ground – *Corylus* leaves, some with half the leaf stripped away – sure sign that the snub-nosed monkeys had been feeding there recently.
Suddenly my memory went way back, to a time when I was a little child, maybe five or six years old. I used to rock myself in the sofa at home, forward and backward and from side to side, imagining that I was in a tiny boat, going through rough torrents on a river. Here I was, going through it in reality, some sixty years later. But the weather wasn’t as nice as I had imagined.

Heavy rain was pouring down, a non-stop tropical storm. And I had nowhere to hide. But then, why hide? I was thoroughly enjoying this rain. It took the summer heat down to a far more bearable temperature even during midday. I only had a plastic tarp to cover myself. Bill Bleisch, sitting next to me, also took it quite naturally. He is a naturalist after all, a field scientist who should enjoy the environment, the weather, the animals and all that nature bestows on this earth. Maybe even the leeches that thrive in such a climate!

Bill, however, had a waterproof jacket over him, and casually pulled up his tarp to cover his oversized fanny pack that had all his camera gear, binoculars, notebooks, and probably a large sundry of other knick-knacks. The rain would last for a long time, a good few hours, until all our luggage and backpacks piled high under a make-shift bamboo canopy would all become wet.

LEFT TO RIGHT:
Limestone hills of Mekong tributary Nam Tha.
Against rapids of the Nam Tha.
Boats moored at Pak Beng along the Mekong.
Hotel owner Karim.
We were on the last leg of an exploration trip to study the Mekong where it left China and became the border between Thailand and Laos for a short stretch before flowing further down to the old capital of Laos at Luang Prabang. After five days on the Mekong, at the confluence of the Namtha, a major tributary at this section of the Mekong, I had the great idea of transferring ourselves, a team of twelve, to two tiny riverboats in order to return to Luang Namtha two days upstream where our cars were parked.

Up till now we had been on a rather comfortable long and narrow boat of 120 foot length, effectively our day-time home. It came with eight booths for sitting, and was equipped with both a toilet, and a bar! And we set out an entire tableful of junk food we brought along. But the move to the two open-top boats, barely 20 feet in length, each taking six of us sitting in pairs, was debatably wise or stupid, depending on the attitude each of us held in embracing an explorer’s lifestyle.

For me, it was not just a lifestyle, but my life. But for some of my colleagues, who took this up as an exciting job, adventures can at times turn sour, like at this moment in the midst of a torrential rain. Momentarily my thoughts went out to another type of boat people, those who had to leave their homes in tiny boats in search of basic survival and security. My sympathy went to the many refugees throughout the world. How fortunate we were that our trip was for a different purpose, and with a different destiny.

CERS has been involved in Luang Namtha, a northernmost province of Laos bordering China, for over three years. Our goal here is to better understand the wildlife, including large mammals like wild elephants, in a large protected area which included many farming communities within its boundaries. Bill is also interested in the very active wildlife trading, legal or illegal, crossing the border into China.

My current trip is in the hope of integrating some cultural aspects into our project, given that there are several ethnic groups living in the vicinity. The Khmu, Akha, Mien, Lanten and Hmong people all make the area their homes. With the jungle all around us, traveling by water was one way to reach outlying villages. Deang Souliya, one of CERS’ two local staffs, is Khmu. The boat we chartered would take us also past his home, right on the edge of the Mekong.

At Houay Xai, we stayed a night at the posh-looking but rather economical Phonevichit Hotel overlooking the Mekong. That first night along the Mekong, I sat back on the balcony and rejoiced at the silhouettes of several geckos perching on the lamp, performing a rhapsody in snapping up mosquitoes and bugs attracted to the light. Quietly, I thanked god for creating mosquitoes which fly slower than flies. So occasionally we too could avenge our miseries.

We boarded our long boat at Houay Xai, a small town where many tourists embark for a two-day river trip along the Mekong. The other end of this journey would be Luang Prabang. As this was during the height of the summer holidays, some long boats would be packing over fifty foreign students in a single boat, led by teachers on summer excursion trips. Other boats would have groups of backpackers among a few locals traveling up and down the river.

Deang’s home was in the small village of Houay Sor, perched right above the north bank of the Mekong. As we disembarked and started hiking up the bank, a tractor came ▶
roaring up the gulley following a track partly washed away by the rain. It was hauling rocks retrieved from the riverbed; foundation stone for a new building. As the incline was steep, half a dozen women were pushing the tractor up the hill. It seemed quite common to see women in the countryside doing the hardest job, while the men take up the easier part of steering, as in this case with the tractor.

Before reaching the village, we passed through a gate made from bamboo. One end of these bamboos was shaven sharp, like spears. With all sharp edges facing inward, the gate was believed to ward off evils and enemies alike.

Deang was in the process of building a new house for his parents, with cement bricks rather than bamboo walls and tin roof rather than thatched. Such houses were considered a sign of wealth and modernity. A refrigerator held the place of honor in the middle of the wall, facing the entrance. This was a gift, presumably part of a dowry, from Deang’s fiancé. They expect to be married in 2016. Villagers gathered around the house to have a good look at the strange looking visitors. Some older Khmu ladies still sported tattoos on their faces and bodies.

Our next stop was Pak Beng for the night. Karim ran a brand new lodge with twelve rooms overlooking the Mekong, next to the boat landing. Most otherlodgings in this small village seemed to be home-stay Bed & Breakfast type affairs. Karim’s Mekong Riverside Lodge was the most pricy; at USD $35 per night, but it seemed the most sophisticated, hugging the river bank with balconies looking down to the Mekong. We took up the rooms with the best views.

Across the street was a restaurant with a sign outside sporting an Indian flag advertising authentic Indian cuisine. It turned out Karim also owned the Indian restaurant. Yet Karim is from Bangladesh. Not only did he own the restaurant, he was also the chef. At breakfast the following morning, an always-smiling Karim was seen in a most colorful shirt, donning his apron and in the kitchen cooking up a meal for us. Such hands-on entrepreneurship is typical in outlying areas of the world.

There was some striking differences between the Mekong here and the Irrawaddy further west in Myanmar. The Mekong mid-section has more limestone hills, looking rather pristine with lots of green jungle, though Bill was quick to point out that these were not primary forest but secondary growth. We rarely saw any birds or heard much cricket and insect chirping at night. Fish life along the Mekong was also relatively scanty, though we managed to buy a five kilo goonch catfish, measuring almost a meter in length. On two occasions however, I saw an elephant.

Villagers here tend not to bathe in the river or wash their clothes along the banks, unlike people living along the Irrawaddy. There was little river traffic save local ferries and small fishing sampans. The river was not wide, and the banks offered little farmland. Plantings were mainly up the hillside, using slash and burn rotation for crops like corn, beans and sticky dry rice. While I saw no dams, I did see a huge tree being cut down by the bank.

After two long days sailing downriver on the Mekong, we reached Luang Prabang. A strange new policy had been implemented recently forcing all tourist boats to dock ten kilometers north of the World Heritage city, once the capital of Laos. Tuk-tuks, designated motor tricycles, would then take the tourists into town, while the boats were allowed
to sail empty of passengers all the way to the town center where they moored along the banks. The only reason, logical or illogical, I could deduce was that some officials were running some kind of syndicate to inconvenience tourists while extracting a higher than usual fare to enter the heritage site.

It was low season for tourism and many hostels and Bed & Breakfast lodges were closed for business. We found one small family hotel by the bank of the river. With seven vacant rooms, it was just the perfect size for our team of twelve. We took up the entire Muong Lao Riverside Hotel, costing only USD17.5 per room. From my balcony in Room 203, I could view the Mekong flowing by. Just across the street, I noticed a young man was cutting the hair of another man. I went down the stairs and checked it out, as I too badly needed a cut. It turned out the barber was the manager of our hotel, doing a favor for a friend. Soon I took up the stool, became his friend, and got my free haircut.

Posted on our hotel reception was a sign, “Wifi password – Daniel1177.” I chatted with the young lady at the reception desk. “Is Daniel the owner of this hotel?” I asked. “Daniel is my name,” answered the lady with a smile showing her dimples. “Daniel? But that’s a guy’s name!” I exclaimed. “In Lao language, my name sounded exactly like Daniel, so I chose that name,” Daniel explained with halting English. She is 19 years old and the hotel belongs to her parents. Her elder sister is a third year student studying tourism at a university in Chengdu.

On our way back upriver, I checked on satellite images with my iPad. I decided, together with Deang’s knowledge of the area, that we should be able to sail up the Namtha River, an important tributary of the Mekong, to Luang Namtha where our cars were parked. It should take two days on small long-tail wooden boats. As we needed two boats to accommodate all twelve of us, Deang called ahead, and two boats were ready when we reached the confluence at Pak Tha on the second day after leaving Luang Prabang. By now the junk food we brought along on our boat was about depleted.

The first day after ten hours on the small boat through torrential rain ended at Khon Kham Village. Volunteers from New Zealand had donated funds and helped build an eco-lodge. All twelve of us barely fit, lined up on the floor in two rooms. Hardly any food was available and there were no restaurants, so we bought and had one duck and one chicken slaughtered to prepare for our dinner. The local Lao women were excellent weavers. Their wares were soon snatched up by our eager group trying to expend the remaining Kip that we had exchanged, as we were nearing the end of our trip. I too, bought several pieces, both old and new ones. I was particularly attracted to one exquisite woven fabric with many animal and bird motifs.

Finally, after seven days on the Mekong and its tributary the Namtha, we were on the last leg towards reaching Luang Namtha. The river had narrowed to a fast running stream. At several locations, it dropped in rapids like those for whitewater rafting, and we proceeded with trepidation against the current. These were also occasions when the water would splash into our tiny boat. At times, I could not determine which was making us soaking wet, the river or the rain.

At long last, I was back on land, with my two feet anchored on the bank of the Namtha River. Back at our hotel, I found myself swaying from side to side, as if I were still on the river. At dinner, I decided to have two glasses of wine, though my usual tolerance would be one. I figured that, if I must feel dizzy, I might feel better thinking that it was from the wine rather than from being on boats for seven days. While that might work well with the imagination of a five year old child, I found that it was time for a reality check, for someone at 65.
On the border of China and Lao PDR lives a small ‘international’ elephant population. These elephants roam back and forth between the tiny protected area of Shangyong Xishuangbanna in China into the much larger Nam Ha National Protected Area in Lao PDR. They move seasonally following the availability of all the things that elephants need – food, water, mineral salts, space and tranquillity. In order to record some of their activity and learn more about the movements of these secretive animals we went out into the field armed with camera traps. We knew that, until twenty years ago, there were hundreds of elephants in this area. Now there are only a few dozen but with better protection and understanding of elephants their numbers could recover and they could repopulate the Nam Ha region.

This is a particularly challenging area to survey, and even more so in the rainy season. The forest here is dense, the slopes are steep and the ‘paths’ are mostly streams and rivers. If we weren’t wading through waterways, usually up to our waists, we were scrambling, often on all fours, up steep muddy hillsides. Within half a day my hands were lacerated with small cuts from grabbing the less than hospitable bits of spikey vegetation to either haul myself up or stop myself from falling down. On the second day I slipped down a vertical muddy bank into a river and smacked my knee on a submerged rock. The result was a rather swollen and colourfully bruised leg, which I limped on for the rest of the trek. I comforted myself with the thought that after setting our camera traps we wouldn’t need to go back until after the rainy season had ended.

Early in the morning we climbed up a steep bank, crawled through thick undergrowth and emerged into what looked like a primeval swamp. Our Lao Program Manager, Mr. Deang, had set up a camera trap a few months earlier in the dry season on one of the gnarly looking trees that overhung a mineral rich muddy pond, a mecca for all kinds of wildlife. We were in luck! Mr. Deang scrolled through the video clips captured on the SD card, and there they were: A small family herd of elephants including a calf enjoying the mud. Like all elephants, female Asian Elephants stay in small family herds led by a matriarch, whereas males live alone. Together with the dung and footprints that indicated a male elephant also inhabited the area our videos provided valuable evidence that there was a viable breeding population in the area. Well pleased with the start to the day we set up a replacement camera in the same location carefully angled towards the area from where we thought the animals were most likely to come.

Whilst the camera was being adjusted, I was very intrigued by a strange gooey foam that was dripping from the leaves of the overhanging branches. It was a creamy colour and, on close inspection, had small round white specks in it. It had an almost jelly like consistency and hung in large globules among the leaves. On seeing my quizzical face, Mr. Deang explained that it was the foam nests of frogs. These nests are made by a variety of species of frogs that live in water and are adapted to lay their eggs in foam. The foam acts as a protective covering for the eggs and as a trap for insects, which the young frogs eat as they grow. Mr. Deang also pointed out an orchid flower, which he said was very rare and only found in this area. The camera trap footage also captured images of a variety of other wildlife, including primates, reptiles, and birds.
Mr. Deang smiled and informed me that it was ‘kai gob.’ Of course, frogs’ eggs! What we were seeing were foam nests. Many frogs mate in trees, and females produce a secretion that males or both sexes whip into a foam with their legs. Into this goop the females then lay their fertilised eggs. The outside of the foam mass dries and hardens, leaving the inside moist. The eggs hatch into tadpoles that burrow out of the nest, falling into a pool below.

The forest here is full of frogs. Or it would be if my Lao friends would stop eating them! Laos is something of a hotbed of frog biodiversity. Scientists know about 100 frog species in Laos and there may well be dozens of species that we have not identified yet. As any biologist who has spent time wondering that there still is unknown biodiversity to be discovered in the tropics knows, what may be unknown to science is not always unknown to the local palate.

On my first trip into the Nam Ha Protected Area in search of elephants back in February this year we set up camp the first evening by the river. The CERS staff and our local guides wasted no time in putting on their head torches and going in search of frogs. They filled a bag and came back to cook them up for supper. I am very fond of frogs, but not on my plate. I find them an especially endearing group of creatures with their big eyes and smiling faces. Personal feelings aside I am also aware of their biological significance and as a conservationist rather despair of the unnecessary killing of wildlife. To my Lao friends however these sentiments are both baffling and amusing. There are plenty of frogs, they are easy to catch and a tasty form of free protein, they reason. Why did I not eat frogs but was happy to eat fish? I admitted the contradiction and turned away, trying not to think about whether the poor creatures were alive when they went into the cooking pot.

This trip was no different, and in fact, being the rainy season, the frogs were even more abundant. This time barbequed frogs were on the menu. Again, I tried to explain my position on eating frogs. Our colleague from the Nam Ha Protected Area tried to reassure me “Don’t worry,” he said, “we are doing elephant conservation, not frog conservation!”

After three days in the forest we arrived back in Nam Khong Village and the road head. As we were waiting for our lift back to town in the house of our local guide, there they were again, a bucket of frogs, looking very much like Kermit. These bright green tree frogs were most probably *Rhacophorus maximus*, the Giant Tree Frog, a species that is widespread from India through the northern parts of Southeast Asia to Yunnan. They are not seen much apart from in the breeding season when it rains. Then they come down from the canopy to make their foam nests in the trees. The local villagers know this and go out with torches and pick the unsuspecting creatures out of the trees, collecting them in buckets. The males are smaller than the females and they cling to them in order to secure their chance to fertilise the eggs. It was rather sad looking at them all piled up in the bucket, clinging to each other as they were picked out one by one and cut, alive, with scissors neatly into quarters to be cooked and eaten. I sighed and my Lao colleagues smiled at me knowingly. The villagers were oblivious to any idea of controversy over their frog shaped dinner.

Back in town, I felt a little the worse for the wear, limping and covered in leech bites and bruises. Still, I was happy to know that in that small pocket of Lao PDR beside the China border there was still a little hope for elephants. I just hope that the frogs can survive as well.
Palawan is considered to be the best preserved islands in the Philippines. In 2011, the National Geographic magazine named it the world’s best place for scenic photography and diving. When our team first arrived at Palawan’s Puerto Princesa Airport, the first thing that caught my attention was an advertisement about the region’s caves and underground rivers. As a cave explorer, I was so excited. I said to the team, “Bingo, we hit the right target, because our whole team is now coming to explore these caves.”

Another member of our team who was even more excited was Jocelyn. She was excited because she was a native of Palawan returning to her birth place. Throughout our exploration she acted as our guide, interpreter and liaison officer.

Jocelyn works for How Man in Hong Kong, and so she knows that CERS has expertise in cave exploring. When she went back to Palawan on home leave, she chatted with her fellow villagers about How Man and the Society’s work. They felt that CERS could help them explore the many caves scattered around their villages and advise them on ways to promote tourism using these caves.

On the plane trip, I made some comparisons between my home and Palawan. Kunming is an island plateau city and Palawan is an island on the sea. Kunming is 21,473 sq. km in area and has a population of over 7 million people. Palawan is 11,785 sq. km in area and its population is only 0.9 million. Both are popular tourist destinations. For a plateau person like me to travel to a tropical island, clothing preparation was extremely simply; a few T-shirts were all that was needed.
If, however, a tropical person like Jocelyn were to travel to a plateau region like Kunming, she would need warm clothes which, after the trip, she would never have the chance to wear again.

Although Palawan and Kunming are different in many aspects, they have one thing in common and that is both are among the world’s most spectacular karst landscapes, harboring plentiful caves.

Caves are the cradle of civilization in both places. They are also a serious topic for study and research by anthropologists. In southwestern Palawan, a group of caves known as Tabon Caves are considered the cradle of Filipino civilization. Archaeologists have found prehistoric human bones and tools in these caves. Similarly, in the Longtan Caves in Kunming city’s Chenggong, archaeologists have also found human remains (known as the Kunming Men) and their artifacts dating back more than 30,000 years.

Kunming’s Luonan Stone Forest is world famous for its size and spectacular appearance and is listed as a World Heritage Natural Site. In Palawan, the place listed as a World Heritage Natural Site is not the beautiful Cockpit-Karst Landscape by the sea. It is the Puerto Princesa Subterranean River instead. Situated in Sabang, central Palawan, it is the longest known subterranean river cave system in the world, with a length of 24 km or more.

As an advisor of the Yunnan Tourism Bureau, I was impressed by the 40 minute boat tour along the Subterranean River, not so much because of the scenes along the underground river, but because of the high corporate ethics and management standards of the organization that runs the PPSR. While making efforts to attract tourists, the organization had not forgotten its duty to preserve the cave’s integrity.

Admission ticket for the PPSR was 200 pesos roughly equivalent to HKD30.00 per head which, I believe, is the about cheapest price for a similar place any where in China or Europe. So as not to disturb the bats and swallows nesting inside, no lights were fitted throughout the entire length of the river cave. The only source of illumination throughout our boat trip was the guide’s headlight. The guide was professional in his work and he was very kind too. He advised us not to look up with our mouths opened, unless we didn’t mind swallowing bat droppings.

The next place we went was the nearby Ugong Rock Cave in Sabang. The cave, situated underneath a 100m high rocky hill, was in fact a narrow crack inside the body of the hill that extends from the bottom of the hill to its top. A few years ago, a local television station constructed two ropeways to the top of the hill to enable its crew to get there to film an adventure documentary. After the filming, local villagers used the rope ways to organize abseiling activities for tourists and the place then became a tourist attraction. Climbing up the whole length of the cave to get to its upper exit at the top of the hill was a tiring task. Not wanting to return by climbing down the same cave route, I decided to get down by the zip line. Bad luck for me and the long que behind me; there was a long wait, because the ropeway staff had difficulties finding a suitable harness for a Western tourist in front of us. He was at least twice my size, so the staff had to exercise extra caution when fitting the harness on him.

The next two caves we went to were the Hundred Cave and the Dinosaur Cave, which were not tourist caves, as they had hardly been explored. Their straightline distance from the Ugong Rock Cave was only a few kilometers, situated on two adjoining hills from the same mountain ridge. The hills’ white cliffs were very eye-catching against the green forests and farm lands surrounding them. Our team first arrived at a village near the caves. The village head and his assistants were already waiting for us by the side of the road. With Jocelyn acting as interpreter, the village head briefed us on what he and his fellow villagers knew about these two caves and other caves nearby. He said the land and use rights of these caves were owned by all the villagers together. They wanted us to help them survey and map them. They would also like us to offer suggestions on how to develop tourism, to teach them cave exploring techniques, and to help them train their people to become guides for cave tourism. These were all meaningful things that we could do for them.
The entrance to Hundred Cave was about 94m in altitude and was only a short distance from the foot of the hill. This distance, however, was covered by a dense forest, and the forest floor was full of rocks with razor sharp upward thrusting points and edges. How Man’s footwear at that time was a pair of slippers, obviously not suitable and dangerous for walking there. He had to turn back, but the rest of us pushed on. The Hundred Cave was a system of branching caves with many entrances. That was the reason for its name. The cave system ran generally from north to south and comprised three layers, indicating that it was formed in different periods by crustal movement. The cave cavity was generally regular in shape and there were few formations such as stalactites inside.

Our measurements showed that the length of the cave was 461.2m, maximum ceiling height was 12.1m, and the biggest difference in altitude was 46.8m. While we were doing the measurements, Bill was examining the creatures we found in the cave with excitement. As a geologist, I explained to the villagers that accompanied us how things like stalactites were formed in caves. The team’s photographer, Xavier Lee, acted as my interpreter. The villagers listened attentively and with amazement.

The last cave we explored in Palawan was Dinosaur Cave. It took us two days to complete the exploration. The entrance to the Dinosaur Cave was hidden in a cluster of rocks in the forest. This time How Man wore a pair of proper mountain hiking boots, however, I was still a bit worried about him. At one point inside this cave, the passage was very narrow and one could only barely pass through after taking off helmet and backpack. How Man surprised me when he safely passed through without great difficulty. On the first day, Zhou Chen Su and Wang Jian crawled through a very narrow crack in the cave to descend to an underground river. In a deep pool there, they saw a big fish, about 1m long and also some other smaller fish and shrimps.

The altitude of this entrance was 145m above sea level and was much higher than the cave itself. The cave comprised two layers; the upper layer was dry and the lower one was the underground river. As the dry cave on the upper layer was linked to the underground river at many points, ventilation inside the Dinosaur Cave was very good. Temperature inside the cave was a cool and comfortable 24.5°C. Outside the cave, the temperature was 34°C. Compared with the Hundred Cave, the Dinosaur Cave had many more cave formations and therefore had higher value for aesthetic reasons. As only very few people had ventured into the cave before, the calcareous deposits inside were largely undamaged. There were large numbers of bats, and also many cave invertebrates. In the cave I noticed an arthropod whose appearance resembled a combination of a spider and a scorpion. It had a big pair of pincers which made it look very ferocious. I had never seen such a creature in China or Europe before. I subsequently did some research and now know that it is called a “whip spider”, belonging to the order of the class Arachnida.

On our return to China, we quickly bought a batch of head lights for cave exploration and sent them to villagers together with the sketches of the caves we produced. We hope to be able to return to Palawan soon to help them train up people for cave exploration, as we have pledged.

CERS was not the first to do cave exploration in the St. Paul Karst Area. During our boat tour of the PPSR, I saw the words “1937 April 13” inscribed on the cave wall. Before we explored the Hundred Cave and the Dinosaur Cave, a total of 15 caves in the St. Paul Karst Area had been explored. The total length of these 15 caves are 30 km, and seven had a length over 500m. After our exploration of the Hundred Cave and the Dinosaur Cave, the number of caves in the St. Paul Karst Area that have been explored is increased from 15 to 17, and the total length of caves explored is increased by 1.3 km. For CERS, this is only the beginning. 
THE SECOND DEFILE

by William Bleisch, PhD

Aboard the HM Explorer on the Ayeyarwaddy, Myanmar
MAIN: Bamboo raft at foot of Second Defile.
The sound of chainsaws echoes through the canyon almost throughout the day. The Second Defile is being logged.

The dreadful background noise makes me cringe reflexively, but the visual scene is still spectacular. The mighty river narrows to a deep ribbon of dark water that snakes between towering hills. The bare rocks of the cliffs stand out from the deep green of the forest, several large trees towering over their neighbours. Birds are abundant and diverse. We even see a small flock of hornbills flying high overhead.

We travel downriver in two Zodiac inflatables to get a close look at the famous Parrots Beak, a psctid-like rock formation that overhangs the river. The beak, painted bright red, dips to within 2 meters of the flowing water. Legend has it that if the water rises to the point where the parrot can drink, then disaster will befall the kingdom. We wonder if last weeks flood waters fulfilled the prophecy.

We interview a group of loggers who are resting in a bamboo hut on the right bank of the river, just below the cliffs. The man who seems to be the leader is happy to chat with us. He is from Chin State in western Myanmar, where the hornbills are considered a very special bird. They are even displayed in the centre of the flag of the Chin State party. Unfortunately, he tells us, the birds have disappeared in Chin State, although they are still found just here. It seems that those remaining large trees provide roosts and nesting sites for a small flock of about 15 Oriental Pied Hornbills. I see a Green-billed Malkoha and then a Black-crested Bulbul behind the loggers’ hut. A flock of three goshawks soar high overhead.

Back at the HM Explorer, our first mate hands me a small Rita catfish that he has caught. As dusk approaches, two large bats fly directly over, and we listen to them chattering in ultra-sound with a Bat Detector set to about 25 MHz. Our boat, berthed on a sandy bank, is in the evening shadow of the tall cliff. It is known as the Deva-faced Cliff, but the outline in the rock looks more like the full figure of a Bodhisattva to me. Legend has it that the goddess once saved the life of a prince. His brother had decreed that the Prince should be thrown from the top of the cliff.

We shouldn’t blame his brother too much. He was just following the time-honored Burmese tradition of protecting his claim to the throne of the kingdom by removing all other claimants. However, in this legendary case, the Deva in the cliff must have felt sorry for the ill-starred prince, and she saved him from death. The story-teller did not relate what happened next – whether the Prince claimed the throne and set the country on a path to civil war, or accepted his defeat and worked to spare the kingdom the heartbreak of more violence.

You would think that the Second Defile would be a sacred place, with its Parrot Beak and Deva-faced Cliff. But when I ask Su Hlaing Myint, our CERS Myanmar Project Manager, she denies it. She tells me that there are so many trees here because the site is disputed between two rival armies, the Myanmar National Army and the Kachin Independence Army. Perhaps as a result, no one has jurisdiction here, and independent loggers can operate freely on a small scale.

Peace may bring prosperity, but prosperity may not bring peace to the Second Defile. In any other country, this site would be a National Park, protected as a tourism resource and promoted as one of the attractions of the country. In modern Asia, tourism and heritage often take a back seat.
I think back on the last months of travel. Everywhere I go these days, no matter how remote, the signs of progress are evident – new industrial banana plantations near Pu Er in Yunnan, new rubber plantations in Luang Namtha in northern Lao PDR, a new hydro dam on the Nam Tha River downstream in Bokeo Province, large-scale mines on the banks of the Ayeryarwaddy and Chindwin Rivers.

The pace of change is accelerating exponentially, as it must if we are to fulfill the targets set by governments and global bodies for economic growth. The government of the Lao People’s Democratic Republic has set a target for economic growth of 7% for the year, necessary they say to pull the country out of its status as one of the Least Developed Countries in the world. A laudable goal for a country where the per capita income, recorded by the World Bank as GNI, averages only $1,600. The reported GNI for Myanmar is only $1,200, but Myanmar is on track to achieve 8.5% growth in GDP this year.

But what does this mean in practice? Lao PDR has no industry to speak of. Although it exports good rice and excellent coffee, and has a growing and healthy tourism industry, the big drivers of the economy all involve exploitation of natural resources – hydropower, industrial agriculture, mining. The economic plan is very much centered on these industries. Myanmar seems to be heading in much the same direction.

If extraction of natural resources are to be the engine behind rapid economic growth in these countries, then extraction and utilization must increase by a comparable amount each year. If 7% growth in GDP based on 7% growth in resource extraction, the simple arithmetic of exponential growth means that the rate of extraction must double in 9.9 years. It will triple in 15.7 years, quadruple in less than 20 years. Four times more mines, dams, plantations ….

As we head back downstream, the current and engine work together and the boat seems to zip over the surface of the river. We race past the line of 23.5 degree latitude and re-enter the tropics. We rush past a checkerboard of old pastures, bamboo shrubland, planted teak and the bare red earth of newly cleared fields ready for the plow. The shrub forest is studded with the tall trunks and high canopies of old tamarinds, mangos and fig trees. We speed past small villages composed of huts perched on top of teak wood stilts, their walls made of bamboo mats woven in checkerboard patterns. The green of bamboo and shrubs seems to hug and shelter these villages. Fishing boats and cargo vessels are moored on the river below.

The HM Explorer sails on downstream and we soon reach a point on the river with a 3G signal where I can get back in touch with the world. I look at the times on the e-mails coming into my In-box: 17:48, 21:50, 23:45, 00:18, 5:53. They are all from Asia, most from the Beijing time zone. It seems none of my colleagues ever stop working anymore. I think of us all, dedicated to changing the world in some positive way. Perhaps my colleagues all feel as I do, that we must run faster and faster but, even so, we are still failing to keep pace with the negative changes. Change that itself is driven as if by a relentless machine; consumers driven by a search for novelty, governments trapped on a treadmill of economic growth at any cost, workers driven by fear of an economic system that must sacrifice human well-being, environmental health and cultural integrity to keep up a steady pace of endless growth, or face catastrophic failure.

The boat races on. The landscape changes to flat fields and the boat winds between islands covered in tall grass. High winds stir up choppy water and we give up hope of seeing the last Irrawaddy Dolphins in the waves. Ancient stupas newly painted white or gold stand out on the banks like exclamation points in the narrative of the river. Soon we are back in busy Mandalay and the end of our river trip.
The colonial house still retains a shade of its former glory. Bricks in crimson red, teak wood cross-bars and corner pillars, a large front door with glass panels tell tales of an era past, when British officers would take up the residence with pomp and circumstance.

A butler there would be, and perhaps several maids and attendants, a gardener or two, certainly a carriage driver; those were the days George Orwell described, when he lived in Katha, on the west bank of the Irrawaddy River, as a police officer. Not far down the road from the house was the Club House, nearby to a tennis court. Up until a year ago, everyone thought this red and brown house was where George Orwell stayed, and it was known simply as George Orwell’s house.

But Phyo Ko, a Burmese Orwell fanatic and amateur historian, thought otherwise. Phyo Ko, after some exhaustive research, claimed in 2014 that this house should be the one Orwell described in his book *Burmese Days*, taken up by the fictional Mr. MacGregor, a colonial officer. Phyo Ko believed Orwell lived a few blocks away, in another semi-colonial house, a teak house with some Burmese motifs on the eaves, on the verandahs and on the stairs. Both houses, however, are important as relics to illustrate Orwell’s significant transition, from an Etonian to a democratic socialist.
To be on the safe side, I visited both houses, as I am on sort of a pilgrimage to old haunts of this famous English writer, the man who authored *Animal Farm* and *1984*, both must-reads during my college days. George Orwell is someone the Burmese government should feel safe to remember and honor. After all, his writing demeaned the British colonial system and its policies, and the opulence and decadent lifestyle of the colonialists; all in line with current official sentiments about that era.

It seems strange that someone as conscious as Orwell was about the ills of colonialism, defying the system that he worked for, would also write such critical satire about totalitarian states and society throughout his later writings. But *Animal Farm* is a classic allegory portraying the defects and inevitable corruption, not only of communism, but of fascism as well.

George Orwell stayed in Katha, only for a year from 1926 to 1927, during the last part of his almost five years in Burma. His experience at Katha formed the basis of his first novel, *Burmese Days*, published in 1934. His writings were to affect a generation of readers, resulting in his name becoming even an adjective; “Orwellian” became a reference and synonym for a totalitarian government and society that passes off lies as the truth. I can only think of one other name of a person becoming a commonly used adjective, Plato.

Today, the house George Orwell described is abandoned. One can enter through a side door and appreciate the emptiness of a two-story colonial house, with four fireplaces, two to each floor. A wooden stairs leads up to the upper floor where I could look out louvre windows into big trees and the field beyond.

I stand quietly by the fireplace chimney in the living room and look around discretely. For a moment I feel as if I can hear footsteps from almost a century ago, coming down the stairs. I see a shadow, reflected off the glass panes of a partition door. “George, I presume,” I think of asking. Suddenly, I realize it is just a reflection of myself. But for a short moment, I thought I was meeting George Orwell in person.
"Han la," urged Jack with a tone of impatience. That means “keep moving” in Cantonese. “Han la,” there he went again. His voice was barely audible but firm. “Han la.”

Within less than ten minutes, as Louise, his wife, walked Jack up the two blocks to get to the restaurant from their home, Jack repeatedly urged her along three times. Each time Louise stopped, trying to make Jack take a breather along the pavement with a slight grade, each time, Jack refused to stop.

Why should he stop? That insistence and perseverance had served him well, epitomizing his spirit of “keep moving” that had taken Jack from childhood to such a senior age, turning 101 later this year. Every time I saw Jack Young, I reminded him that he should tell people his name is “Jack Old”. He seemed entertained whenever I mentioned it.

It was through Moon Chin, another centenarian and celebrity pilot; that I got to meet Jack. Jack started out as Moon’s copilot, flying the Hump during the War between India and China until he was checked out as a Captain for the China National Aviation Corporation (CNAC). Before that, he flew for the Canton Warlord Chen Jitong in the mid-1930s, then joined the Kuomintang Nationalist Air Force. Our first meeting was in Hong Kong, where Jack spent each winter getting away from the bitter cold of Montreal. I had interviewed Jack several times. But this was the first time we met at his home in Montreal.

Jack was born in November 1914 in San Francisco. His father came from Zhongshan, a county adjacent to Macau in Guangdong Province of southern China. Jack’s passport however, mistakenly bears his birth year as 1917, which allowed him to work a few more years before retiring. That was something he found most convenient, as it allowed him...
extra years around his beloved airplanes. By then, Jack was still involved with aviation, though not as a pilot, heading a team of maintenance personnel at the Hong Kong Aircraft Engineering Company (HAECO). The airplane servicing company had its home at Hong Kong Kai Tak Airport. This was the career Jack took up after “retiring” from active flying.

But the most exciting era of Jack’s long career in aviation was during the early days, from the mid-1930s through World War Two and the Civil War years in China, continuing into the early 1950s when the Communists took over Mainland China. Those were the most turbulent years of modern day China, involving various factions not only on the Mainland, but also in Taiwan and Hong Kong.

“I never thought that flying was a cool thing, I was just transfixed with flying. I never brag about it, trying to show-off by being a pilot,” said Jack as a matter of fact. “As a kid, I used to rush out of the house whenever I heard an airplane flying overhead,” he added. “After school and later after work, I always went over to the airfield to look at airplanes taking off and landing. I always knew somehow, some time, I would be up there flying.

“It was a promise I made to myself,” Jack continued. “I worked hard, saving up every penny I had, so I could go to flight school. I even took up more than one job, I waited at tables, I did whatever job was on offer. I was only 16 at the time. But I said to myself. I will become a pilot. It was not cheap in those days to take flying lessons, as you know.”

“You know, when I was a kid I used to wear glasses, and I had heard you must have good eyes to pass a flight test,” recounted Jack. “Then one day I read in the Reader’s Digest that looking at green fields and trees would help correct your eyesight,” he recalled. “So I went out and

LEFT TO RIGHT:
Jack Young in front of early airplanes and inside DC-3 cockpit.
CNAC and CATC pilots and crew defected to China in 1949.
Jack in front of DC-3 doorway.
looked intently at anything green, and over time it worked. Gradually I could do without my glasses,” said Jack. It was such strong will that finally got Jack his flight license at age 19. The year was 1933.

“In Canton, I felt I was flying for China, not just for Chen Jitong. I felt being Chinese is very important, and I could not stand being called Chinaman, Chink Chink, like that in America.” Jack expressed his desire to go to China to serve the country. Later during the War, he joined CNAC, a civilian airlines and joint venture between the Chinese government and Pan American Airways.

“Flying the Hump was the most dangerous among my aviation career. The Japanese were everywhere with their Pursuit fighters, and we, flying passengers and cargo, were not armed,” Jack recounted the most heady days of the War. “We had to fly high and into the cloud, mostly at night and bad weather, to avoid the Japanese while crossing the Hump,” Jack added. “You just had to take full control of the plane, and be confident that you could do it. There was no second thought about danger or whatever.” Jack held his fist firmly as he made his point. “I don’t believe in luck. But I trust God, and thank him after each flight,” Jack seemed to soften his tone when he mentioned his belief. “I went to church and prayed,” he reminisced quietly.

By the 1950s, perhaps it was good measure that the airlines in Hong Kong chose not to let Jack get his hands behind the wheels inside a cockpit, but instead allowed him to maintain the aircrafts that he knew so well. Jack was after all trained first as a mechanic, before becoming a pilot. Unlike other pilots who went straight to the cockpit, he knew the aircraft well, inside and out. But there was one speck, of dirt or of merit, depending on who you speak to, on Jack’s flying record.

This most controversial flight came about when Jack was a young man of 35, some 65 years ago. The episode happened on November 9, 1949, barely a month after Mao Zedong stood on Tien An Men Gate and proclaimed the founding of the People’s Republic of China. On that particular morning, Jack woke up earlier than usual, before sunrise and when the sky was still dark without any sign of dawn, after a largely sleepless night. But he wasn’t alone. There were eleven other pilots, and as many co-pilots plus radio operators wide awake on that early morning. It was as if a squadron was readying to go on some important war mission.

As the first shade of dawn gradually cast over Kai Tak Airport in Hong Kong, twelve airplanes, mostly DC-3, C-47 (a version of the DC-3), and C-46, including one most modern and a brand new Convair C-240 recently delivered to Hong Kong, all revved up their engines. The roar brought the airport to life, as one after another, these twelve airplanes took to the air in regulated succession within a period of two hours. The airport officials, controlled by the British in the tiny colony on the coast of China, did not suspect anything unusual. After all, these airplanes were registered with two civil aviation companies, CNAC and CATC (Central Air Transport Corporation, which was an airline co-founded by Moon Chin right after the end of the War in 1945).

At the time, much of southwest China was still in the hands of the Nationalists, including Guilin and Kunming. It wasn’t unusual for the two airlines to dispatch their planes to cities under the jurisdiction of the Kuomintang. But as soon as these planes took to the air, they redirected their flight paths and veered far off to the east, avoiding radar and radio stations of the Nationalists. Within the next five hours, eleven of these planes would be landing in Tientsin in succession, and the newest plane, belonging to CATC, would touch down in Beijing. On that particular plane were the two General Managers of both CNAC and CATC, together with a few high-level underground communists who had choreographed the event over a long period of time.

There were great receptions at both airports. In fact, the Beijing crew and passengers were quickly whisked off to a welcoming banquet hosted by Zhou Enlai that same evening. Chairman Mao was soon to script some praising words for these brave and “patriotic” aviators. A coup indeed it was, when twelve airplanes defected to the newly founded PRC. This was to become the core of a fledgling young civilian airline for China. The defectors were hailed as heroes in
China and as traitors by the Nationalists, who themselves had only retreated to the island of Taiwan not long before.

Jack Young was one of the pilots of the twelve airplanes, flying a C-46, which was considered a very new aircraft, developed and delivered only during the latter part of the Second World War. It was considered a very difficult airplane to fly, much larger and heavier than a DC-3. Many American flyers crashed and died in it. However, for Jack, this had always been his favorite airplane, powerful and spacious.

While most of the pilots who defected to China stayed, their fate through the 1950s and into the Cultural Revolution varied. No doubt the 50s were the glory days, but not for long, as the country became a nest of radicals who were finding every means to witch-hunt for anyone with any overseas connections. Pilots and crew who defected from the Nationalists to the Communists became natural prey. Jack was one exception. He flew in China for only a couple of years, including time as a flight instructor. Then, in 1952, he decided this was not his cup of tea. He returned to Hong Kong and thus was spared the political turmoil of subsequent years in China. Though he was fiercely nationalistic, he did not pledge allegiance to any political party. Jack felt, even to this day, that as a Chinese he must uphold the dignity and integrity of China. An often repeated phrase from his mouth is, “We as Chinese cannot lose face.” But early on, he saw the incessant political feuds and maneuvering within the government at all levels, including in the running of the airlines and its operations. He decided he should return to Hong Kong.

That incident was not Jack’s first or only defection. In the mid-1930s, he was one of the pilots of the Canton Air Force under Warlord Chen Jitong. The pilots defected en masse with their airplanes to Nanjing to join the Kuomintang of the Nationalists. The 1949 debacle was his second round of defection.

Today, at such senior age, Jack still gets excited when talking about flying, especially when he displays his knowledge about each and every type of plane he has flown. But when asked about his defection to China, Jack will go “mum”. Obviously it is an episode he would much rather forget. Though I knew there was some personal loss resulting from that fateful decision in 1949, I did not want to bring it up in case that wound is still hurting him, a proud individual who had seen all the ups and downs of both China and Hong Kong throughout much of the last century.

At the first interview inside our aviation exhibit at the 1939 House in Shek O, Jack sat with his back straight in front of a life-size mock-up of a DC-3 cockpit. At our second interview, I surprised him by changing the cockpit to that of a C-46, his favorite airplane. We also had an entire panel decorated with early pictures of his flying career, including those taken when he was a student pilot in bi-planes, and pictures from the War years flying the Hump. He pointed to a picture, now turned yellow from age, of a young Jack Young. “Since seeing the first airplane, I knew I wanted to become a pilot.”

He talked deliberately but slowly, often repeating his important points several times. Every time I asked whether he had been worried or afraid when flying under extreme conditions during the War, each time he would answer simply, “That was my job.” “I knew my airplane and what it could do. I checked through the plane carefully, being trained also as a mechanic,” Jack reiterated.

“You must be totally positive and fully convinced that you can achieve your goal and mission,” said Jack with a firm but quiet voice while holding up his fist to make his point. Immaculately dressed in his leather flight jacket with a tidy silk scarf around his neck, Jack Young will always remain young, even at over a hundred years of age.

Han la, Jack!

LEFT TO RIGHT:
Jack Young in smart uniform.
Three centenarian pilots Moon Chin, Jack Young and Peter Goutiere.
Jack Young in front of CERS cockpit room.
Jack and wife Louise in Montreal.
CLOCKWISE FROM TOP:
HM Explorer model and ship in background.
Cao Zhongyu drying wet camera.
Interns disembarking HM Explorer.
Interns in Zodiac at Second Defile.
Team in front of George Orwell’s house.
HM rowing wet. Interview at Deang’s home.
Ranee May, retired faculty emeritus at the University of Wisconsin, River Falls, joined CERS as an Associate. Ranee has taught dairy science, in particular homestead and artisanal cheese making, for over 30 years. She pioneered CERS Yak Cheese production which recently won a Gold Award in France. Ranee would help expand our Yak Cheese social enterprise in Shangri-la to cover yogurt and ice-cream, as well as experiment with dairy development in Myanmar.

CERS is supporting two fishing villages along the Irrawaddy in their handy craft, collecting drift wood to be carved into dolphin souvenirs, for sale on cruise ships catering to high-end tourists. This is part of our effort to save the Irrawaddy Dolphin, with less than 80 individual animals remaining.

John Hsu, CERS patron, joined CERS on HM Explorer on the Irrawaddy as well as at our project sites at Inle Lake Myanmar.

Betsy Cohen, CERS patron from New York, visited CERS 1939 Exhibit House in Shek O.

Tony Chan, President of the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology, visited our 1939 Exhibit House in Shek O.

Wayne Tam, a regular contributor to CERS with his collection of WWII relics, joined CERS expedition to Laos.

Dr Bill Bleisch, CERS Science Director, participated in a site inspection and was rapporteur for the Fanjing Mountain Declaring World Natural Heritage Expert Seminar at Fanjingshan National Nature Reserve in Guizhou Province on June 18. Dr Bleisch began his research work at the nature reserve in 1989, as described in an article in this issue.

Sharon Ko, former CERS staff designer, rejoined CERS as contract staff after furthering her studies at the University of Pennsylvania.

CERS welcomes Tsomo Cuomaoji, a Tibetan and recent graduate of Dartmouth College, in joining CERS as full-time staff. She majored in Human Geography and Environmental Studies.

While visiting a Catholic Church in Weixi of Yunnan, our team came across a collection of early pictures from the last century, of French and Swiss priests who conducted missionary work in Tibetan region of China. These images were reproduced for our expanding archive on this topic.

MEDIA AND LECTURES

- Tashi Delek, inflight magazine of Druk Air of Bhutan, published two articles in consecutive issues by Wong How Man regarding his travels to remote corner of the kingdom, and his meeting with the Royal Grand Mother.
- How Man gave a talk at the China National Aviation Corp (CNAC) reunion in San Francisco. With him were three centenarian Hump pilots Moon Chin, Peter Goutiere and Jack Young, all at 101 years of age.
- How Man gave a talk at his alma mater the University of Wisconsin at River Falls.

LEFT TO RIGHT:
From driftwood to carved dolphin. John Hsu in Myanmar. Ranee May in Wisconsin dairy farm.
CERS thank the Wong Fei Hung Martial Art Center of Foshan Guangdong Province in donating relics including two retired Lion Dance heads and two drums for permanent display at our Shek O 1939 Exhibit House.

- Nancy Lee joined as a new CERS patron.
- William Connor II continued his long years of support to CERS.
- We thank Nicholas Bleisch for writing original music score for the latest CERS film “From Beggar to Stardom”.
- The family of Cedric Mah, deceased former CNAC Hump pilot, provided a rare 8mm film and photo album for the CERS early aviation archive.

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