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CLOCKWISE FROM TOP:
Pottery made along bank of Irrawaddy. Bamboo crafts supported by CERS. Statue ofPadmasambhava, otherwise known as Guru Rinpoche. CERS working on Irrawaddy with HM Explorer in background.
President’s Message

This year will be CERS’ 30th, something of a milestone, though an explorer seems less tied down to such traditions and formalities. Yet it does call for some time for reflection on the path from our infancy and uncertainty to relative stability and maturity.

It seems unnecessary to take stock of our accomplishments, as I know by heart and by fact that we, my team and I, have made many quantifiable achievements. Some are with impacts that may have larger and longer implications. Others with less shine are nonetheless unique and important.

I, being Chief Spokesman for CERS, tend to stay in the limelight, though I have tried my best to share that stage and shine with my colleagues. Such credits for CERS have always been focused on those of us working in the frontline. Credit must also be given to the quiet individuals working in the background in order to provide a platform for us to perform.

Those platforms are multi-faceted, be it our fleet of cars and drivers, boats at different locations with trained crew, our many centers and their functioning facilities, theme exhibits, and archives. And performance requires equipment, meals and supplies, as well as an unseen array of logistics including but not limited to flights/hotels/currencies/payments/funding cycle renewal, etc., as well as management of all our working bases, not least the several facilities in Hong Kong.

What can be called logistics is crucial not only to exploration, but also as support to far-reaching research and conservation efforts in some of the remotest regions of our field work. I thus would like to pay special tribute to our behind-the-scene colleagues for their unwavering support of the mission of CERS.

This issue covers such remote places, ranging from Tibet and Ladakh with dizzying altitude, to the warm oceans of Palawan and hidden treasures of Myanmar. Even the less known islands off Taiwan are featured. I hope our friends and supporters will enjoy this first issue of 2016 as we move into our 30th year of existence.
As an anthropologist studying Tibetan pilgrimages since 1990, I was lucky enough to be able to do two outer circumambulations around the sacred mountain Kawakarpo in 2003. That year was a Water-Sheep year and the sixtieth year in the Tibetan sexagenary (60-year) calendrical system, considered to be the most auspicious one for the pilgrimage, since it is said to be the mountain god’s birth year.

When I came back in 2014, however, the situation was more difficult. The Chinese authorities had decided to close the pilgrimage to foreigners, since half of the route crosses into the Tibetan Autonomous Region (TAR). Nevertheless, I tried my luck, only to be caught by the police at the only checkpoint, placed exactly at the middle of the pilgrimage. In spite of hours of discussion between the police and my muleteer, we had to turn back. But what appeared at first as a failure proved to be a very good experience. While Buddhists circumambulate in the clockwise direction, keeping the sacred mountain always on their right, adepts of Bonpo, the other religion that coexists in Tibet with Buddhism, walk in the anti clockwise direction. If I had not been turned back, I might never have discovered how much more difficult was the Bonpo pilgrimage, the climbs being much steeper than in the Buddhist direction.

I came back again last year, 2015, again a Sheep Year and another auspicious year. But in 2015, there was no question about doing the full pilgrimage: the police had established four checkpoints. So, Bill Bleisch and I decided to do the shorter inner pilgrimage together, which does not cross from Yunnan into the TAR.

MAIN: Upper Yubeng early morning.
Like all pilgrims, we first had to ‘open the pilgrimage’; which is done by visiting two monasteries. In spite of the early time in the day, pilgrims were already quite numerous. The famous statue of Namkha Tashi in the first monastery is said to have flown here from India on its own, which is why Namkha Chökyi Gyatso, decided to build a monastery in this particular place.

Going next to Chöten Karpo, a complex of white-washed stupas, we met many pilgrims walking on the side of the road. They knew that hardships on a pilgrimage bring more merit. Indeed, contrary to many modern pilgrims, who now do the pilgrimage by car or motorcycle (possible ever since a road was built), those full of faith still want to walk along the entire path. Many pilgrims were at Chöten Karpo, burning juniper, circumambulating and throwing lime on the walls. Bill did the same, as it is the custom, and succeeded in staying relatively clean of the white wash.

Our pilgrimage being properly opened, we left for Nyinong, a village along the Mekong. We knew that we had to climb about 6 or 7 hours that day to reach Yubeng Village. Just a little above Nyinong, we entered the national park, our arrival underlined by the requirements of registration and “donation” of 230 RMB. We walked up a gentle climb along an irrigation channel before entering a deep forest. Chinese tourists, in great number, were coming down from Yubeng on this same path, and, at a lunch stop, we met our first Bonpo pilgrims, two ladies from Tengchen in Kham. They were delighted when I gave them pictures of Lopön Tenzin Namdak, the head of the Bonpo school, who is now living in France.

After a quick lunch, we continued our climb. Groups of stones were piled up beside the trail as an offering to the mountain-deity. And, for the first time on my many visits, I saw prayers-flags dedicated to Amitabha and written in Chinese, a sign that Chinese Buddhists were now also doing the inner pilgrimage. Because of the coming of many pilgrims in this Sheep-Year, several tea-houses had opened along the path, bringing with them piles of garbage heaped up on the sides of the trail. This in spite of all the posters hung on the trees announcing the need to protect the environment. Another inconvenience was the many motorcycles driving at full speed on the walking path without any respect for the pilgrims.

The village of Lower Yubeng was much bigger than it was in past years, with almost all houses also being a lodge for guests. When the weather cleared, the snowy mountain Mentsunmo, the spouse of Kawakarpo, stood out against the blue sky above the village.

The next morning, we left for the sacred waterfalls, the climax of this pilgrimage, stopping first at a small monastery. All along the way, public notices had been put at the sacred sites giving some explanation in Tibetan and Chinese. We met many pilgrims, mainly from the Kham region but also from as far away as Lhasa.
We decided to visit a place dedicated to women who want a child. While the turnoff to this sacred site is indicated by a sign along the main trail, the devotee is then left in the unknown. It took us quite a long time to find our way, although I had been there in 2003. At last, we found a trunk carved with notches that allowed us to climb up to the sacred site itself, which was covered with offerings.

Continuing our ascent, we reached the waterfalls. This year, the water fell with an incredible force; something I had never seen before. Piles of stones covered with ceremonial kata scarves and prayers flags were scattered on the ground. Few pilgrims were there, it being late in the day. In spite of the wind and the low temperature, Bill went three times under the bitter cold waterfall. I went once.

We left quickly after, meeting two Tibetan ladies on their way to the sacred site, carrying their children on their backs. We were still numb from the waterfall, but without a visit to Guru Rinpoche’s caves, the pilgrimage would not be complete. Guru Rinpoche, also known as Padmasambhava, introduced Tantric Buddhism to Tibet and built Samye, Tibet’s first monastery, at the request of King Trisong Detsen in the 8th century. He is supposed to have meditated in a cave close to the sacred waterfall where a small monastery has been built. Two monks from the Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture of Kanze, in Northern Kham were living there. They had come here to meditate, but they had not expected to see so many pilgrims. Moreover, they told us that the cold in winter is terrible, and both would be quite happy to return to their monastery. Kindly, they showed us around the site: Padmasambhava’s statue in the cave, and the footprint of Karma Pakshi (1204/6–1283), the 2nd Karmapa, who is said by some sources to have first opened the Kawakarpo pilgrimage.
On the way back to our guest house in Upper Yubeng, we met a lot of pilgrims still on their way up, heading to one of the makeshift tent-hotels near the waterfall. A very good dinner in Lower Yubeng gave us strength for the steep climb to Upper Yubeng. We arrived in full darkness of night, but still in time to enjoy some moon cakes on the terrace of the lodge, looking at the lights down in the valley and the stars up in the sky.

For our last day, the weather was fantastic, but we were not allowed to enjoy the long walk to Gyume Gompa that we had anticipated. Starting in this year, foreign pilgrims must take electric cars to a place up the mountain, and only from there is it allowed to walk.

Still, Kawakarpo brought down his blessings on us on this day. After the visit to the temple, we climbed the stairs alongside Minyong Glacier. At the topmost platform, a group of nuns and monks from Jyekundo were chanting, reciting a prayer to Kawakarpo composed by their Rinpoche. Suspended between heaven and earth, two Western pilgrims experienced one of those privileged moments that give meaning to life.

Katia Buffetrille is an Anthropologist, research fellow at the École pratique des Hautes Études (Sorbonne) in Paris and a CERS Associate.
My flight is subsidized. It has to be. For a new ATR prop-jet with 72 seats, there were only eight of us passengers. Four in the crew, including two pilots, provided a ratio of 2:1 in service. This is off-season. I was told that during June and July, many tourists arrive, from Taiwan, Hong Kong and Mainland China.

The flight took 45 minutes, but the weather is drastically different. It was raining when I left Taipei and here at Beigan the sun is shining. The owner of the hotel I stay told me that this year’s winter has been exceptionally warm, and that the weather would change for the worse tonight. I am not worried a bit, as I have packed multiple layers of clothes, preparing for the worst. After all, I’ll be scootering around hopping from island to island. In short, three islands in a nearby group, Beigan, Nangan, and Dongyin.

While there is no Big Mac being served on these islands, there are 7-Eleven’s. My first stop is Beigan, an island only twenty minutes by boat from Mainland’s Fujian Province, with slightly over 2000 inhabitants. Some residents are seasonal, working at home-stay hostels during the high season in the summer. Here the only 7-Eleven store becomes also the most frequented café, with both civilians and soldiers stopping by not only to shop, but for a cup of coffee or a snack.

The village town has only a couple streets. A few shops specialized in making noodles from ground-up fish. The lady in charge told me that such noodles has become the most popular gift visitors would take home, besides the somewhat famous Matsu liquor. I saw a shop at the corner of one street. Long closed down, the old sign said it sells building material, meaning quarried boulder chiseled into rock pieces for the construction of traditional houses. Today no more houses are built in the old style.
At the village I stayed, Chinbe, there used to be over a hundred households. Their houses, many of them in ruins, were all built with rocks cut from boulders in the area. Over the last few decades, most villagers had left for work in Taipei and only a few families remained. Today a new wave of tourists prefers to stay in traditional houses. Thus many such houses had been restored, some more beautiful than before, serving as home-stay or boutique hostels. The former residents are gradually returning, given the new opportunity. Chen Kung-han, his wife and their two daughters, are one such example. My stay with them was most pleasant.

A most significant feature of the houses at Chinbe is the political and military propaganda from decades ago. These cement slogans were engraved to the walls of each of the houses. Mainland as well as Taiwan tourist found such writings most appealing, from hailing loyalty and allegiance to Chiang Kai-shek, to destroying traitors Chu and Mao. One reminded everyone to get rid of bandit spies, and another proclaimed that the Mainland would soon be liberated.

While many tourists come to visit the numerous military installations and defense positions around the island, I skipped over all such attractions, finding the story and display rather repetitive after an earlier visit to Kinmen last year. Instead I rejoiced over the sceneries around the island, especially the liberating feeling of riding a motor scooter and catching the breeze.

From the rock veranda outside my room, I looked down at the beach below and saw a nearby rock island. Perching above the calm water like a turtle, that is exactly what the island is called. Stray and domestic cats roamed around. No doubt Chinbe boasted that it is the Mediterranean of Taiwan. Some dilapidated houses have walls made from various sizes of rocks, reminding me of those at Machu Picchu that I visited in 1975.
My next stop was Nangan Island, a short hop of 15 minutes boat ride to the south. After checking into my hotel by the pier, I again took a scooter to explore the island. These off-shore islands still retain many statues of Chiang Kai-shek, usually at roundabouts or positions of strategic importance. Camouflaged fortifications are everywhere, memory of decades past when Taiwan and the Mainland were hostile enemies against each other. Those days are now long forgotten, and tourist dollars are pouring in from across the strait.

The Matsu Temples are favorite of Taiwan, particularly so for the off-shore islands. The female goddess derived from a legend about a pious daughter plunging into the ocean to try saving her drowning father. Her spirit is supposed to bless all those going out to sea, in particular fishermen along the coast. At Nangan, the ancient temple now is totally rebuilt into a very large and elaborate massive. Nearby, navy landing craft on the beach became tourist site.

At a remote hamlet, a wooden sign caught my imagination. “Fu Ren Café”, meaning Madame Café, stood along a hillside overlooking a pristine beach and seacoast. I stopped and paced down the stone steps to have a cup of coffee. Madame was not in, but a young lady Miss Yeh was on hand to serve guests. She told me I should return in June or July, when a special type of seaweed would turn the coastline fluorescent blue at night when the waves pound the rocks. Locals called this phenomenon “Blue Teardrops”. By then perhaps Madame would also be back.

My next stop should have been the island of Dongyin. But the boat schedule has changed without my knowledge, which would get me stranded on that island for two days. Whereas I must get back to Hong Kong in order to host a group of guests. Just as the cruise ship was lifting the vehicular plank to pull off, I discovered just in time and they lowered the plank in order for me to get off.

So now it seems I have a good reason to return, while fantasizing what Madame at the café may look like. As with much in this world today, the fantasy would portray something far more beautiful than in reality. So may I continue with my dream, both for Dongyin and for Madame!
Friends and colleagues asked why, with a newly minted MBA, I wanted to quit a prestigious corporate job with great prospects for the future. Finally I have my answer after spending two weeks on a field trip with CERS. There is no more “TGIF” for me, but instead it is “Thank God Everyday Is Friday.”

Waking up with fresh air and a colorful sunrise, exploring the Chindwin River on the HM Explorer, our research vessel; I never felt it was tiresome. I was so lucky to listen to so much of the views and observations of Wong How Man along the trip; things that I never learned in business school. We worked more like a family than just a team. All the boat staff are so eager to learn and help each other. My traveling experience with CERS opened my eyes and heart to doing many things in the future. I’ve gotten a great chance to enjoy the beauty of Myanmar, my own country, and to know more about its life and culture.

Modernization of a country has its pros and cons, but every citizen needs to maintain the cultural heritage of a region. A traveling orchestra which I met in Kalewa is keeping its heritage from generation to generation performing at ceremonies. More recently, however, in order to get the attention of a younger audience they have needed to create some new songs that reflect the current musical trends; all the while maintaining some integrity of their former style.

My very first experience to chat with the rafters on their bamboo rafts revealed how hard they are struggling in leading their lives on the Chindwin River while floating their rafts down the river. It is no wonder that bamboo poles are in great demand. As Ko Kyaw Zeya from the CERS Bamboo Collection House at Inle Lake explained, they can be
transformed into over a hundred designs by a bamboo master craftsman. Ko Kyaw Zeya was not from a family of bamboo craftsmen. But in 1998, while he was very disappointed at being a goldsmith, he went to Nant Pan Monastery for a month to become a monk. He started learning bamboo craft from the monk Ashin Nya Na Taza, and began making and selling bamboo objects as his vocation. In the beginning he could create only a few bamboo articles. But day by day, he fell in love with doing such things and came to understand that it’s not only about the bamboo crafts, but the art of bamboo.

In 2003, he was one of twenty eight students chosen to be sent away for eight months to learn more about bamboo crafts in Paung San (Bao Shan), China with the support of Sayarma Daw Hnin Hnin Ohne from Shwe Inn Thu Foundation and the Norwegian Embassy. After learning more about how to choose the bamboo, how to treat bamboo to make it last longer, and how to create things, he better understood the value of bamboo and was willing to contribute his knowledge for the development of his community and to expand the bamboo art.

Around that time, he met Wong How Man through Ms.Chaw Su from the Inthar Heritage House, and was able to implement his dream of a “Bamboo Collection House”. With the help of CERS, in 2013, he embarked on his new milestone project. Today, he’s making over a hundred bamboo objects, like bamboo cups, baskets, tables, chairs and other interesting and lovely souvenirs, all on exhibit at the Bamboo Collection House. “There is nothing to throw away from a bamboo,” he said with a smile. “Every part of it is priceless.”

He is now contributing his knowledge to the community by giving short-courses to apprentices, and advocating the value of traditional bamboo art. He also travels to provide vocational training in different places.

Moreover, he encourages and gives moral support to people who don’t know the value of bamboo art. Some of these people become addicted to doing bamboo arts once he finishes coaching them during a short training.

To keep our environment clean and beautiful, we should grow more bamboo, which is more sustainable than other materials. We should substitute bamboo objects for the wood and plastic things in our daily life. In the future, the art of bamboo will spread locally to globally, as these are environmentally friendly products, and their beauty will catch the eyes of people. It both has value and preserves the tradition of an old culture.

Last but not least, it was also very interesting to visit the pottery villages along the Chindwin River. The art of doing pottery had been handed down over generations. Based on their location, the way each village baked their pottery was different. There will be a big future market if they can add some more artistic value to the pieces.

All in all, this first trip is one of my most memorable trips. I hope there will be many more trips to come, allowing me to reflect more on my country as well as to contribute to our community in the future.

CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT:
We carried out interview surveys over the past two years in a target area that includes the Irrawaddy Dolphin Sanctuary and many riverside villages. I chose the interview questions to give data useful for sustainable development. I wanted to research the present condition about living standards; habitation, food and clothing; the basics in human society - and also personal activities and challenges. We asked about their livelihoods, use of pesticides, disposal of garbage and how they get information, and whether and how they participate in conservation activities.

At the beginning of each interview, I classified the respondent depending on age, work and gender. I also wanted to get a feeling about the interviewed person. We can also classify the respondents according to whether dolphin are present in their village, whether villagers still fish cooperatively with dolphins, how they use fish and water resources, their livelihood, and their use of pesticides, garbage disposal, availability of electricity, their health, healthcare and education.

The people who live in our target area all have a positive attitude towards the dolphin and know that dolphins can collect fish for fishermen who cooperate with them. They also have many beliefs about dolphins, and I have collected some remarkable stories. For example, it is said that if the dead body of a dolphin sinks on a sand bank, the bank will disappear in the coming year. The villagers who live in Yawrhit Village claimed they used this method to remove a sand bank in the river in front of their village.

Some people can describe the dolphins’ appearance exactly, but young students answered as if their descriptions had come from reading. Apparently, many young people no longer have the life experience of seeing the dolphin. They also did not know about the value of the dolphin for our country.

Most people know the dolphin well, but they did not know much about the system of fishing cooperatively with the dolphin. They have not seen it and they only know about it from other people’s descriptions. Few villages are still using this traditional fishing system now. I interviewed three cooperative fishermen; U Chit Hlaing in Seinpankone village, U Sein Win in Ayekune and U Tin Myot in Myaeson. These three fishermen are facing many challenges in their lives now. The main challenge is from electric shock fishing. This illegal fishing method kills all fish, regardless of size. As a result the success of fishing has clearly decreased in this year for everyone. This was pointed out by many legal fishermen and fish-eating residents.
The other challenge for the cooperative fishermen is that illegal electro-fishermen also call the dolphins by striking the sides of their boats, just like cooperative fishermen. The dolphins cannot distinguish friend or enemy, so now, they do not come out for cooperative fishing. Some cooperative fishermen have changed their career. According to the data from the interview survey, the traditional culture of cooperative fishing will soon disappear.

Most of the interviewed villagers know about electro-fishing, but they do not have a way to stop it. They are afraid of the electro-fishermen, who always carry Myanmar traditional weapons such as sling shots and who often band together in groups of 10 to 12 thugs in 5 to 6 boats. Their boats have more powerful engines than the police. The villagers reported the names of the villages from which illegal fishermen come, but some departments of government just ignore illegal fishing.

We still do not know why some people are doing illegal fishing. Most people like to live without participation in illegal activity, but a common problem is poverty. Are electro-fishermen just more greedy?

For most other people, selling fish in the market has become a very rare activity. Burmese people have always regarded fish as a basic food. They were plentiful and it was the cheapest source of protein for Myanmar’s masses. Nowadays, that is all changed. When we asked the villagers about the condition of fish, they answered that fish are not a daily or even a weekly food for them now. Some families never eat fish, because river fish are a rare animal and too high priced to eat.

The quantity of fish caught by fishermen reveals the reason. One fisherman reported that he only catches enough fish for a curry for his own family. I have found a reduction in both the quantity and the variety of river fish. I did not find any news about turtles or big fish; we have lost these natural resources in the last three year.

The majority of villagers in the survey area engage in farming. The main crops are peanut, seasame, pigeon pea, chick pea, butter bean, mung bean and other kinds of beans. This region is in the dry zone, so harvests depend entirely on the weather. As a result, the cost of cultivation is very high and the benefit is very low. The villagers cannot use pumped irrigation because of the high cost. The farmers have not had a good harvest for the past three year.

Many farmers use pesticides to increase crop yield. They can tell the kind of pesticide from the logo, and they buy the same one every year. The pesticide companies come to the villages and advertise their products.
by putting up posters in the fields. When the pesticide on the cultivated land runs off into the river, polluted water quality is the result.

Everywhere, garbage and waste can be seen in the villages in the survey area. The river is gradually becoming just a receptacle for household garbage and other waste. Local people accept that their garbage disposal system is wrong, but they don’t know what to do about it.

The villages along the river bank are poorly developed when compared with land-locked villages. Some residents face severe challenges because of loss of cultivated land sliding into the meandering river. Health care and education in the surveyed villages is very poor. All villages in the survey area have insufficient electricity.

Most of residents now also raise cattle, pigs and goats. Traditional Burmese farming relies on cattle to provide the power to grow crops, and the cattle also produce valuable products (milk and meat). These village have not been provided veterinary services by government or by civil society organizations. In 2014, the cows in the area suffered from Anthrax, and the young cattle all died. In 2015, the cows were suffering from Hoof and Mouth disease. Since 2015, CERS has been providing veterinary services to the villages adjacent to the Dolphin Sanctuary.

I have done many interviews in the survey area and have discovered many challenges. We documented a loss of natural resources and natural heritage and an increase in poverty, a lack of hope and a decline in human dignity. I still believe that we can succeed in saving the Irrawaddy Dolphin, but we shouldn’t delay. If we work together for sustainable development, we will gain better environmental conditions. Whenever we engage in conservation activity, however, we can’t do it alone. The environment is built on connections and knows no borders. Conservation requires cooperation with those persons and organizations that have the same mission, all working together to achieve the same goal - save the dolphin.

TOP: Pesticide etc sold in market.
BOTTOM: Author off to distribute T-shirts with HM Explorer in background.
"For a woman, the hardest work is giving birth to a child. For a man, the hardest work is to be on a raft". Daw Nyein told me this old Burmese saying. Surely for her, it is by far the hardest, as she has done both, giving birth to a child and working on a raft. Working the raft may be temporary, only for a few years. But raising a child seems permanent, though her son is now finishing graduate school at Monywa University. Her next big wish is that he would find a perfect wife, or for her, a daughter-in-law.

Few would find working a raft so gratifying, as a contended smile readily came to Daw Nyein’s face when we chatted on their bamboo raft, a raft about the size of a basketball court. It is because she is doing one hardest job in order to support the other hardest job she brought to life 23 years ago.

For six years, since their son Aung Ko Latt finished 11th grade, then through college and now in graduate school, she and her husband Kyaw Than have been working a raft downriver from Kalewa to Monywa three times a year. It takes four months to assemble a raft, considered small in size using 5,000 bamboos. This is followed by about a week to float down the river from Kalewa to market. In the past, without the small motor, the journey may take ten days to two weeks. During the rainy season in the summer when the current is fast, it may take a few days longer than a week, rather than faster, to negotiate the dangerous bends on the river.

They paid a deposit, based on a price of 200 Kyat (US$1 equals 800 Kyat) per bamboo, before assembling the raft. Some rafts may be up to four times the size of hers, with up to 20,000 bamboos. At the other end of the trip, each bamboo would be sold for 230 Kyat. Each trip may earn them between 60,000 to 100,000 Kyat in profit; that is, if there are not too many surprise charges along the way.
Once Daw Nyein mentioned her son Aung Ko Latt, she quickly rushed inside her shed and brought out her son’s student ID with a picture to show off. We are stopping off at the village of Kyi Taung Oo where several bamboo rafts are mooring to the bank of the Chindwin River. Daw Nyein is hopeful that in three more days, she may arrive Monywa and see her son. He has finished all his studies and is waiting for the graduation ceremony to take place. The parents, proud parents, are also waiting to attend.

But for now, they, as well as the other rafters, are stranded. Not by the many sandbars on the river during dry season, but by the local authority. Day and night, police along such villages would stop the rafts and extort a fee, or a fine in name, from these poor rafters, before allowing them to continue with their journey. Hopefully this unscheduled, but to be expected, stop would not last too long once they can negotiate the asking price of 50,000 kyats down to something more reasonable and affordable. Today, they may not be able to negotiate too hard, given her urge to see her son.

But for her son Aung Ko Latt, he may have to remain philosophical with his new degree of Master in Philosophy. For him, finding a wife may be easier than finding a job, a good job. This can be demonstrated by 30-years-old Ko Thar Lin Oo, another graduate of Monywa University, with a degree in Law. Today, he is working a raft, slightly larger with 7,000 bamboos, heading down river toward the same destiny, that of an uncertain future.

While a new Myanmar seems to be full of hope and dreams, some may materialize, others unfulfilled. For the rafters, situation has gotten worse. But they hope it would get better once
the new government is installed following a landslide election victory by the opposition.

For Ko Thar Lin Oo, his journey started at Homalin further upriver, and it would require 16 days minimum to arrive at Ahlone, a point slightly above Monywa where the bamboos are sold to wholesalers. His bamboos are however of better quality, costing 250 to 300 Kyats each, and sold for 500 at market. Bamboo rafting has been his family’s business. At their hometown, it takes seven years for a bamboo grove to grow to size for harvest.

When asked about the profit he makes, Ko Thar put on a grim face. “I’ll be lucky if I break even on this trip,” he answered. So far he has been stopped ten times since leaving Homalin. Each of these stops are by the local forestry “police”, extorting a fine, or a fee to keep a blind eye, to let the raft through the section of the river under their jurisdiction. None of these fines come with a receipt. At times, they have to literally beg the authority for a smaller fee such that they can still earn the little they can. And in the three days ahead, there are several more gates to cross.

The next raft we stopped provided even a grimmer story. Forty years old Ko Win Htay is the “boss” of this raft. As such, his loss on this trip will be solely born by him, rather than his hired hands on the raft, a timber raft. He was carrying, or floating, teak log harvested from near his home village of Yay Sa Kyo Village in Pakhok Ku township. Teak cutting is strictly regulated, with concessions given to favored timber baron whereas for common people totally restricted. He needed to pay a larger fine to get his cargo through the many river check points.

Harvesting teak, hauling them to the river, assembling them as a raft, takes far more time and exerted greater energy. That alone would require up to six months. But the profit is supposed to be more lucrative, if delivered to market without too many stops. When asked how many stops he made to pay fine, Ko Win Htay felt disgusted to count, and simply said, “One hundred stops!” After all, he has been away from his family for six months already, and with his pockets still empty, home seems far away.

With a new Myanmar, modern infrastructure and transportation are gradually being put in place, transforming a once quiet and slow country. It is only a matter of time such modernization will replace old method of travels, like rafting on the river. But with the arbitrary and insatiable “fine” to the rafters, such historical tradition may die a sooner death, fading into obscurity like the morning mist over the Chindwin River.

(Upon finishing the above article, Mother Daw Nyein called us twice at night to plead if we might be able to help alleviate their situation as they were fined beyond redemption of their cost of the bamboo and still stuck above Monywa. While in Yangon I read the weekly Myanmar Business Today with a story headline “Bamboo Shortage Strikes as Demand Rises”. What an irony for today’s Myanmar.)
A number of small boats are tied to the bank, each with a wood and bamboo framework on it. A couple of these boats are half loaded, with pottery jars piled upside down against each other inside the frame. This is Kone Yin Village on the west bank of the Chindwin River, some distance south of Kalewa. It is one of several villages along the Chindwin as well as the Irrawaddy rivers, with the former river merging into the latter below Mandalay.

It is dry season and the village, rising above an earth bank some ten meters high, is around 250 meters from the edge of the sandy shore. Below the village and standing on the sand are round circular structures made with straw fences. Here are where the clay pots are fired off, with peanut shells at bottom, tree bark in between and straw above the pots and mud with some exhaust holes on top to seal them off. After a day of baking, the jars will turn into usable pottery. There are around 130 families in the village, almost all engaged in pottery making. Sherd pieces lie around these “furnaces”. They would be pounded into powder and be used again.

Raw clay comes from a section of the muddy shore some distance away. It takes an ox cart four hours to deliver one load of clay to the village, costing 3500 Kyat. Each day one cart can bring two loads. The hardened earth would be pounded into smaller pieces before being soaked in water to soften it into usable clay. Villagers are also engaged in subsistence farming.

“I only make 30 pieces per day,” said Ma Shwe Ei while busily making some jars. She is 30 years old and her family has been making pottery for generations. With another girl working the spindle, Ma’s hands work the pile of clay into a perfectly rounded jar within minutes. Locally the jars are sold for about 500 Kyat a piece. When it reaches market at Kalewa or Kalay, it can fetch between 2,000 and 2,500 per jar, delivering multiple times in value.
Later on as we sailed to the Irrawaddy below Mandalay, we visited another pottery village. Tha Pate Tan Village is a short distance up the confluence of the Dote Hta Wati river with the Irrawaddy. Here perhaps half the families are engaged in weaving Longyi (sarong-like skirts) and the rest in pottery making.

Here they make vases big and small, between 20 to 40 centimeters in height. Again about 30 pieces would be made per day per person. Packed in bamboo baskets filled with straw, they would be shipped throughout the area of Mandalay.

While browsing around the village, I suddenly saw one basket filled with smaller clay items sitting next to the village trail. When I picked through the straw, I saw tiny animals revealing themselves, chicken, horse, elephant, rabbit, cat, owl even a penguin. These are tiny piggy banks heading to the market. Such trinkets have their traditional customers, parents who want to teach children to save money. I chose a very beautiful set of animals and want to introduce such items to the market in Yangon. There is a reason behind my action.

Before Myanmar opens up a few years ago, life goes on as if in a time capsule. Rural community and its attached economy maintain itself the same for decades, centuries or even millennia. Pottery is as old as such early civilization, not only in Myanmar but throughout the world. They were created first for utilitarian use, and later developed into higher state for the select few as an art form, or utilitarian objects with artistic rendering. But it remains in its simplest form for usage by common people.

That is the case of Myanmar’s pottery cottage industry, mainly home based and usually attached to entire village specializing in such preoccupation. If future is predictable like in commodity trading, traditional pottery will in time go into decline as the country of Myanmar modernizes. Once pipes are laid for running tap water into villages, people have little need to store water in these pottery containers. Furthermore, in the future plastic, metal and other durable containers are also replacing breakable clay ones.

For now, the demand for such pottery utilitarian objects seems to be stable and at a constant, like it has for generations. However, something mainstream may without warning suddenly become obsolete. One way to safeguard this twilight of the cottage industry is to tap at the burgeoning tourist market as well as a more sophisticated local and international consumer market in big cities. Value-added to products also is a simple concept. If these small items can become more refined, like glazing to smooth the surface, or even gradually becoming an art or sculpture, there may just be a new future waiting for the pottery in Myanmar.
THE BIRD’S NEST TRADE

by William V. Bleisch, PhD.

Palawan
Manon Bueg is not a tall man. Like most of his tribe, the Palawan people, he must be less than 5 foot in height. But he stands tall in the eyes of the villagers of Barangay Tagabini. For Manon Bueg discovered the caves that the village plans to open for eco-tourism, the Hundred Caves cliff, and Dinosaur Cave. Now 57, he has been exploring caves for over 20 years, but not for tourism or science. He was searching for edible birds’ nests.

Often called Swallow’s Nests, a direct translation of yanwo, the edible nests are actually produced by a few species in the family of Swifts, unrelated to swallows. These swiftlets build their nests in limestone karst caves, which are often found close to a sea coast. It was once believed that the nests were constructed from sea foam collected by the birds, but the nest fibres are actually dried secretions from the salivary glands of the birds themselves. The Edible Nest Swiftlet, Aerodramus fuciphagus, produces the highly valued white nests, while the closely related Aerodramus maximus produces so-called black nests. Both types of nest are edible and are harvested. Other species of swiftlets also use their saliva in nest construction to cement bits of moss and twigs together, but these mossy nests are not harvested.

The most sought after edible nests are red nests, which are widely believed to be coloured with the bird’s own blood. In fact, the colour is caused by denitrifying bacteria in the nests reacting with ammonia vapour from decaying bat and bird guano in the caves. Upon learning this, some traders began treating white nests with ammonia to produce the red colour artificially. The red nests have high levels of nitrates. Since consumption of nitrates has been linked to various cancers, in 2011, the Chinese government banned import of swiftlet nests from Indonesia and Malaysia.

Manon Bueg reminds me of Papageno, the wandering bird collector of Mozart’s opera, a free spirit of the hills, singing as he climbs. Manon Bueg learned to climb the cliffs of Palawan’s limestone karst from his father over 20 years ago. At that time he stays, nests were easy to find around his home in Brooks Point. When the nests became rare there, he started exploring around Tagabini, where he found many caves and many nests. At first he could make a good living for his family, which now includes 8 children by his one wife, and 4 grand children. But now, he says, he can only find about 10 nests per year.

LEFT: Swiftlet in a nest
RIGHT: Nest showing whitish treasure.
It is not definite what has led to the decline in the supply of wild nests. Sarawak’s Niah Cave is one place where the birds’ nest harvest has been studied intensively over many years. Niah has recorded a precipitous decline in the number of nesting birds over the last 2 decades. This despite the fact that the government maintained a clear system of ownership and strict government regulation, and the fact that local Penan people there have a very respectful relationship with the caves, which are believed to be inhabited by important spirits. Perhaps the decline in nests was partly the result of clearance of natural forests, where the birds forage for insects, and the increase in use of insecticides. But illegal harvesting at Niah also became rampant as the price of birds’ nests sky-rocketed. One thing is clear – over-harvesting can lead to a collapse in the population of swiftlets in the caves.

The headlines recently have been full of reports about the international waves from China’s market demand. With China’s demand has been driving prices of commodities around the world – coal from Australia, copper from Peru, corn from Iowa. From the news, one might get the impression that China’s demand for distant resources was a new phenomenon, a unique boom and bust. But travelling through the region in Southeast Asia, I have been struck again and again at how ancient the China trade has been. The example of edible birds’ nest is a case in point.

According to an article co-written by my friend David Melville, consumption of edible nests goes back at least as far as the T’ang Dynasty (618–907 A.D.). Although the nests could once be found throughout southern China, trade in birds nest from Southeast
Asia to China also has a long history. Trade from as far away as the northern coast of Borneo was documented as far back as the 16th Century, when it was noted by Dutch merchants first visiting the region. Exploitation in Malaysia began in earnest in the 19th century, when Rajah Brookes of Sarawak had licenses issued to the indigenous Penan, giving individual Penan perpetual rights to control the harvest of birds’ nests from particular “holes.” These “owners” could then sell the rights to leasers, who hired climbers to undertake the dangerous work of climbing high up on the walls of the caves to knock down the nests to be caught by collectors waiting below. The leasers cleaned and sold the nests to traders, often Chinese-Malay merchants, who then sold them on to other middle men for the start of their long journey to Hong Kong and China.

So I was surprised when we discovered that no such system of ownership seems to exist in Palawan. Although the government says that it is illegal to harvest the nests from the caves in Barangay Tagabini, there actually seems to be no control. The nests are an open resource for anyone to take.

I was familiar with the historical system of ownership and auction, which still persists to this day in parts of northern Borneo. From 2000 to 2002, I had the opportunity to work with the Sabah Wildlife Department, which controls the harvest of birds’ nests in Sabah State. One of my colleagues in the department was actually a member of an indigenous family who held the lease to a valuable cave. His family is very aware of the impact of harvesting on the population of the birds, and controls their harvest to insure that there is a supply of nests year after year.

The impacts of harvesting have been best studied in Sarawak. According to Lord Medway, at the end of the 1950s birds’ nest collection was a dying business there, but it picked up again in the 1970s. The price of nests then started an exponential climb, from less than 20 Malaysian Ringgit in the 1970s to 1,600 Ringgit per nest in 1996. No doubt this was partly the result of China’s rising buying power. At the same time, the quantity of nesting birds in the Niah Caves began to decline. Manon Bueg tells us that when he started collecting, 20 years ago, the price he got from ethnic Chinese middlemen was 3,500 Philippine Pesos per kilogram. Now it is up to 8,000 pesos.

Manon Bueg tells us that after harvesting one cave, he can return in one month and there will usually be a new nest on the same spot. “I can harvest again and again from the same cave. The birds just keep building nests” The Palawan people, the oldest inhabitants of the island, are known for their knowledge of local natural resources, but I think he may have this wrong. It is true that swiftlet pairs can produce up to 3 nests per year, often at the same site, and the female of the pair normally would lay 2 eggs in the nest. The pair may construct a new nest if one is removed before the eggs are laid. However, repeated loss of their nest-building investment may lead the pair to abandon the site and move elsewhere, or forgo nesting altogether. And the loss of the energetic investment of nest and eggs must affect the reproductive success of the pair.

Manon Bueg tells us that he has taught his sons to climb, but they are more interested in fishing than in the birds’ nest trade. Perhaps they sense that the wild nests will soon be gone forever. These days, most birds’ nests in trade come from domesticated swiftlets, who have been trained to nest in converted apartment buildings. The indigenous cave explorers of Palawan, like Manon Bueg, will soon be just a memory.
My birthday, December 12, in past years has often fallen in the middle of a CERS winter expedition. I have had the luck to celebrate at some of the most beautiful sites in the world; aboard the HM Explorer on the Chindwin River in Myanmar, in the monsoon rainforests of northern Lao PDR, and among the remote mountains of the Kunlun Range in Xinjiang. This birthday was no exception, as I celebrated in Palawan Philippines with Howman and a large CERS team.

On my birthday, after the cake and toasts, it is my habit to take stock of where I am and where I am going. When we arrived in Palawan, two weeks before, I was already nursing mixed emotions. On the one hand, I was eager to get back to the reefs and their colourful array of corals, butterflyfish, and giant clams. And I longed for a few relaxing days of no phone and perfect sunny weather, so different from the rush of Hong Kong and the smog and cold of Beijing.

Still, I could not overcome a nagging feeling that I should be somewhere else. Not only was there work piled up and waiting for me in LuangNamtha, Myanmar and Kunming, but contractors were starting work on my son’s mother’s house in Princeton New Jersey. Although it was not my house, and it was half way around the world, they were using my money; money that I hoped could be recovered after the sale, and money that I could not afford to lose.
Worst of all, that same week, thousands of activists, environmentalists, ministers, diplomats and politicians had just converged in Paris for a meeting that promised decisions that might shape the direction of my work for the rest of my productive life, and that would certainly shape the nature of the world in which my son would live his entire life. I was thinking of course of the climate talks.

For the first two weeks after our arrival in Palawan, we sailed up the east coast of the island in two small banka outriggers, one of them the HM Explorer II and the other christened the Jodan, named after Joceline and Dante’s young son. As we struggled across seas with heaving waves stirred up by the season’s high winds, occasional e-mails and news-links would filter through during rare moments of internet access.

The news that dribbled through was encouraging. The world’s leaders in Paris had tentatively agreed to aspire to a target of only 1.5 degrees in global average temperature increase, much less than the frightening figure of 2.5 degrees that many had predicted would be the only politically acceptable compromise. And in New Jersey, kitchen tiles and bathroom fixtures were being chosen and installed by professionals without the need for any input from me, except more cash. As we reached Johnson’s Island near the coastal port of Roxas, I was ready to concentrate on learning as much as I could about the reefs and their incredible diversity of life.

CERS Field Biologist Camilla Mitchell and I decided to partition the work ahead of us. We wanted to compare the conservation value of different islands and their reefs during our island hopping in the boats. Camilla concentrated on brushing up her already extensive knowledge of Palawan’s hundreds of species of fish. (613 marine fish species had been recorded in Palawan by 2014, and there are no doubt many more to be discovered.) Rather than try to catch up with Camilla’s already expert knowledge, I chose to concentrate on the numerous invertebrates; giant clams, sea slugs, sea stars, sea cucumbers, and the corals themselves. After more than 40 years, I was finally able to put my undergraduate training in invertebrate biology to good use. The course work that has served me most in my career always turns out to be the courses that I thought were most enjoyable, but which I felt most guilty about taking.

Despite my training, when I cracked the field guides to the pages on corals, I found myself utterly confounded. It was all I could do at first to list basic life-forms – massive, branching, foliose, encrusting or solitary. External colours were no help to identification, since coral colour can vary from bright pink or blue to brown to bone white depending on the health and age of the overlying coral polyps. Newly formed tips of branching corals were sometimes bright colours, but older polyps had become brown as the bodies of the animals were colonized by symbiotic brown algae called zooxanthellae. Bleaching, a response to stress, such as prolonged high temperatures, could cause the coral polyps to expel their algal boarders and lose their natural pigments, turning the colony white.
And this brought my thoughts back to Paris and the climate talks. High global temperatures caused by human induced climate change, has been reported to be causing widespread coral bleaching including right here on the reefs of Palawan. The U.S. National Oceanic and Atmospheric Association (NOAA) predicted as of the end of 2015, more than 4,600 miles of the world’s reefs would be affected. And increased atmospheric CO2 also causes ocean acidification, an additional stress on coral reefs and their inhabitants. Finally, rapid sea level rise caused by warming oceans will inundate many of the low-lying islands on Palawan’s coast, forcing their human populations to move, and stretching the abilities of corals and other organisms to adapt.

By December 12, it was already clear that the new climate deal forged in Paris would not be enough to stop these processes. National plans submitted to the Paris conference would probably result in a nearly 2.7 degree increase, and that only if everyone kept their pledges. To put that in perspective, a 3 degree rise in temperature would lead to so much rise in sea level in the Philippines that land where 13 million people are currently living would eventually have to be abandoned; 38.6% of the population of Manila would have to move because of an expected 7 meter rise in sea level (Similarly, 38% of Hong Kong’s population and 59.3% of Shanghai’s would have to move.)

Back in Hong Kong after the trip, on a chilly Friday, I take the bus to Central from our office in Wang Chuk Hang. I continue my habit of forsaking taxis and cars for busses and subways. It is a token gesture, but I am well aware of the accusations of hypocrisy against environmentalists who do little to cut their own contributions to carbon emissions.

There are no seats on the bus when I board; the bus is completely full of high school students. Chinese, Eurasian and European. They all seem to speak, alternately or in the same sentence, Cantonese and fluent English with American accents. Perhaps they are from one of the elite international schools, I think. School must be out early, and it seems that they are all on their way to the Elements shopping complex to enjoy the Christmas displays.

The male students listen to music on headphones or play Minecraft on their smart phones. The female students all seem to be talking at once, with great enthusiasm. One group is talking about plans for a birthday party, which soon becomes an elaborate festival. Another pair is reviewing the principles of business development for an upcoming test. I stand alone, swaying in the center of the aisle, my fever rising from the latest microbe that Howman has brought back from his international
travels. I am a lone, bearded curmudgeon among the festive young crowd.

In my flu-induced haze, I fantasize. My voice resounds; “My friends, can I have your attention please? Please put away your videogames, your Facebook, your What’s App and WeChat for a moment. For what I have to say is important to you and to all of us. My friends, yesterday I came back from a survey of the coral reefs of the Sulu Sea. They are magnificent still, but all is not well. Among the thousands of fish that we saw, snorkeling and scuba diving, we saw no Napoleon Wrasse. We saw only two Baramundi Cod, and only two sharks, not counting the stash of small, drying fins that we saw in one village. We saw very few Coral Trout – in fact, few Groupers of any kind.

My friends, this is not natural, this is not right; it is a disaster in the making. These fish are the top predators, the algae eaters, and other key players in the food web. Without them, the entire reef ecosystem is in danger. If some things does not change soon, you will never be able to see them on a reef, or enjoy them on your dinner table. And because of this, and because of climate change, the reefs themselves may change in fundamental ways.

And this is all the direct result of the habits of people like your parents and your grandparents. Please, I beg of you, consider this and urge them to change their ways, before it is too late.”

The words resound in my head, but they remain unsaid. I disembark early, before the noisy happy crowd exits at the terminal stop. A sign above a bank greets me as I step from the bus to the sidewalk.

“You spent a lifetime accumulating wealth. Now you want to impart to your children the responsibilities that wealth entails.”

What are those responsibilities that they imagine, I wonder? I walk on, but now with a glimmer of hope.
When Willie proposed that we, “Gang of Four” as our classmates used to call us, went on an expedition to Deqen Prefecture to visit some of CERS sites, we jumped at the opportunity. Our better halves, Kitty, Margaret, Vivien and Sandie were also most supportive. However, one of my major concerns when travelling in China was the crowds at every well-known sightseeing spot. This notion hanged over my head as we landed at Kunming Changshui Airport. We were met by Wang Jian and Li Na who took us to the Zhongdian Centre. My reservations were completely gone by the time we arrived at the centre. It was about 10 km outside of town and consisted of a three-storey Tibetan wooden structure, located at the foot of a hill amongst a pine and fir forest. The sturdy building housed simple rooms with modern day amenities for lodging. It exuded a rustic, green and serene atmosphere, and rapidly helped to ease any strain that came with living in a bustling, cosmopolitan city like Hong Kong or, in our cases, caring for ill patients.

I was also mindful to find a handful of Tibetan mastiffs roaming and guarding the centre. We were told one or two were pure breeds, while the others were mixed. The mixed breeds were particularly friendly, and they enjoyed licking our fingers and hands. I was blessed by being protected by one each time I strolled down the village. It accompanied me and confronted much larger animals such as cows and horses (see figures) when it felt that I was threatened. This enabled me to enjoy taking pictures of the village illuminated by evening lights, or a family of pigs wandering home (see figure). On one occasion, it took on a piglet and almost killed the poor little one. I have to intervene!

The original Tibetan mastiff kennel is located in Deqen Prefecture at 3500 m altitude. The Meili Snow Mountain Range is situated right across the campsite. I had seen pictures when the first ray of the sun crowned the peak, making it sparkle like a diamond. Alas, the clouds would not concede such golden splendor. For two mornings in a row, I set up my equipment but only managed to catch the shimmering mountain tip submerged by the heavenly clouds. Nonetheless, it was still an awesome, magnificent scene. Moreover, the colorful yellow and red leaves of the forests reminded us that summer was over and perhaps winter was definitely coming. The colourful patterns are soothing not only to the eyes, but also to the mind.

From the mastiff kennel, we went to the National Park at the Baima snow mountain nature reserve, close to the Lisu Hill tribe site in Xiangguqing. The lodgings were simple with small rooms that would keep us warm. These were built on the steep slopes of the mountains so that we had to climb a fair number of steps before reaching our rooms to rest. With the high altitude and winter arriving, keeping warm became the more important issue than taking baths. Walking up and down the steps of the steep mountain became a major stumbling block for Francis. In the end he decided that he would stay and not venture up the mountain in search of the Golden Monkeys.

The group was in bright spirit when we climbed the muddy mountain path. There were other tourists besides us awaiting at the slopes. I carried a 400 mm telephoto lens and a monopod to make sure that I could get a close-up shot of these unusual creatures. There was at least one other group of enthusiasts who were carrying heavier equipment than I, and I presumed they might be professionals working on a project. The initial wait seemed like eternity, but the excitement was obvious once the animal approached the feeding ground. My heart was bumping loud as I attempted to focus on the snub-nosed thick-lipped creature. I was firing with my Nikon D4 at a frame rate of 10 per second and I must have taken at least 500 shots within the 30 minutes when the animals were close to us. My only regret was that I could not catch them jumping in the air. However, other members of our group were able to catch the monkey “flying” on video, and that proved to be amusing to watch as we shared our recordings.
later that day. With the exchange of photos, I presumed we had reached the climax of this expedition. Back at the campsite, How Man further explained the various projects his team had embarked on, including the conservation of the black-necked cranes and the wild yaks, as well as the search for the source of the Yangtze. Deep in my mind, I could not help but marvel at the courage of this explorer, a true leader with so much vitality, his never-say-no attitude would help to conserve and preserve the natural and cultural heritage of China. Our country is definitely indebted to you, How Man.

Our final destination was the Yak cheese factory and the nearby Bottomless Lake. To get there, we had to drive on a winding, single lane pass that went up the snowy mountain to an altitude of 5000 m. The road was bumpy and hazardous, but the first snow covered the mountainside with white shimmering blankets, providing us with breathtaking views all the way. Wang Jian and Yuen shifu who drove us were so competent that danger never crossed our minds. We set off early and arrived at the campsite in Langdu just before noon. The sky cleared and Wang Jian suggested that we should visit the Bottomless Lake after lunch. After the morning’s rollercoaster ride, I did not believe that there would be anything that might interest me. When we arrived at the road overlooking the lake, I could not believe my eyes. There lied, in front of us, a somewhat triangular-shaped lake filled with deep emerald water. The latter was awfully calm and peaceful, forming a perfect large mirror, reflecting the evergreen pine trees of the surrounding mountain. At times the sunrays broke through, giving a shimmering light on the water surface. Other times a gentle gust would create ripples, disturbing slightly the calm reflective surface, turning the clear picturesque painting to an impressionist masterpiece. As we descended to walk along the shores of the lake, we realized we were the only souls roaming the quiet plateau. A small number of horses and yaks accompanied us. The air was clean, there was no sound and the diffused afternoonlight all added up to create a comforting atmosphere; it was so peaceful that it was like heaven on earth, a true Lost Horizon, and indeed Shangri-La! I felt so close to nature, felt so much at ease; being submerged by the quietness – I thought I could stay forever! We returned to Zhongdian the next day and then onto Lijiang. Staying in the five-star Hotel brought all of us back to civilisation. I was also rewarded as the snow-capped peak of Yulong was revealed by the early morning sunrays. What a final treat!!

As I write and reflect on our 2-week gathering, I know this could be one of my few lifetime journeys. Flashes of the serene campsite situated amongst picturesque landscape, the untouched Lost Horizon and all the places that lure our admirations, kept returning to my mind. Our reunion also brought back memories of our good old days, when we would at times indulge in somewhat boisterous behaviour.
I

t all started one pleasant afternoon at Tai Tam. It was New Year’s Eve; we were enjoying one of many “barbies” hosted by How Man. The four of us, Maurice, Sam, Francis and I, have known each other since the early days of medical school. We used to hang out in Central where all the pretty women were and the Bull and Bear was one of our favourite haunts. Shortly after graduation, Sam returned to Minneapolis, completed his surgical residency at the Mayo Clinic and eventually settled in Stanford. The rest went & pursued careers in paediatric cardiology, radiology and reproductive medicine respectively. After more than 35 years, we finally realized that life is too short and camaraderie is more important than career so I proposed that we go on an expedition and visit some of the CERS sites in Yunnan.

This journey was especially meaningful in more ways than one. Having listened to How Man about his travels and work in China all these years, I was finally able to experience first-hand and to truly appreciate the tremendous amount of effort and dedication his team has put into conserving and studying the remotest areas of China. It also presented an unprecedented opportunity for long-time friends to re-unite since our graduation. For more than a week, we were far from our customary “synthetic” city environment and immersed in nature. Everywhere we went, we were surrounded by breathtaking, unspoiled scenery and wildlife.

Our group stayed at CERS Zhongdian site as our “base camp” and travelled to the Lisu Hill Tribe site at Xiangguqing Village of Weixi County where CERS, in its true tradition, has “preserved the material culture, hunting legacy and architecture of Lisu”. We had heard about not having a shower for days on end during How Man’s expeditions! As it turned out, this was the only time when we did not have a proper shower. This is where, for the first time, our stamina and mental reserve were tested as the lodgings were on steep slope and the feeding ground of the Snub-nose Golden Monkeys was on high country. We started out early, amidst the morning mist and followed Wang Jian and Li Na up the sometimes-slippery muddy mountain path. By the time we arrived at the first site, the nature reserve rangers had already laid out the Golden Monkeys’ favourite food – pine tree lichen. After some time, we were asked to move to higher ground, as it was apparent that they were not coming to feed. By the time these elusive, delightful and endangered creatures arrived, we were so excited that we kept shooting... with our cameras. We then visited the Tibetan mastiffs’ kennels where the spectacular, sacred Khawakarpow (Meli Snow Mountain ranges) in the distance was augmented by the bursting hues of brown, amber, orange and red of the autumn foliage. The last stretch saw us braved steep, narrow, winding and nerve-wrecking mountain passes, blanket by first snow, that took us to an altitude of 5,000 metres before descending to Langdu where the Yak cheese factory was located. There we had the opportunity of strolling along the shores of the pristine “bottomless lake”, accompanied by horses and yaks. Maurice got so indulged that he spent almost the entire afternoon there taking pictures of everything in sight.

A lot has changed in the past three decades, we have grown older but not necessarily wiser. Our hair is shorter and thinner; the Beatles had disbanded, Imagine John Lennon gone, the Queen without Freddie Mercury and the Police had no Sting! Even CERS sites were not immune to change. The Tea House Clinic that served pilgrims intending to circumambulate the sacred Khawakarpow was in shambles and the suspension bridge crossing the upper Mekong had been moved and replaced by a concrete structure (Figure 1). The Tibetan Mastiffs’ kennel is no longer breeding pure breeds; How Man is disheartened by the speculative activities of unscrupulous entrepreneurs who are bent on prospering from these majestic guardians of the high plateau.

Thanks to How Man and all the CERS staff, especially Berry Sin, Logistics Director, Zhang Fan, China Director, Li Na, Kunming Administrative Officer and Wang Jian, Kunming Director who help made this journey of a lifetime for the eight of us possible and so enjoyable! As a closing remark, I would like to share with you.

“Leave nothing behind save your footsteps
Take nothing away save your photographs.”

During our journey; it amply summed up our adventure. But mind you, when Nature calls, most of us would leave more than our footsteps!

TOP TO BOTTOM:
Medical doctors at graduation. Same line-up today, from left author, Dr Sam So, Dr Maurice Leung, Dr Francis Yau. Yak and dog. Youth returning.
For centuries, Ladakh has been at the crossroads of Central Asian caravan trade. Its culture has been shaped by the goods and ideas exchanged between Tibet, Turkestan, Kashmir and India. Political developments in the mid-20th century put an end to the cross-border trade and relegated Ladakh to relative geographic and cultural isolation. The Central Asian Museum, Leh is an ode to this aspect of Ladakh’s heritage, while also helping educate people about it. It is built in Tsas-Soma (‘new garden’), which in the past also hosted one of Leh’s serais. Masjid Sharif, Leh’s first mosque, is said to have been established here in the 17th century.

The NGO Tibet Heritage Fund (THF) restored this mosque in collaboration with the Anjuman Moin-ul Islam society in 2007. Around this time, the idea of such a museum was expressed by former director of Jammu and Kashmir Tourism, Saleem Beg and eminent Ladakhi historian, Abdul Ghani Sheikh. The Anjuman Moin-ul Islam supported the idea and provided land for it.

LEH’S CENTRAL ASIAN MUSEUM: MIXING HERITAGE WITH MODERNITY

By Pimpimde Azevedo and Yutaka Hirako
A committee was formed to operate the museum and later registered as the Society for the Preservation of Trans-Himalayan Art and Culture, with Abdul Ghani Sheikh as its president. THF and Leh Old Town Initiative (LOTI) were asked to design and build the museum. The project was supported by the Jammu and Kashmir Department of Culture and Tourism with funding of INR1.02 crores (INR10.2 million), of which INR89.6 lakhs (INR8.96 million) was used in the construction of the museum. In addition, THF’s sponsors Virginia and Wellington Yee, Maximillian Ma, HowMan Wong, Rubin Foundation and Embassy of Finland, New Delhi contributed INR1.01 crores (INR10.1 million). A total of INR1.906 crores (INR19.06 million) was used to construct the building of the Central Asian Museum. The balance of INR32.4 lakhs (INR3.24 million) has been allocated for the purchase of artefacts and to pay relevant taxes. The construction of the museum started in August 2008 and was completed in October 2015, with work proceeding only between April and October in the intervening years. At present, the museum is open for visitors interested in the architecture of the building.

The main building was conceived and designed by the late André Alexander along with the Habitat Unit of the School of Architecture at Berlin University of Technology and vital inputs from local artisans and international volunteers. The museum is built to resemble a Himalayan fortress tower with some contemporary design elements. The museum is built to resemble a Himalayan fortress tower with some contemporary design elements. The square ground plan and diamond-shaped ceilings echo ancient Buddhist, Hindu and Muslim places of worship. Each floor is encircled by a passage leading to a stairway to the next floor. Each floor has a different interior design to reflect Ladakhi, Kashmiri, Tibetan and Balti influences.

The ground floor ceiling and timber elements are crafted in an ancient Ladakh style, inspired by the Tsemo fortress in Leh. The first floor is designed in an early Kashmir style, with Bactrian fluted columnists reflect those found in one of the older mosques in Srinagar. The second floor is designed in a classical Tibetan style, with timber elements and carvings echoing those seen in the homes of Lhasa’s aristocracy. The top floor is decorated in a Balti style with long elegant pillar capitals and flower-pattern carvings.

The museum has been built with traditional Ladakhi construction materials, including stone, timber and mud. Each aspect of the construction is done by hand; each stone was individually dressed by masons and the wood-carving was done on site. The walls of the museum are built in solid stone masonry with mud mortar. The style of the masonry and individually faced stones embedded in layers of splinter stones are identical to the one used in Lhasa and also seen in the remains of Gandhara monuments. The stones are local granite, quarried from Shey village. The local mud mortar used was prepared with a mix of soil, water and markalak (white clay). In Tibetan architecture, the embedding or ‘braiding’ of large stones with small ones lends flexibility to the walls to withstand tremors. The floors are paved with slate stone, which were traditionally used for monastic courtyards. The ceilings are constructed in traditional Ladakhi style with talu (willow twigs). The Himalayan flat roof has traditional mud layers with a layer of slate for waterproofing. The windows, however, are a more modern innovation and unusual for Ladakh. They are tall and narrow and placed asymmetrically along the facades. The main door echoes the gates of mansions in old Leh town. Many historic elements were donated by local community members and have been integrated into the building. This includes three lintels, carved with Buddhist and Islamic floral patterns as well as two dozen historic windows, many of them decorated with Kashmiri tracery.
The location of the museum is of great significance. Many of the other buildings in facing the garden have been integrated with the museum complex. Above the Chhutey rantak entrance is the Trans-Himalayan Research Library. The Masjid Sharif is just north of the library, followed by the Kashmir bakery building. This building has been re-designed to be a part of the museum complex. The bakers will continue using the ground floor of this building facing Chhutey rantak, while the museum restaurant will be located at the rear and serve food in Tsas Soma during summers. This restaurant and the Ladakhi kitchen museum, on the other side of the garden, will generate resources for the museum. The ground floor of this building also has three public toilets—two flush-type and one Ladakhi dry type. The toilets have been fitted with an eco-friendly filter system.

The museum complex can be accessed by three gates: the Chhutey rantak entrance is currently the main entrance, a second entrance is located on the southern side and leads to a small alley facing the main bazaar and the third entrance is located on the north of Tsas Soma.

The completion ceremony for the Central Asian Museum took place on 7 October with Mr. Saleem Beg as the chief guest and attended by community leaders, scholars and others. Now starts the work of collecting artefacts for display at the museum, which will be done by the Society for the Preservation of Trans-Himalayan Art and Culture. We hope that the museum plays an important role in the cultural life of the region and promotes understanding, tolerance and cultural diversity.

Pimpim de Azevede is a conservator of Tibetan architecture, with a Master of Research degree in Heritage Sciences. She co-founded Tibet Heritage Fund with André Alexander in 1996 and is currently its co-director.

Yutaka Hirako is a Japanese architect who worked with Tibet Heritage Fund in China from 1998 and since 2012 has been working in Ladakh. He is programme director at THF and Leh Old Town Initiative.

LEFT TO RIGHT:
CERS IN THE FIELD

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP:
CERS welcome new board member Mr Oliver Silsby. Oliver, an international trust lawyer, has been a long-time resident of Asia and a patron of CERS for many years.

CERS celebrated its 29th year with a well-attended dinner at the Football Club in Hong Kong. As before, the event included a photographic exhibit, several CERS-produced films and a lecture followed by an auction.

CERS launched a third expedition to Palawan as our team explored marine life along the east coast coral reefs of the island while our caving team began training program in caving for a local village eager to open their caves for future tourism.

Following a lecture to the World Presidents’ Organization (WPO), How Man attended a private dinner in Manila where the Philippines Secretary of Foreign Affairs Albert del Rosario was among the guests.

During the Nepal Economic Forum organized by the Himalayan Consensus which How Man is on its Advisory Board, he met one of the lead panelists Nirupama Roa, former Foreign Secretary of India. She is an expert on India-China relationship.

Sandra El Thantar Myint joined CERS as our Myanmar Country Manager. Sandra obtained her MBA from Thailand and has worked for an international corporation based in Myanmar.

CERS hosted in Shek O 1939 Exhibit House twenty guests from Friends of the Hong Kong University Museum. We also hosted a group of alumni from the St Paul’s Co-ed College. At another occasion, we hosted another group of alumni from Hong Kong University organized by Ms Choy So-yuk.

CERS hosted students and teachers of the Yung Yau College, our animation film collaboration school, to our Center in Tai Tam.

Two new books, Nature’s Pathway, Culture’s Footprint, the 15th and 16th in a series of bilingual books authored by Wong How Man, was published by Commonwealth Publisher of Taiwan.

Dr William Bleisch, CERS Science Director, published in the Asian Highlands Perspectives a 10-page review of an important book China Environmental Challenges by Judith Shapiro, a scholar who started visiting China since 1977.

Da Ai Television of Taiwan aired a program interviewing How Man on his experience featured in his two new books.

Rhythms Magazine of Taiwan published an article based on our recent documentation of cultural activities along the Irrawaddy River.

Harbour Times reported on CERS and its readiness for adventure after attended the CERS annual dinner.

How Man lectured recently in Manila for the WPO, Taipei during a book launch, Kathmandu for the Economic Forum, and at Boston College.

Dr Bleisch lectured in Kunming at the Mountain Futures Conference with a topic on Protected Areas in Northern Lao PDR: Intersection of Wildlife, Tourism and Watermelon.
A subscription to this newsletter is US$100 for three issues. All proceeds support CERS projects. Please contact us directly if you are interested in signing up. See the bottom of page two for contact details.

The production of *China Explorers* is made possible through the generous contributions of Toppan Vite Limited

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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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**The Margot and Thomas Pritzker Family Foundation provided matching Fund for CERS project in restoring a meditation house at Damazong Cave in Yunnan. Damazong (Bodhidharma) is the First Patriarch Master who brought Buddhism from India to China. The Pritzker Foundation to CERS also supports study of Tibetans in the southern Himalayas, to be published as a book.**

**Ms Choy So-yuk donated an apartment in a high-rise building in Manila to CERS for use as our liaison office or be converted into funding for work in the Philippines.**

**Mrs Anne Marden joined CERS in support of the restoration of the former Shek O school house to become a community center. This followed our interview of Mrs Marden regarding the history of Shek O’s residents.**

**Mrs Rosa Pun cooked and served a wonderful dinner at her home for CERS annual dinner auction winner Oliver Silsby, represented by Afonso Ma and Wellington Yee.**

**Mr George Yeo, Chairman of Kerry Logistics, supported CERS by shipping our equipment from Hong Kong to Zhongdian for our new museum.**

**A generous donation of HK1 Million was made to the Society. The modest donor chooses to remain anonymous.**

**Cathay Pacific Airways is providing a number of long-haul business class tickets in support of CERS documentary filming production on several upcoming subjects.**

**City Developments Limited (CDL) of Singapore renewed as CERS corporate patron for 2016 as well as supported our overseas accommodations through their Millennium and Copthorne Hotel Group.**

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TOP: Rosa Pun and guests at home dinner. BOTTOM: Anne Marden being interviewed.