CLOCKWISE FROM TOP:
CERS team crossing from Sichuan into Tibet.
Hanging coffins of Sagada Philippines.
Caravan heading for Songpan.
Recycled umbrella sail of Palawan.

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President’s Message

I t may seem strange that this issue of the newsletter has only two contributors, Dr Bill Bleisch and me. But then, we are the two among CERS’ key field personnel who have been spending the most time in the field, so why not? I counted at least half a year of each year not at home, and Dr Bleisch even more. That, after all, is what CERS is about, and what both of us enjoy the most, and what many others envy the most.

Through the pages of what follows, our readers will find out that CERS covers a range of geographic areas and topics, from China to the Philippines, and from Myanmar to Laos. We share with you stories from history to the present day, from nature to culture, from dizzying altitude on the high plateau to pristine depths of tropical oceans, and from exploration excitement to conservation fulfillment. I hope you will find these journeys just as fulfilling.

The Internet age has dramatically shortened our gaps of knowledge. Yes, the world may seem smaller, but that only makes interpretation of such knowledge even more critical. How we make such knowledge and its context relevant to this generation is of the utmost importance, especially when we are seeing our natural and cultural heritages disappearing in front of our eyes.

The custody of our world’s future no doubt will soon be in the hands of a younger generation. That is why it is imperative that CERS be involved in educating, sharing and inspiring our younger, and often smarter, future generation. Perhaps if they can learn not only from our modest successes, but also from the mistakes we have made, they would be ready to tackle future problems, both environmental and cultural. Let us hope that they face them with just as much enthusiasm as we have in our generation, but with wiser values.

At CERS, we run both sprint and marathon as far as our projects are concerned. Values and attitude, however, often derive from slowing down and engaging in subjects with sustained interest, highlighted by long-term commitment rather than the excitement of new discoveries or moments of glory. Let’s hope that our future generation, fast and capable from the internet age, would also slow down and enjoy some moments of peace and tranquility.
Put this away, it may cause you trouble,” the Abbot whispered as he slipped back the picture to me. I was showing him a picture of the Dalai Lama receiving me at his home in Dharamsala. I am no stranger to political sensitivity, having worked in China since 1974 and through part of the Cultural Revolution. I know what I can get away with, but not the Abbot. Out of consideration, however, I stuck the picture inside the inner pocket of my down jacket.

But that short episode opened the door, or doors, at this remotest corner on the Tibetan plateau. Qiongguo Monastery is located inside Tibet, but at a faraway corner where Qinghai and Sichuan meet with the Tibetan Autonomous Region. Until recently, no road penetrated into this monastery except one that required days of horseback riding. Today, a suspension bridge connects the distant town of Luoxu on the Sichuan side to the monastery.

Luoxu itself was once the capital of a backwater county of Sichuan called Dengke along the upper Yangtze that was disbanded in 1978, due largely to its remoteness, and integrated into the two nearby counties of Dege and Serxu. It might as well be, since the region was extremely tribal until the last few decades of the 20th Century. The Dengke region was the home of the most brilliant Tibetan hero and fiercest warrior, King Gesar of Ling. And the town of Luoxu is where Dengma, his top general, came from.

For that reason the full name of the monastery across the Yangtze is Dengma Qiongguo Monastery. This however is not just any Tibetan lamasery. Legend has it that this monastery was directly related to Tsongkhapa, founder of the Yellow Hat or Gelug Sect. His lead disciple was commissioned to start a number of monasteries. Casting his monk’s robe into the Yangtze, he prophesized that the robe would stop at the future site of an important monastery. The robe floated downriver and ended up at the current location of Qiongguo monastery, thus the name, which means monk’s robe in Tibetan.
Our arrival coincided with the monastic debate week and my team was treated to an exciting morning of activities followed by mass chanting in the covered courtyard of the main assembly hall, a building that miraculously survived the Cultural Revolution, possibly due to its remoteness. Silang Puji, the chief abbot, was presiding at the function, sitting inside the Assembly Hall in front of the altar, with the Buddhist statues and deities high above.

My photo introduction seemed to work. I asked to purchase a monk’s robe, namesake of the monastery, as a religious relic for our newly finished museum chapel at our Zhongdian Center. “I will give you my robe,” whispered the abbot. He took me by the hand and paced the few steps to the high chair by the altar, took off the saffron robe draped over its back and passed it to me. I offered to pay him and he simply shook his head.

“Don’t show it,” he cautioned. Soon my down jacket took on a more plumpish appearance as I walked out of the Assembly Hall. Silang Puji is not just any high monk or abbot. His family pedigree hailed back centuries to the beginning of the Gelug Sect of Tibetan Buddhism. His discipline for the monks of his monastery is so strict that over twenty other monasteries far and wide decided to become the sub-monasteries of Qiongguo Monastery and adopted his same stringent rules and regulations.

Qiongguo monastery is the farthest destination for me on this short yet exciting expedition. Having studied and crisscrossed the Yangtze for over three decades, including reaching the source region on three occasions, this is the first time I arrive, and cross, the Yangtze where three provinces meet. This is also where the Tongtianhe changes its name to Jinshajiang as the river flows from Qinghai into Sichuan. We set camp for the night at the confluence.
After a night and morning of snowstorm, we exited the region. On the way out, we stopped by a hot spring by the roadside. The name is Duojenri, phonetically and appropriately meaning “lots of praise in hotness” in Chinese. The water was way too hot to take a bath, so we satiated ourselves by dipping our feet in. Soon a young lady came out of the house next to the spring. I thought there must be a fee charged. No, it turned out to be absolutely free for all. Upon finishing with the treat for our feet, I poked my head into the house and met the father of the lady.

Sixty-five years old Gerong Qucho turned out to be quite well to do, having amassed a small fortune as a local trader in barley grain and other merchandise. Against the wall were stacked sacks of grain stored in old and sturdy leather caravan bags used no more today. I tried to negotiate to get a pair for our collection, but the price was prohibitive, running into the thousands. Next I saw a large yak blanket used to cover another stack of merchandises on the floor. Gerong wanted 1500Rmb, the equivalent of US$200. It was time to grease the deal with my secret and sacred weapon of the Dalai Lama again.

Seeing that the family altar had a picture of the Karmapa, I doubled down with another few pictures I took while attending the Enthronement of the Karmapa in Tibet in 1992 when he was seven years old, coupled with a picture I took of him as a tall adult standing next to me when I visited him in Dharamsala. It worked. The price dropped immediately by half to 800Rmb.

In passing, I asked if there were still sitting/sleeping mats made from musk deer hair stuffed in between fabric layers. This is a most unlikely item to find, as the source animal has almost totally disappeared throughout the plateau due to depletion of the animal for its valuable musk, once a key ingredient for traditional medicine and the perfume industry alike.

Tibetans believe mats made from musk deer hair will prevent rheumatism, and these were only commonly used by royalty and high lamas. It may take upwards of 100 musk deer to yield enough hair to make one full size mat. The hair of the musk deer is unique, with a cork-screw shape and hollow center that must help keep the animal warm in the cold wet climate of the high Himalayas.

Surprisingly, Gerong revealed that he had one such mat. It turned out to be an extremely large and very old specimen. He was ready with a scissors to cut open a corner to show me the contents, but I had already found a section where old stitches were falling, revealing the inside. Indeed there was yellowish wild hair showing, not cotton or cloth stuffing. I wanted to recondition it to serve as a sitting/sleeping pad for high monks who would soon begin to use our Buddhist chapel attached to the new museum we are finishing at our Zhongdian Center. Through some hard negotiating, the price dropped from 6000 Rmb to 2700, with my sacred pictures changing hands to sit over his altar.

Back on the road during the times while I was busy with photography, data collecting, or artifact negotiation from monasteries, roadside stands and campsite passers-by, a number of our team members were busy negotiating and buying cordyceps, the caterpillar fungus that has transformed the entire economic landscape of the Tibetan plateau over the last two decades. Fortunes were made by anyone even remotely connected to this business, driving a craze from source to

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT:
Upper Yangtze in Tibet, Qinghai and Sichuan border.
CERS fleet in snow.
Yak in snow.
Camping in snow.
Shelduck with chicks.
Nun in seclusion.
Chapel of nunnerly.
markets in China’s big cities, Hong Kong and overseas for these tiny heaven-endowed, fungus-infected worms. Prices have dropped recently from a high of over 100Rmb per piece to barely 30 for large specimens and 20 for medium sized ones, or even 5 for an ugly tiny worm.

Just the day before, we were at the bank of the Yalong River, one of four rivers that feed the Yangtze in Sichuan (Sichuan meaning ‘four rivers’). Geographically the upper reaches of both the Yangtze and the Yalong here are separated by only roughly 60 kilometers and one ridge. Flowing south somewhat in parallel to each other, they won’t join each other for another 800 kilometers further south as the crow flies. We camped at the bank of the Yalong, here at an elevation of 3850 meters, by another little-known monastery, Drekar, of the Nyingma (Red) Sect with over 400 monks.

A young girl of 22 by the name of Nimaco was most lively and proactive, offering to show us a nunnery nearby. Driving along the Yalong and then through some twists and turns up the mountain, we located inside a valley the hidden nunnery by the same name of Drekar. This nunnery, standing at 4020 meters elevation and affiliated with the monastery, has less than forty nuns. None were in sight, but the presiding Khempo (head monk) Bienma showed us the main hall. Mumbling some noises through his nose, we finally figured out that all nuns, as well as himself, were observing the 8-day Mute Prayer ritual, which forbid them to leave their abode and restricted their talk. I peeked through one window and saw a quiet nun in her meditation routine.

Without planning, this expedition became a monastic pilgrimage, visiting new “old” monasteries for the first time as well as revisiting three old “old” monasteries that were all
close personal friend since we first met in the 1980s. I have entertained him on several occasions when he visited Hong Kong to perform religious ceremonies. Although he was away in Chengdu during our current visit, his chief abbot Zangyang Tsecun was extremely hospitable and insisted that we must stay for the night. This is the site where our first survey team moved in during the snowy spring of 1991, with subsequent international teams staying through several seasons to restore the building and murals.

Entering and exiting Baiya Monastery even ten years ago would have required four days of travel… on horseback. But today, with China’s new gained wealth, and corresponding technological prowess, most of the dirt roads and treks of the past are now paved. Before I left Baiya, the Rinpoche called his Abbot and instructed him to remove the gigantic saffron monk’s robe draping the presiding seated Buddha. Wrapped in beautiful embroidered fabric, the sacred robe was his gift for us to adorn our newly finished chapel at our Zhongdian Museum. So for now, I have not one, but two special monk’s robe that would accompany us back home to our Center in Yunnan.

I could not help imagining that such glitter and excess were fueled by the nouveau riche who showered these religious sites with money, much of it ill-gotten, as a way of redeeming themselves. Today, if they offered enough, a hall would be built for any supplicant, I suppose. Yes, maybe monasteries are places for cleansing one’s soul and mind. But it is not the original purpose of these pantheons of religious worship to be patronizing to those with deep pockets, or be corrupted by people eager to pledge support in order to launder their souls.

By comparison, all three CERS monastic sites we had the good fortune to revisit and stay at are small and special. Renkang, despite being the house where the 7th Dalai Lama was born, retains its historic old look and humbleness as if taking us back four centuries in time. Lumorab or Tumu monastery, where we constructed small dams and retaining walls to contain a landslide above the assembly hall, continues to be remote and pristine. Its mural remains in great condition and is one of the best among Nyingma Sect monasteries.

Lastly, Baiya Monastery of the Sakya (White Sect) is very intimate to CERS and me. Baiya Rinpoche has become a very close personal friend since we first met in the 1980s. I have entertained him on several occasions when he visited Hong Kong to perform religious ceremonies. Although he was away in Chengdu during our current visit, his chief abbot Zangyang Tsecun was extremely hospitable and insisted that we must stay for the night. This is the site where our first survey team moved in during the snowy spring of 1991, with subsequent international teams staying through several seasons to restore the building and murals.

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While the three nights’ stay at our beloved monasteries were gems for the heart, I also cherish the five nights we spent camping out in high mountains and among tall fir and pine forests. From a sudden snow blizzard to idyllic blue sky and twilight, my mind feasted on nature to the fullest. For over a week, we ate meals cooked in camp and drank from mountain springs. Though it is now time to go home, that sweetness of nature lingers and I will always be longing to return.
A ONCE-EVERY-TWELVE-YEARS PILGRIMAGE

by Wong How Man

Damazong, Yunnan

TOP: Sacred and secret prayers in morning by Tashi Rinpoche.
BOTTOM: New façade of Damazong (Bodhidharma) sacred meditation cave.
The rooster by our house started crowing at 4am. But that may just have been the early morning call, and soon it died down. By 5am, the rooster called again. This time around, there was a chorus from the nearby hill, as other roosters echoed in.

Roosters here are well groomed. They would never be served on the dinner table, as they were released as an act of kindness, what Chinese called “Fang Sheng”, meaning “let live”. But here it is Tibetans who are performing this act of beneficence. The rooster near our log house sported a long curly black tail. Roosters are all well fed here, thanks to the barley grains scattered all over the top of this mountain as offerings by Buddhist supplicants to Damazong Cave.

Here is where Bodhidharma (Damo in Chinese) is believed to have spent nine years in solitary meditation facing the cliff before he attained nirvana and ascended to the Buddha’s world. It is said that even his shadow can be seen, casted permanently on the rock face. Damo is the sage who first brought Buddhism from India to China during the early part of the 5th century AD, and he is considered the First Patriarch Master of Chinese Chan Buddhism. His teachings were developed into Zen and later spread throughout Korea and Japan and eventually to Europe, the USA and throughout the world.

Bodhidharma was born during the year of the Monkey, which matches this year’s zodiac. Furthermore, he was believed to be born on the First Day of the Fourth Moon, as well as attaining nirvana at his passing away on the same auspicious day. This coincides with the day when Shakyamuni attained full merit and became the Buddha, a day celebrated by Buddhists around the world.

So it is on this very special day that we adjourned here to this remote spot to launch the restored meditation house directly adjacent to Damazong Cave. Tibetan pilgrims also started arriving early in the morning to make prayers and perform the circumambulation of the mountain. As the cave is at an elevation of 3100 meters near the top of the pinnacle of a mountain, the circuit around the top is a relatively easy 45 minutes trek, compared to the more strenuous circuit at Kailash of 53 kilometers at near 5600 meters, or the 8-day trek around Khawakarpo.

I did my kora, as Tibetans call such a circuit, and finished in slightly over an hour. The entire route was adorned with prayer flags, at some location so thick that one had to crawl under them. It is said that one must make the Kora in odd numbers. If you were to make two circuits, it would be advisable to finish a third one, a fifth one, a seventh one, or so on and so forth. The most devoted would prostrate up the mountain, as well as prostrate around the circuit. Each circuit would then require a long day of repeated kneeling, prostrating flat on the ground, standing, then taking three steps forward before repeating the same routine. I conveniently stopped at a single digit single circuit, on foot.

Our new project came about in a subtle way as if by coincidence, like most other CERS projects. Since 2003, I have passed by the foothill of this mountain several times each year. Looking up at the temple slightly below the peak, I had contemplated making the half day hike ‘one of these days,’ but never made the time or effort. Then a fire descended upon the temple in 2014 and the government decided to build a road and reconstruct the temple, rushing to finish in time for the 2016 major pilgrimage.

Finally, our own CERS project manifested itself last summer when I was joining a group of young interns to visit our Golden Monkey/Lisu Hill Tribe project site barely an hour away. Having been to that site dozens of times, I took a break from the group and drove up the newly finished road to visit Damazong Cave.

After visiting the restored temple, I noticed a dilapidated house over the steep hill, directly adjacent to the presiding cave structure being reconstructed. It had a most awe...
inspiring view of the Yangtze meandering below and into the distant hills. The modest building turned out to be a meditation house belonging to a Tibetan teacher monk.

A lone construction worker present gave the name of Monk Gongjiu who was teaching young monks at a school half way down the mountain. We went down the hill in search. The humble monk was most hospitable and over a bowl of butter tea, we discussed the possibilities of restoring the meditation house with leaking roof and badly in need of repair. Soon an agreement was struck that CERS would take on this new project and make the building usable again before the 2016 pilgrimage began.

Subsequent trips over the next few months took this house to its current status, including kitchen, bathrooms, incense burner, observation deck, and an extension log house detailed with religious objects for visiting monks to use as a meditation facility. There is also a small dorm area for visiting students to use in the future such that they could learn about the traditional practices of Tibetan Buddhism through this important religious site.

As I left the CERS restored Damazong meditation house the day after my pilgrimage, I nodded to myself in approval that this is yet another small project that we undertook in record time, yet with lasting value to many who would come after us. I too, may come back for a span of meditation when I am retired.

But for now, I feel most gratified that as of today, Tashi Rinpoche, a close friend of CERS and a descendent of the 7th Dalai Lama’s family, would begin his month-long meditation at our newly restored house. It is my hope that Tashi would only be the first of many such devotees who can make use of this very special and auspicious religious retreat.

The Damazong Meditation House restoration project is co-supported by the Margot and Thomas Pritzker Family Foundation and CERS
In the mountains north of the Sichuan basin, the walled city of Jin’An was established as a garrison post of the Tang Dynasty in the year 618. In 638, the armies of King Songtsan Gampo forged a united Tibetan empire, and, according to Tibetan sources, one of these armies threatened Jin’An with attack unless a Chinese princess was granted to the Tibetan king in marriage. The princess chosen was named Wencheng, and she dutifully travelled to Lhasa to join the king’s four other wives. In return, the Chinese garrison was allowed to remain in Jin’An, and the town soon became an important center on the West Mountain Road, a major trade route to Tibetan regions in the west.

Jin’An, also known as Song Zhou, remained under Chinese control until 763, but then lost much of its importance until the Yuan Dynasty (1279-1368), when imperial presence was once again established. In 1379, the Ming Dynasty reestablished the town as an important center on the West Mountain Road, a major trade route to Tibetan regions in the west.

Jin’An was on the eastern border of the Tibetan Plateau, and historically the Songpan region extended beyond the town from near the Yellow River bend in the north to the southern river gorges of the Min River above Dujiangyan and Chengdu. Most of the region was higher than 3,000 meters above sea level, rising in the east to 5,588 meters at Shardungri, transliterated as Xue Bao Ding in Chinese, meaning Snow Treasure Peak. The majority of people and institutions in the region were culturally Tibetan, and they remained largely independent of the imperial Chinese court. But they were not part of a unitary Tibet either, or even a unitary Tibetan cultural regime. In the 1890s, parts of the Songpan region were variously considered to be part of the Tibetan rGal Rong states, the Hor States, or the Kham or Amdo regions, and it was also claimed by the Qing governor-general of Sichuan. In the early 1950’s, during the Republican era, it was partitioned between the Tibetan regions of Sharkhog, Kokonor, Amdo, and Xikang and Warlord District 16. In the 1960s, after establishment of New China, it was part of the Southwest Region, the 124th Military Region, and Sichuan Province, and the name Songpan was restricted to a much-reduced county around
the town. Rather than a stable political entity with fixed borders, the region is better thought of as an ecological domain where political boundaries were fluid for much of history; a changeable borderland where Tibetan, Han, Hui and Qiang peoples lived and interacted.

Jack Patrick Hayes recently published a sweeping historical analysis of the greater Songpan region covering the period from the late imperial era until the close of the twentieth century. He provides a ‘thick description’ of local history, traditions and practices during this period of intense social, political and economic transformation, focusing on the relationships “between humans and landscapes, markets and governments, and local people and nation-states.” Before modern roads broke the isolation of Songpan, Chinese travelers might have described the landscape as a uniform, isolated, barbarian wasteland inhabited by lamas, nomads and bandits. Hayes paints a more complex picture, much more nuanced than the usual view. While Buddhists, herders and robbers there certainly were, there were also other religions, other livelihoods, and other ethnicities besides Tibetans. There were merchants of many ethnicities all eager to trade with outsiders, and Tibetan headmen happy to increase their status by accepting recognition by the Qing Dynasty as tu-si rulers. Even as early as the Tang Dynasty, the Songpan region was not completely isolated, and trade in tea, horses, and other goods connected the region to the lowlands beyond the mountains. By the late Qing Dynasty, commodities coming into Songpan included tea, silk and cotton goods, ironware, and salt, while Songpan Tibetans sent out animal skins, medicinal plants, livestock and wool. Despite this continuity of trade and relationships, social
and political management of the region began to shift during the Republican era after 1912. Chinese forestry and mining concerns first extended their interest into the region in the 1910s and 1920s. This was followed by even more profound change in the 1930s and 1940s, as new economic forces created what Hayes calls an “opium regime” in Songpan. Crop cultivation always had been centered on the lower and more accessible river valleys, which also provided farmers with ready access to markets. Unfortunately for those living in those more accessible areas, economic access also meant political access, which in turn, in the Republican era, came to mean coercive taxation by local elites and warlords. In response, high value poppy rapidly became the crop of choice. The new reality included criminal networks, oppressive taxation and environmental degradation, but despite all this, local elites continued to dominate, and in fact they enabled the opium regime to develop. The Nationalist state did not control the region, it only added another layer on top of pre-existing power structures of local elites, who were predominantly Tibetan. Central authority was conspicuous in its absence. “The functional reach of the state into local governance would have to wait until the rise of a new, more powerful, and more determined socialist state in the 1950s.”

Hayes concludes that the Chinese state did not come to rule the Sino-Tibetan borderlands in one unopposable wave of expansion, nor was the process of centralized expansion and ‘state-making’ a smooth process. Rather, it was the result of stop-and-go projects that only slowly transformed local elites and the patterns of their dominance. For most of history, the Songpan region interacted with the Chinese state not through large-scale wars and major battles, but instead through interactions in local markets and exploitation of natural resources. This created a mixed economy dominated by Han, Tibetan and Hui elites who were thus brought into touch with other parts of China. Despite banditry, coercion and resistance over the centuries, most of the interactions involved mutual benefit in a “middle ground” of trade and cultural contacts between Chinese immigrants and local Tibetans. Hayes provides a view of the Songpan region not as a frontier on the edge of an ineluctably expanding Chinese state, but rather as an internal borderland, where the ‘friction’ created by vast distances, high elevations and steep topography resisted and slowed Chinese control and assimilation. How these geographical barriers were overcome, breaking down the isolation of the region with new infrastructure and new economic regimes, goes a long way to explain how a multi-ethnic and largely stateless region came to be incorporated into modern China.

“Look at this patch of mangrove, I feel the people planting them are totally irresponsible,” said Cheng Kai-keung with disgust in his face. Cheng is very vocal about many things in and around Tai O, once a backwater fishing village of Lantau, itself an island backwater of Hong Kong, that is until the new airport and Disneyland were completed in 1998 and 2005 respectively. An isolated village up until the 1970s, today droves of tourists come to Tai O during the weekends to visit a labyrinth of metal shed houses and shops.

“Just a tiny patch to make a point. I think city folks coming here feel they are educated and needed to make change. Such symbolic action help them receive government or private resources, all in the name of conservation,” Cheng added with a sneer in his tone. “See all the trash and foam boxes in the water caught under the trees, they never follow up and clean up the mess. It is impractical and worse than before,” Cheng spoke while pointing at a line of mangroves along the footpath to his shop.

I can understand and sympathize with his frustration. After all, I have seen similar situations acted out by “conservationists”, taking endangered habitats and species on a spin, not unlike spin artists of our financial world. At times it becomes a branding exercise, hijacking public sentiments for fundraising or recognition needs. But of course, there are also committed conservationists with more purist agendas, though not always acted out with sensitivity or consideration for other stakeholders.

When it comes to his own family business, Cheng became more meticulous and solemn. “Cheng Cheung Hing, our brand, was founded four generations ago in 1920 by my great
Sea salt used in preserving these shrimp used to be produced locally, as Tai O had a long history of harvesting salt from the sea. Since the early 1970s, however, that profession had come to an end here, and today Cheng’s salt is brought in from outside. Salt production, like farming and raising pigs, evaporated under the sun into obscurity. While the last pigs were eaten, the water buffaloes were simply let loose. They roam throughout Lantau Island to this day.

Today Tai O has only two shrimp sauce shops remaining, down from ten shops a few decades ago. The smell is pungent, but it is a fragrant aroma to those with the acquired taste. It fills the air within twenty or thirty meters of Cheng’s shop. His mother takes care of the shop-front retail business, whereas in the back are the packaging and delivery departments. Bottles are put into carton boxes of 24 bottles each, string bundled into crates, then taken into town with a forklift, and sent off to wholesalers worldwide. Some of these bottles would show up in markets in North America. Others are destined for Europe.

But life isn’t always a party, even with an old and successful brand. Since Hong Kong government implemented restrictions on near-shore fishing in 2013, the supply of “silver shrimp”, the key ingredient of the sauce and paste, became exhausted. Cheng had to turn to China for supply of his shrimp. Making the paste is a long process and doesn’t require fresh shrimp. But making the sauce must be based on fermentation of freshly caught shrimp. Setting up his supply chain became crucial, so as to receive his shrimp in a timely fashion. Today Cheng produces between 30 to 40 tons of shrimp sauce and paste each year. In the past, he could deliver up to 100 tons.

“Eating at home together is a very important tradition among overseas Chinese, thus their habits, flavor and taste is carried from one generation to the next,” he explained. “With our shrimp sauce and paste, Cantonese in particular feel connected to their past, the ancestral home in China where they came from,” Cheng told us his theory of why their brand continued to catch on and did not die with time.

“Guess who are our most loyal customers,” Cheng asked. I suggested two answers - Taishan and Swatow Chinese - both wrong. “Vietnamese Chinese in North America are by far our biggest customers; to them it is like an addiction,” Cheng revealed with a smile.

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High up on a storage loft are old wooden basins, not unlike those used in grape wine making in Europe. Cheng kept these containers simply...
as relics, as today’s utensils have been modernized into large plastic vessels. When asked whether the product tastes the same with the change of processing equipment, Cheng quietly looked away and did not answer.

After revealing the history and process of making these products, Cheng proceeded to show us the ancestral house across from his shop. This is one of the main reasons for our visit, to inspect a dilapidated house. Yutaka, our conservation architect friend, is most interested in this part of the visit and begins making photographic records. Professor Yu Shuenn-der, an ethnologist from Taiwan, is also curious as to how villagers lived in the past within a close family structure.

I, on the other hand, am contemplating whether this might become a CERS project in restoration. The wooden stairs to the second floor living area has become so fragile and dangerous that only one person can go up at a time. The ancestral altar still stands clean and tidy, presiding over a small loft under the tiled roof. Obviously Cheng and his family have been keeping the incense burning despite the house itself being no longer livable. That tradition of respect to ancestors is most admirable.

If indeed we have the capacity to take on yet another conservation project, perhaps I have to start learning how to breathe shrimp sauce odor, even if I am not going to eat it. Perhaps in time I too would find it a fragrant aroma, rather than a pungent smell. That however is for the future. Today, I am taking home just one bottle as souvenir, sealed well.
The tempo of music, set to instruments including two sets of drums, a score of variation sizes of gongs, accompanied by cymbals and a high pitch wind instrument called Hnal suddenly went much faster, as if reaching a crescendo. Momentarily Ko Thant Sin’s vocal for the song started. The lyrics, being in Burmese and unintelligible to me, nonetheless seemed to come alive through his facial expressions. A lot of emotions were put into this rendition of a song that I felt like being in the southern USA, listening to some kind of blues mixed with jazz. The rhythms however are very different.

While Thant Sin was singing, his hands moved in a dramatic fast circular motion, beating on a roll of drums, may be twenty or more in various sizes, surrounding him literally from front to back. The lead singer and leader of the Thant Sin Orchestra was performing a popular song called Asian Hero, a tribute to the most revered figure in modern Myanmar history, General Aung San, father of Aung San Suu Kyi. Usually this special number is reserved for the height of their performance, when the audience would also get into a spell of excitement, before the orchestra would gradually play out other numbers to end the show. This particular piece would last for seven minutes, a rather exhausting performance.

I have been traveling up the Chindwin River on our HM Explorer boat for three days, just to catch up with this other traveling orchestra, also on a boat. I first ran into this orchestra briefly over two years ago, soon after we launched.
our own research vessel in Myanmar. Since then, I’ve been eager to return and document their story.

We were lucky to catch them at their home base of Kalewa, a short distance from the Indian border of Tamu where a massive retreat of British forces took place during World War Two. As a traveling minstrel, the troupe is called in to perform during religious functions or festivities, to entertain while the host would collect donations for the many temples and pagodas being built, or needing repair and restoration. Occasionally they would also perform at private functions, like at weddings.

Such traveling orchestra has a long history and is part of a tradition along the river. With new roads now being built along the banks, river traffic may gradually trickle down. Luckily the countryside has become more prosperous due to opening up of the country in the last few years. More and more temples, as well as pagodas, are being put up by suppliants. Such activities keep the troupe busy, being invited to perform 30 to 40 times a year at religious ceremonies, festivals and civil events.

For Thant Sin and his family, playing in a traveling orchestra has gone on for three generations, since his grandfather’s day. Soon, it seems set to move to a fourth generation as Ko’s daughter, barely ten years old, is quickening her step to get involved with the orchestra. Today, or any other day after school, Moh Moh can hold her own with her singing to the accompaniment of the orchestra. The father is obviously proud, as a huge poster of Moh Moh is hung behind a make-shift stage, next to Ko’s poster of himself. This bamboo shed with plastic-leaf roof by the bank serves as their rehearsal “studio”, but with barely enough space to sit at most half a dozen guests.

Thant Sin began learning the art of such performance as a young apprentice, not from his father or grandfather, but from another troupe “Sein Hla Sin”. For two years since nine years old, he stayed with this troupe without pay, just two meals a day and a mat to sleep on a boat. So it seems natural that his daughter Moh Moh should also start learning at nine, while attending school at the same time. Education is considered very important to any Burmese, thus Moh Moh’s singing can only be done after school.

Today Thant Sin is 40 years old. He was formerly known as Zaw Min Hlaing, and was little known to anyone at that time. In 2006, he met the monk Sayar Taw Wai Zayantar. The monk gave him a new name Thant Sin to bring more luck and fame in the future. It seemed to have worked and he founded his own orchestra under his name in 2008. Their orchestra suddenly became popular and more in demand.

Thant Sin Orchestra now has eight members
and is by and large a family minstrel, including Thant Sin’s 43-years-old brother Aung Khaing Min who can also play all the instruments, younger sister at 30 Nwe Ni Hlaing who sings, their father U San Hlaing at 67 years of age who plays the flute and the “flute like wind”. The other members include female singer Mya Mya Win (30), U Maw Gyee (47) who also started learning at age 9 and joined their troupe in 2010, and Thit Lwin Aung (18) who apprenticed for two years since age 10 before joining Thant Sin.

For Moh Moh, the child prodigy as a singer, her voice is still breaking and often drowned out by the orchestra. But as Thant Sin expected, in time she would excel as she grew older, hopefully before such traveling orchestras become obsolete. Since they are not receiving any order to perform these couple weeks, I invited the troupe on our boat to perform in the afternoon and after dinner. The collapsible stage and decorative enclosure were quickly set up, and we gave up our usual happy hour and instead enjoyed their performance. All our boat staff seemed to know many of the songs, either singing along or strumming their hands or feet in unison with the beat.

While this is winter in northern Myanmar, relatives and friends of the orchestra joined us on our boat as spectators, hugging their blanket on our upper deck benches. I promise that we would return another time, in order to document them traveling to various performances.

Nearby above Kalewa, I sit and enjoy my Burmese milk tea at a roadside cafe above the ferry crossing. I observe the many small boats busily ferrying villagers back and forth across the river to the morning market. Larger boats are ferrying trucks and cars across at the same location. It costs 300 Kyat for a passenger on the boat whereas if one were to wait for the vehicular ferry, the crossing is free. However time is of essence and it seems there is hardly any taker for the free ride. Such may be an indication of life ahead in an otherwise slow moving country.

As I look a little further into the distant, I can see that foundations are being laid across the Chindwin River for the construction of a major bridge. Once this bridge is completed, all these cafes, restaurants and shops by the riverbank would become obsolete. Cars and passengers would hurry on with their life without stopping to enjoy a cup of tea while waiting for the ferry.

Old friends and customers may all become a passing memory as Myanmar rush to join the modern world. As with Thant Sin’s traveling orchestra, he would be fortunate if the younger set of Burmese boys and girls would find time beyond their other choices on television program and social chatting over their now viral mobile phones. Perhaps this will also be my last cup of tea at this café, and my last look at the ferry crossing of Kalewa.
It seems strange that I should be writing about the Hanging Coffins while looking at one such coffin site slightly below the Bed and Breakfast where I am staying. From my desk, which overhangs a garden that drops off to a gorge with a seasonally surging river, the coffin site may only be two to three hundred meters across from me. Four wooden coffins hang against a whitish patch on the limestone cliff.

When Nash, my new writer friend and “guide”, picked this B&B, she had no idea that it directly faced a site with hanging coffins, the chief purpose of my visit. The house, peach in color and five-minutes walk down from a football field, is well hidden, just like the nearby coffins. Even Canadian anthropologist Joachim Voss, who knew this area well, did not know of its existence. Since his first visit in 1976, Joachim had been studying the Igorot people of Sagada, which later became the focus of his doctoral thesis.

Since then, Joachim and his wife Villia, also an anthropologist, have been coming back several times a year to live among these people that they have learned to love. Obviously the feeling is reciprocal. As Joachim showed me around the region, passers-by waved or nodded at him.

Just yesterday afternoon, soon after I arrived at Sagada, Joachim took me on a hike into Echo Valley, a gorge where the most popular coffin site is. From a small path next to the Episcopal Church, we took a short cut to join the main trail toward the coffin site. Suddenly, it seemed I had
rejoined Manila traffic, though on a foot path. The railed steps were jammed at several places as each line of tourists had to wait for the other to pass before proceeding forward.

I was told however, that up till five years ago, there were hardly any tourists. Then, all of a sudden, the fame of the hanging coffins went viral. Of late, there is a night bus from Manila and another bus service from nearby Baguio bringing busloads of visitors every day. Buses and vans arrive every weekend with young tourists in droves, flooding the 40-minute walk from the Episcopal Church to the coffin site.

It may seem strange, but I myself have been yearning to come here for years, ever since seeing a single picture of these hanging coffins of the Philippines in a magazine over two decades ago. I had studied similar burial customs and hanging coffin sites in China since 1985. The main difference is the burial rite has died in China over 400 years ago, and it is still practiced here in the Philippines.

In 1999, I had led our CERS team to explore and conserve one coffin site we discovered that had never been reported before. A full-hour Discovery Channel film about our work on the hanging coffins of China won Best Documentary Award. Now after twenty-five years of dreaming and two days of driving from Manila, I finally have my five minutes grace with the spirits residing in the hanging coffins of the Philippines!

Alma is owner of the Inandako’s B&B, opened three years ago to accommodate the huge influx of tourists. After 25 years as a dentist, she decided to retire early and now enjoys managing her six-room outfit. The bed is spacious and the breakfast sumptuous, a full meal including her famous cream of pumpkin soup, vegetable, egg, corn beef, toast and rice. She is a member of the Igorot tribe who has lived among these karst hills as long as history has a record. This region is called the Cordillera, or Mountain District.

As Alma noted to me, the Igorot have never been conquered, not by rival neighbor headhunter tribes similar to themselves, not by the Spanish, not by the Americans, and not by the Japanese during WWII. The only conqueror is perhaps the Episcopal Church, which Alma admitted to be almost 100% successful in converting the
Igorot people. Even today, the Igorot live a very autonomous existence with a traditional democratic way to manage community affairs and relationships, far superior to many so-called democratic societies.

Alma is very passionate and opinionated. She easily gets irritated by anything she feels is unreasonable. One such matter is the name Echo Valley for the prime site of the coffins. “There is no such place as Echo Valley,” she spoke while pounding the dining table in front to make her point. “The guides made up the name and now visitors shout in front of the coffins hoping to hear an echo, and it is just repulsive and disrespectful,” Alma said with high emotions.

The fire-brand dentist continued to explain how this misunderstanding came about. “In our tradition, when such a burial ritual takes place, which by the way is only reserved for tribal elders with particularly high standing of rank, three to four persons would lead the way in front of the procession with torches,” Alma explained. “As they walked, they would shout out the name of the deceased, allowing the ancestors to know that an important descendent is about to join them,” Alma continued. As practically all Igorot belong to the Episcopal Church, a priest would come along to bless the deceased. The entire ritual usually would happen very early in the morning when the spirits are believed to be most active.

“The deceased elder would be bound to a chair, the more senior in rank the longer his body would stay in the chair before burial. The body would be curled into a fetus position and put inside a coffin to be hung up the cliff,” Alma explained. That is the reason why some of the coffins are rather short, not for children or infants as many have speculated. Both man or woman can be buried on the cliff. Some coffins are shaped like a boat. The chair would then also be hung outside of the coffin. “I had the opportunity to witness the last burial in 2007 and had it all filmed for my own record,” Alma said proudly. “It is a very solemn and respectful ceremony,” her voice finally mellowed.

But only momentarily, as Alma’s voice went into high pitch and her mood ballistic again, “I hate it, just hate it, when some tourist with his lover would shout at the bottom of the cliff at the top of his voice ‘I love you’, to get an echo back. Of course you can never hear the wall talk back.” Finally the lecture on Echo Valley ended. But not before I chimed in and said, “Don’t worry, I will now circulate the story that it works only at midnight, and during full moon!” After all, it is full moon these couple of days.

There are ten or more coffin sites on the cliff along the river, which changes name as it flows, from Latang River where the gorge is to Dinetaan River where Alma’s house faces it. Further down near a long cave it has yet another name - the Sogong River. The most popularly visited site of Echo Valley has more than ten coffins, Alma’s site has four, and I noticed an additional site with only one coffin.
As Joachim said, the Igorot know their priorities in life. The restaurants and shops are open only when they feel like it, and close for any excuses that come their way. Certainly these guidelines reflect that the Igorot care more about their identity and integrity than economic gain, something the rest of the “modern” world can learn from.

Scholars have studied the Igorot’s burial custom and tourists have come and admired these sites in awe. While others may feel the hanging coffin burial is a cultural heritage of the Igorot, I feel strongly that such a practice borders on being a natural heritage. After all, the deceased is put back into place closest to nature, in mid-air among the mountains and with the running water below.

Over my short two days’ stay, Joachim not only took me to Echo Valley to see the most impressive coffin site, he also led me on two hikes, one to a nearby village and another up to a pine ridge to see a beautiful sunset. I stopped by to bid farewell to Joachim and Villia. Their house is set on a karst hill, with the limestone coming inside and becoming part and partial of their house, with them living literally as modern cave dwellers.

As we parted, I borrowed from the famous promise made by General Douglas McArthur to the people of the Philippines, “I shall return.”

Below are a few extracts of the guidelines for tourists, worthy of note:

— Do not touch or disturb coffins or burial sites. Do not attempt to join or film any ritual without direct permission from the presiding elders.
— Please don’t ask us “where are the Igorots”. We are the Igorots. We do dress in traditional clothing for special occasions, but please don’t expect any of us to pose in traditional clothing for pictures, because we don’t do that.
— Sagada is a community, not a museum. If you want to see the way we lived a century ago, there’s an excellent museum in Bontoc; please visit it. Don’t think, or say, that we have “lost our culture” because we no longer live in traditional houses or dress daily in wanes and tapis. We are indigenous people and we are deeply attached to our traditions and culture. We are also modern, well educated people who are comfortable in any living or professional environment the world offers.
— Please conserve water. Sagada suffers from water shortages, especially during dry season and periods of peak tourist flow. This can lead to diversion of water from our farms and rice terraces, where it is desperately needed, to support tourism.
— Please be modest. This is a small, conservative town, and we like it that way. Please save the revealing clothing for the beach, and save the displays of affection for your private space. We are not known for nightlife: business in Sagada closes at 10PM. If you like to party all night that’s fine, but you’ll have to do it somewhere else. There is no commercial sex here, so please don’t waste your time looking for it.

With Sagada’s new-found fame through the hanging coffins, the indigenous Igorot people have now also become a focus for tourists. A new guideline just issued and posted in public areas can perhaps shed some light on how the Igorot feel about the advent of tourism. While they cherish to some degree the economic gain, they certainly abhor the human and car traffic in tandem with such an influx of outsiders, not to mention some of the behavior of those who look upon their tradition and heritage as either exotic or romantic.
Finally life has gone back to the “old” normal, where time is slow and days are long. How I yearn for such moments of back to basic living. Others may go on vacation at a resort to feel the change in pace, and in comfort. I too, am in comfort, relative comfort, adequate comfort, cherishing going back in time, to a simple village in a simple bamboo house.

Yes, there is no running water, and even electricity can be cut off at any moment. But mentally I came prepared, taking that as a matter of fact, just as how our forefathers had lived. No, this is not Outward Bound. I am thankful that we have well water, just a bucket and rope away. How wonderful to have mangoes and coconuts dropping from the air, left and right, all around me. I enjoy turning in when the sun sets, waking up at the first shade of light. Even more so, if I am on a fishing boat in the open sea.

I can transcend two worlds, and two centuries, between the jet set city of Hong Kong and the farm country of Palawan in the southern Philippines, all within a matter of hours, by flight and car. In both places, I live by the sea, but a very different sea.

Others may consider such places backward or primitive; I have always been attracted by its quality of living, let alone its cost of living. Yes, living is the key word here, and I feel I am very much alive here. Today, our new set of modern netizens advocates healthy living, going on diet regimes, some even go vegetarian, exercising in gyms, with yoga and meditation to boot in order to calm and rid ourselves of anxieties, a byproduct of big city, fast life and the “more of” pursuit. Here I have few anxieties, except in a leisurely way of asking when I should go out to sea again.
I have always taken notice that among my three centenarian “buddies” and multiple nonagenarian friends, not one had lived by such exercise or diet regime. One exception may be Moon Chin, who would observe a 5-minute walk on his NordicTrack each morning. He, however, still drinks a beer or two every day, with chips on the side. Surely, obsession with health can become a form of stress too, people tend to forget, and doctors conveniently also neglect. Of course a moderate and appropriate dosage of concern is probably necessary.

Here, it is simpler, both healthy and worthy living. Oh yes, I admit it may not be all that simple. After all, like Moon Chin, I am having a beer with some chips at the moment. Those amenities, however, I got by adding some carbon footprint, driving an hour to the city in Puerto Princesa to get them. Closer by, there are no such amenities.

Idyllic life here is also manifested through a visit to the fish market by sailing into a bay with a fishing boat. JoDan returned home this morning with a small haul of three tuna fish in its hold, 10, 17 and 33 kilos each. The boat had been out to sea for four nights, and it stopped by a harbor to pick me up.

As we sailed near shore, I could see other slightly larger boats unloading their catch, lots of catch. These boats would have been away for ten days to two weeks. In fact, all boats are home-bound, as it is half-moon already. From now until pass full moon, there would be not much to catch, until the moon ebbs again with a new crescent and darkness befalls the open sea. Fish would then, again, be plentiful.

The further the distance from land, the more tuna they would catch, up to twenty or more fish in their ice-packed haul. From here they were brought on to small floats and tugged by hand to shore. Once on shore, the first round of transaction took place, with the tuna ultimately ending on the table of sushi restaurants after changing hands several times. Each of these hands would be the real profit center of the tuna trade.

Today, the fish on JoDan would yield only 1360 peso and 4950 peso for the two larger fish. Thrown in was a huge bottle of Coke to reward the crew. The fish buyer would not want the 10 kilo one, too small, it was deemed! We shall take it home to enjoy our own fish steak. The price paid for tuna is based on an interesting and intricate cartel of business. It seems each boat would have its own traditional and predetermined buyer, based on a multi-tier arrangement.

For a tuna between 5 to 19 kilos, 80 peso would be paid per kilo. Between 20 to 29 kilos, 110 peso is paid. Between 30-34 kilos, the price goes up to 150 peso. And for 35 kilos and over, 190 peso is the top range. This morning at the buying shops, I saw many tuna of sizes over 50 kilos each. Topping at close to 60 kilos, one young man would hold the tuna to bring it up to shore. Each would be weighed on a spring balance, before a paper sticker was put on the body with the exact weight.

But there was more than just weight and price, depending on a set of relationships between the buyer and seller. The price mentioned above is the cash price paid at shore. If the boat owner is willing to wait ten days for payment, the price paid per kilo goes up accordingly. For those who have taken money in advance, or in other words who are in debt to the buyer, the price paid would be significantly lower. Naturally a person in need or a gambler/alcoholic type would have to pay interest.
Jocelyn, my helper and owner of the JoDan, revealed to me that their largest catch ever was a tuna weighing 118 kilos. Usually anything reaching 120 kilos is considered the upper range of a tuna catch. Today, we only saw the biggest ones being half that size.

Noli, Jocelyn’s elder brother, was made a hero some months ago. Not by size of his tuna catch, but when he caught a sea turtle by chance. With a shell of 180cm x 150cm in size and weighing over one hundred kilos, Noli decided to release the endangered animal back to sea. The local ABS-CBN Palawan television channel broadcasted the news as something worthy of note, kudos to an environmentally conscious fisherman.

While relaxing in Palawan, I contemplate about the notion that too much stimulation and attention for a person, even for a baby, can be cause for high anxiety, high expectations, and ultimately more disappointments. I, being an extremely curious person, may be a victim of such a malady, the high expectation syndrome, easy to arouse, difficult to satisfy.

What is adequate has a different definition for each person. Here in Palawan, for me the level of anxiety and expectations are low, much lower, so I feel adequate far more easily. At times, I even feel privileged. How can I not feel privileged when I spent a night at sea in our boat the HM Explorer II, with five dives in between. I was floating among coral fish, and swimming around star-studded glittering sands, a beach filled with Star Fish. This is the real Avenue of the Stars, not in Hong Kong, or in Hollywood Boulevard. My needs are all met, and there seems no need to become greedier.

I have learned over the years that even if a journey arrives at a dead end, I should enjoy the process. Aren’t all the river sources I arrived at dead ends? But in another way, they are also life springs of a beginning. Isn’t life’s destiny a dead end? But certainly we can, and should, enjoy the process nonetheless.

So do I want more? Yes indeed, a little greed beyond need. I am longing for another day on the boat, our own HM Explorer II outrigger boat or on a tiny sail boat I saw on the beach, and another day watching the sky pale at 5am, leading to yet another perfect sunrise, and ending with another perfect sunset.
After a week in the office in Luang Namtha town preparing paper work and materials for training courses for tourist guides, I am itching to get out in the field again. Mr. Deang, our CERS Lao Program Manager, who is always eager to get into the forest, eagerly agrees. And so, on 22nd May, a Sunday, we decide to head out of town on a short survey of a new road that has been cut deep into the forest of the northern sector of the Nam Ha National Protected Area (NPA) in Luang Namtha, Lao PDR. The weather is fine in the morning, but the rainy season has begun and we expect the dirt roads will be a bit muddy. I think we might need extra power to climb up the slippery hills, so I decide to pay a little extra and rent a big 125 cc ZhongShen motorcycle. The decision will prove to be a big mistake.

After renting the heavy bike, which I soon nickname ‘the Beast,’ I fill the tank and we buy some food for our lunch. We leave Luang Namtha Town just before 11:00 AM and head off on the metaled road towards China with a full tank of gas and packs heavy with water bottles, sticky rice and assorted Lao delicacies wrapped in banana leaves. An hour later, not far from the border checkpoint, we reach the turn-off at Ban Huay Dam. From there, a dirt road heads off to the left and immediately climbs steeply on switchbacks up to about 900 meters above sea level from where it follows the saw-tooth ridge north. We pass rubber plantations and old swidden fields, then a patch of newly burned forest that is being prepared for planting. Descending, we reach the large village of Ban Sun Nyang at about 800 m asl at 12:26. The villagers tell us that the road this far north was completed 5 years ago. Beyond, the new road is just a few months old. After a quick interview, we continue on, passing patches of forest, old swidden and much newly burned forest. These are large burns of 2-3 hectares, with many charred trunks of small trees that have been cut and allowed to dry before they are set alight. The burning releases the nutrients stored in the vegetation, making it quickly available for a mixed crop of hill rice, beans, squash and pumpkins.
The Beast, a heavy 125cc motorbike, proved to be too much to handle in sticky mud.

Above the village of Ban Pa Kha, the road climbs steeply again to a high point of 1097 m asl. The climb is treacherous and exhausting. The heavy bike repeatedly slides out from under us sideways, slowly tipping over on top of our legs. The motorcycle helmets are essential. At one point, I fall backwards, landing on my pack and hitting my head on the muddy ground. My helmeted head is protected, but not so my camera, which never works again.

A recently burned swidden field pushes into the rainforest from the new road. At the crest, we break for lunch. Here and beyond is some good forest, and some very large trees have been toppled to make way for the road. We descend again past more recovering swidden fields, full of weeds and small trees. There are also more large recent burns, one of which is being planted by rows of local villagers, men and women and children. We reach the first outlying settlement of the village of Ban Khuoy Sung, 894 m asl, at 15:12. Mr. Deang collects more details from the villagers. This is a settlement of Mu Seu minority people with about 10 families. Later, we learn that the Mu Seu recently moved here from Oudomxai Province to find more land, arriving after the National Protected Area here was already gazetted and supposedly closed to new settlement.

Mr. Deang checks our location at Ban Khouy Sung as a storm moves in. As soon as we arrive, it begins to rain, and it quickly turns into a deluge. We take refuge under the eaves of a village hut, but are soon invited inside to sit around the fire with the family. After about one hour of chatting with them, the weather clears and we say goodbye to our hosts, now eating their simple meal of steamed potatoes and other root crops. But the road we came in on has now turned into a river of mud the consistency of library paste.

After a failed attempt to climb back up the hill on the way back from the village, we are joined by four children from the village who try to help push the motor bike. We can only gain a few meters at a time, and we have to give up, exhausted. What to do? Mr. Deang enters into protracted negotiations with the two older boys, who are experienced with this kind of motorbike on this kind of road. They offer to ride with us, one driving the big bike and the other on his own small scooter, on which they will return to the village later. But the asking price is 200,000 kip, 4 times the cost of the all day rental for the big Chinese bike!

I realize that my extra weight is a big liability, so I set off hiking up the hill. I also guess that my presence might be raising the price, but the boys will not budge on the amount even after I leave. Eventually, they pass me on the motorbikes as I near the crest of the first big climb, Mr. Deang riding on the back of the small scooter. It turns out the trick to success is to ride and walk at the same time, with feet touching the muddy ground to stabilize the bikes in the slippery, resistant mud. Mr. Deang’s legs are too short to do it well on the big bike, and I have too little skill working the clutch and brake to start up on the steep slopes.

Even with these skilled riders, I wind up walking most of the 15 kilometers back to Ban Sun Nyang, sliding backwards with almost every step, the sticky mud caking up on my shoes until they are like enormous moon boots. When I ride on the back of the big bike, the weight is too much for the steep climbs, and slipping and sliding down the steep hillsides is just too nerve-wracking for me on the back of the bike.

Mr. Air and his driver on the small bike see a Crab-Eating Mongoose cross the road in a very settled area near Ban Pa Kha by the river.
At Ban Pa Kha, we leave the two boys, quite happy with their well-earned spoils. They set off back to their village on the smaller bike, and we continue on, Mr. Deang on the big bike and me riding behind when I can, but walking up or down the steep slopes. The descents are just as tricky as the ascents and much more treacherous, the edge of the road looming threateningly close whenever the bike goes into another skid.

INSERT WVB IMG_1788 about here: Two happy lads from Ban Khouy Sung. Our misfortune became their windfall. We arrive at the metaled road again and continue on, but a new problem has developed – we cannot get the bike out of 1st gear. I imagine riding back to Luang Namtha all night in 1st gear, but eventually we figure out that the problem is a clot of hardening mud that is acting as a second brake on the rear wheel. Once we dig it out with bamboo sticks, the bike runs fine again. I complete the drive in the a pelting rain in the dark, Mr. Deang exhausted, resting on the back. We arrive in town at about 10:30 PM and I finally get to sleep well after midnight, having gotten as much mud as I can out of my clothes and off my shoes and body.

The entire experience is one that we would not want to repeat, but it was worth it. We were able to map much of the new road, which continues on to Ban Nam Khun, a Yao minority village that we already know from previous treks. We also learned that there are plans to extend the road to connect with the new road on the other side of the National Protected Area at Ban Nam Khong Village. This new extension would cut right through one of the richest wildlife areas that we have found in the Protected Area. While the roads that have already been completed can perhaps be justified as poverty alleviation and electrification schemes for these remote forest villages, this new proposed connection can have no such obvious justification. The environmental impacts of the road and the forest clearing that is sure to follow would be tragic for Laos.

We also learn of plans to introduce sugar cane plantations to Ban Nam Khun. Perhaps this is part of the Sino-Lao Friendship aid project that is supposed to provide alternatives to cultivation of opium poppy. That project previously concentrated on introducing the technology of rubber plantations from Xishuangbanna to Luang Namtha. Since rubber prices crashed in 2010, perhaps the project is branching out now into other alternative crops. But sugarcane seems like an unfortunate choice for Ban Nam Khun. This village is regularly visited by the international herd of wild elephants that crosses the border from China to Lao each wet season. Trying to keep elephants out of sugarcane fields is like trying to keep children out of the candy jar, so mixing wild elephants and sugar cane farming is a perfect recipe for intense conflict. It can result in tragedies, as elephants kill people trying to defend their crops, and elephants are killed in turn in reprisal.

One exhausting and sometimes hair-raising trip seems like a small price to pay if we succeed in raising the alarm to prevent future disasters.
I must get on that bus!" The ticket taker and gate attendant looked at me as if I were a madman. By that point, I was worried that they might soon be right.

I was in the middle of one of those trips from Hell, when everything seems to go wrong. It had started in Hong Kong on January 22nd. I had rushed to Central Airport Terminal to catch the train to the airport, only to arrive at the airport and find that the flight was delayed, and then, after five hours in the airport waiting lounge, cancelled without explanation. After a few hours of early morning sleep courtesy of the airlines in a hotel in Wanchai (was it the Hilton? I hardly had time to notice), the courtesy bus managed to get me back to the airport to catch the first flight to Kunming the next morning. With a just minutes to spare, I made it to the flight, which miraculously left on time. But my next flight, from Kunming to Diqing was also cancelled! Looking at the sky outside the terminal windows, I realized that it was unlikely that I would get to my destination by air on that day. Worse still, my Chinese phone card no longer allowed me to connect to the internet to make new travel reservations.

As snow began to fall, I took the airport bus to the apartment where I could get on line. I quickly found information about the night bus to Zhongdian and realized that I could just make it to the last night bus, leaving at 8:30 PM. But there were no taxis because of the rare snow. It was just a dusting by New York standards, but it had devastated the traffic in Kunming, where snow is a very rare occurrence. Desperate now, I took the new Kunming subway to the interchange and transferred to City Bus No. 20 to the Western Bus Terminal. I knew that I was on the right bus, because it was packed with "guest workers" with their heavy bundles in back packs and heavy-duty plastic bags. The bus seemed to stop every block, filling up with more and more travelers. Hanging from the strap, since all seats were taken, the trip seemed endless. I could already see that we probably would not make it in time.

When we finally reached the bus stop for the terminal, I tried to run, but there was a sea of luggage and people ahead of me. There were no tickets available at the window. The teller said the bus had already left, but an insider led me inside to buy a “special” ticket at the gate. It was 8:30 exactly as I lugged my heavy pack from the security check and into the waiting room of the bus station.

The gate attendants seemed startled at first by this out-of-breath, bearded madman. But after hearing my sad and desperate story, a glimmer of understanding crossed their. The station manager quickly called the terminal gate check post and told them to hold the bus, which had already pulled out but had not yet left the terminal yard. I staggered onto the bus, found my narrow berth, and collapsed immediately into sleep.
The next morning, we arrived at Shangri la with the dawn, and it felt like coming home. I could see snow on the peaks, but the road was clear. Driver Zhou picked me up from town, and we were soon driving along the now familiar route from Zhongdian to Tacheng in one of our CERS Landrover Defenders. It was three hours down to the bottom of the Yangtze River gorge and then up along smaller and smaller streams to the valley of Xiangguqing, where the CERS Lisu Cultural Village Project is located. When I arrived, the view down the valley was as beautiful as I had remembered, and I felt the pressure of the hectic trip physically lifting from my shoulders.

We had chosen Xiangguqing as one of two sites in which to hold the fourth session of the CERS project “Community Education for Minority Children in Northwest Yunnan.” The students were already in the classroom, an old one-room school-house that had been turned into the village community centre after a new school was built in the valley below. Our two student-teachers, Dora and Olivia, were reviewing English with the students. Dora yelled out the numbers and flashed her fingers at the packed classroom, and the students roared back in their best imitations. “Ten!… TEN! Eleven… ELEVEN! … Twelve!… TWELL-FAH!” Number review was followed by practice in simple conversation. The children, who already spoke Chinese and their native Lisu, were rapidly learning a third language. It felt good to be there, both as a witness/rapporteur and as a contributor.

The CERS Community Education Programme had been planned 3 long years before, and much had changed since then. Tsering Drolma had discovered that she was going to have a baby, and now she was on maternity leave back in her home village with a beautiful little baby boy. Luckily, she had been able to find a very suitable temporary replacement for herself in time for this fourth and final session. Tsomo Jid was from Qinghai, but otherwise was very much like Drolma in many ways. Tsomo had also had graduated from the elite English Teachers Training for Tibetan Speakers Programme at the Minority College of Qinghai University. Like Drolma before her, her English had gone from near zero to near fluent in her three years in the now famous “ETP” programme. And like Drolma, after graduation, Tsomo had also received a scholarship for college study in the USA. However, while Drolma was now rooting for Duke University’s top ranked basketball team, Tsomo was following the progress of Dartmouth’s highly competitive ski team.

Tsomo, in turn, had recruited two student teachers, Dorje-Drolma and Tsering-Chuncuo, also known as Dora and Olivia, respectively. They were both from the local area but were currently enrolled in the same elite ETP course that Tsomo and Drolma had graduated from. The program is already famous throughout southwest China for its interactive, student-centered teaching style. The graduates of this programme are shaking up the educational system in western China with their lively classrooms and the rapid progress that their students make learning English. As one ETP student told me, most of his previous English classes had just involved the teachers talking about English in Chinese, and students almost never got a chance to speak, and so were never able to actually use the language. ETP teachers were entirely different, leading classes so full of life that many headmasters stop by to see why the students are so noisy. In our own program, the village head at Gongbin had complained that our students were just playing all day.

And play they did. In the afternoons, there was a role playing exercise, acting out a murder mystery with Conan, the child detective. Then the children experimented by constructing load-bearing platforms out of dried spaghetti noodles and...
introduce them to the many visitors who come for an audience with these elves of the forest. Some of our students however, had said that they were tired of the monkeys, but this visit was different. The children became our guides and we, the teachers, became their students.

We knew that it was important to encourage the students to think critically about their lives and the environment in which they live. Someday, they themselves would be making decisions that would affect the conservation of these rare monkeys and their forest. Tsomo asked them for their honest opinions about the job of a Forest Guard. Their answers opened our own eyes to the reality of life next to a nature reserve. Several students reflected on the experiences of their fathers and grandfathers as Forest Guards:

“My grandfather gets up at 5AM every morning and goes into the mountains to take care of the monkeys. One day, he did not come back home for the night and I thought he was dead. When he came back home next evening, I cried so loud and asked him where he had gone. He said he slept on the mountain, in one of those small bedrooms they build for Forest Guards. I felt relieved and went to bed”.

“I understand Snub-nosed Monkeys are an endangered species and need to be protected, but what about the lives of our fathers? The Forest Guards work really hard to take care of the monkeys everyday, from 5am to 8pm, but they don’t get paid that much and can’t spend a lot of time at home”.

“For Forest Guards, their job is important but they sacrifice a lot for it. The pay is not that much and apart from the work in the mountains, they also need to take care of their family chores. They don’t have much time to rest - this is my opinion about this job.”

As required by our donors, we did our best to measure the achievements of our program in objective ways. It was hard to administer tests with a class that spanned age ranges from 6 to 18. The youngest student had insisted on coming despite being turned away, while the oldest was a headstrong young woman soon to graduate. Twice during the two week session, we forced the class to quiet down for a writing exercise, asking them to fill out answers to a list of evaluation questions prepared three years before. In the middle of the test, the youngest student got up from his desk and began stomping around the room shouting “I can’t do it, I can’t do it!” with all his might. I found myself wondering again how meaningful these evaluation exercises really were. Most of the answers were more a reflection of the children’s poor knowledge of Chinese characters rather than a meaningful measure of the success of our programme.

Despite fulfilling the donor’s requirements for rigorous evaluations, we know that the real achievements of this programme will not be measurable for years to come. Everyone who participated believes, however, that these students benefited from their introduction to English, their taste of the excitement of science, and their opportunity to practice critical thinking. We know they will have more interest in their studies, more interest in the natural world and more appreciation of their rich cultural heritage.

I watched the students in that classroom bubbling with enthusiasm. The arduous grant application, the frustrations of evaluation and reporting, and the mad hectic trip finally all seemed worthwhile.
A male and female bat will court and mate in a noisy tangle while hanging upside down. Young bats are born in a regular birth season before the peak fruiting season. The babies are carried by their mothers for the first few days, but as they grow larger, they are left in the roost while the mother goes out to forage. The babies continue to nurse for 2 to 3 months. In captivity, Large Flying Foxes have lived for over 15 years.

Like all bats, Flying Fox feed by night and sleep by day, hanging from their feet upside down from tree branches. As dusk falls, they become active and noisy, and soon begin to fly and circle in the sky above the roost site. When all are ready, they head off towards their chosen feeding site in a line of bats that stretches across the sky. They may fly up to 50 kilometers to reach prime feeding trees. When they return to the roost in the morning, there is a noisy chorus of complaints from neighbors as bats use their feet and hooked thumbs to “walk” upside down along the branches in search of a perfect spot to sleep.

Sadly, the Large Flying Fox is hunted in many parts of its range for food, and this has led to the decline of populations to the point that the species is now considered to be Near Threatened with extinction globally. In some countries however, such as Myanmar and Sri Lanka, the bats are protected and coexist with people, and bat roosts can be observed at close range in city parks and monastery forest groves.
CERS IN THE FIELD

CERS IN THE MEDIA

- A CERS Comic team has been formed in Myanmar in preparation for a new series of comic strip with conservation focus.
- Catster, a cat-lover magazine published a full feature on the CERS Burmese Cat Reintroduction project, by Dr Arnold Plotnick, founder of Manhattan Cat Specialist, a feline-exclusive veterinary practice in New York. Dr Plotnick was former columnist for Cat Fancy Magazine.
- How Man gave his annual Royal Geographical Society lecture on the topic of his First National Geographic Expedition of 1982.
- Dr Bleisch gave a lecture to 200 students of the Kellett School in Hong Kong with a topic of “Sourcing China’s Rivers”, covering four river sources CERS defined.
- CWGV, a film crew from Taiwan is producing a commemorating film for Monk Hsing Yun’s upcoming 90th birthday by featuring CERS in Hong Kong and China. The theme relates to Monk Hsing Yun’s acquaintance with How Man
- Southside Magazine featured a story on CERS and its Shek O 1939 Exhibit House.
- Students of Yung Yau College won one of the most prestigious Animation Awards in Europe with a film focused on CERS’ effort to stop electro-fishing and saving the Irrawaddy Dolphins.
- Four documentary films produced by CERS are to begin airing on Cathay Pacific’s long-haul flights to commemorate the airlines’ 70th anniversary beginning September.
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.

Three trustees of the Asia Society in New York visited CERS. They are Society co-Chair Henrietta Fore, Ms Betsy Cohen and Ms Lulu Wang. Betsy has been a CERS patron for a number of years, and Ms Fore and Ms Wang became our latest supporting patrons.

CERS welcomes Mr Rick Kroos as our new patron. Mr Kroos is a long-time resident and businessman in Hong Kong. His WPO International Forum also visited CERS Exhibit House in Shek O.

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A major two-year grant has been given by the Shun Hing Education and Charity Fund covering 2016 and 2017.

The Jebsen Company continues its beverage support to CERS.

Many existing patrons renewed their support: Ingrid & Joe Chan, Dr Joseph Chan, James Chen, Judith Corrente, Ester Goelkel, Christabel & Ricky Lau, Zhengyu Huang, John Hsu, Victor Hsu, Barry Lam, Danny Lee, Nancy Lee, Vic Lee, Afonso Ma, Albert Ma, Patrick Ma, David Mong, Daniel Ng’s Family, Thomas Pritzker, Serge Pun, Oliver Silsby, Dr William So, Chote Sophonpanich, Nancy Sun, James & Mary Tien, Betty Tsui, Conrad Wong, Queenie & Gilbert Wong, Dora Wu, Sonny Yau, Eric Xin, Wellington & Virginia Yee, and Billy Yung.

CERS’ MISSION:
The mission of the China Exploration and Research Society is to enrich the understanding of our cultural and natural heritage.