EXPLORERS
CHINA EXPLORATION AND RESEARCH SOCIETY

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CLOCKWISE FROM TOP:
A Miao New Year parade circa 1986.
Night scene Old Town Vigan.
Tibetans of earlier time.
Jackie Chan and Xavier Lee Operation Smile.
President’s Message

Confucius said “三十而立”, meaning “At 30, stand upright”. That was in reference to himself, as well as to others, urging that, at mid-life, a man should become independent and stand upright in the world.

So it is quite symbolic that CERS has reached its 30th year and crossed that milestone. Recounting our 30 years’ history would be too long and tedious for some. But let me take this opportunity to pay tribute to all our staff, past and present, as well as to all our friends and supporters from throughout those years.

Some may have looked at us with doubt and mistrust in the past, but I reckon that our results speak louder than words, or than promises, which we rarely care to make. Our track record perpetuates our reputation, and we intend to continue to march forward on that very same route, standing head-high, yet leaving some gentle and valued footprints along the way. Articles in this issue demonstrate our range and diversity, highlighting that we are well beyond the fringes of China today.

Confucius also said, in the same text of the Classics, “四十而不惑”, meaning “At 40, without sway”. Let us look forward to that as well; like a tall Teak tree, standing ten feet high, yet leaving some gentle and valued footprints along the way. Some may have looked at us with doubt and mistrust in the past, but I reckon that our results speak louder than words, or than promises, which we rarely care to make. Our track record perpetuates our reputation, and we intend to continue to march forward on that very same route, standing head-high, yet leaving some gentle and valued footprints along the way. Articles in this issue demonstrate our range and diversity, highlighting that we are well beyond the fringes of China today.

Confucius also said, in the same text of the Classics, “五十而知天命”, meaning “At 50, without sway”. Let us look forward to that as well; like a tall Seak tree, standing straight at 30, 40 and beyond.

Wong How Man
Founder/President CERS
July 2016

Though I have worked in China since 1974 for over 40 years, this year marks CERS’ 30th and it seems appropriate to revisit that special year 1986 with a gallery of photos from that era.

The year started off with my coverage of the lower Yangtze for the National Geographic, followed by the first CERS expedition to China’s southern border provinces of Guizhou and Yunnan.

Returning to visit the Dong and Miao minorities during a festive month yielded some superb pictures, as well as ethnographic objects and costumes to enrich our growing photo archive and artifact collection. The visit to the Dai people of Xishuangbanna and the Dehong Jingpo people followed with additional results.

I flew to Lhasa as guest of Tibet Secretary General Mr Yang Hauli. I was allowed to photograph inside the Potala Palace, including the inner sanctum of the Dalai Lama’s residence and bed room, an area not open to the public, and rarely seen even by insiders.

These illustrous images seem a very promising overture of what were to come later for a young and vibrant organization, the China Exploration & Research Society, now known as CERS.

Recipients of CERS reports are a select group of friends and supporters. Please only circulate with discretion.
CLOCKWISE FROM LOWER LEFT EACH PAGE:
(circa 1986) Street barber.
Restaurant on a pole.
Pheasant hunter.
Turtle vendor.
Snake hawker.
Old lady with her wares.
Student monk in Xishuangbanna.
Dai ladies.
Dong woman weaver.
Jingpo girl.
Ge young girl learning embroidery.
Miao parade.
Clothe-line maze.
Dalai Lama’s bedroom.
The heads are being counted, fewer and fewer. But these are not the heads the Tsou people historically hunted when they raided their neighboring enemies. That custom has been abolished and died almost a century ago. It is the head count of their own people, dwindling now to fewer than 4,000 individuals.

“If the current trend continues, our people will be extinct in a few generations.” Dai Su-yun sounded her alarm, chatting with me over a fine cup of tea that she carefully brewed for us. We are here to inspect our project among her people.

Dai is the wife of An Da-ming, one of the most successful tea farmers in the Alishan region at Dabang, which is the heart of where the best Taiwan teas are grown, as well as the heart of the indigenous Tsou people of Taiwan. Though Dai is very concerned about the future of the Tsou people, she herself is not of Tsou ancestry, but married into the family. The fate of the tribe, of the ethnic group, and even of her husband, is no doubt in jeopardy.

“We have one daughter, well-passed marrying age, and she seems in no hurry to get married. In fact, there are so few options around here for a mate that she would rather stay single,” Dai said with a somewhat sad tone. “Young people either don’t marry or, even if married, don’t have kids. And many of the younger ones leave here and flock to the city,” Dai further lamented.

While sipping her very fine award-winning tea, I promised to ask my close friend Professor Yu Shuenn-der, a leading ethnologist of Taiwan’s Academia Sinica, to come and have a look. At the moment, Professor Yu is staying at our Zhongdian Center, continuing his yearly studies of Tibetans at a neighboring village in Yunnan. Perhaps a survey and proper demographic study here would help reveal a bit more about reasons for the grave situation the Tsou people are facing.

“My brother-in-law is a very experienced doctor in reproductive medicine and constantly handles infertility cases. Perhaps he can come and help too,” I suggested. “But if the children of the Tsou simply do not want to have babies, then perhaps we need to send in a phycologist or marriage counselor/planner instead,” I quickly added.

While much of the world is facing the pressure of population explosion, the Tsou people are in the reverse, trying futilely to be more fertile and grow their numbers, which were small to begin with. Small enough that even Wikipedia only has a six-line entry about the Tsou people, far less than what some of us at CERS know about this unique tribe.

Perhaps that is somewhat understandable. Because of their head-hunting tradition, very few people dared to enter the region in the past. One exception was Torii Ryuzo, a Japanese anthropologist who studied the Tsou around 1920 when Taiwan was still under Japanese occupation. His richly illustrated book recorded the last vestiges of the Tsou tribe and formed the basis of what we now know of as the colorful history and unique practices of this people.

Even up until the mid-1970s, it was difficult to acquire the special...
permit necessary for any foreigner to enter the region. Some remote villages claim to have seen foreign visitors only once or twice. In 1984, an ageing Japanese anthropologist entered a village and was told that he was only the second foreign visitor, ever. The other was a Japanese woman missionary, over half a century ago.

Dabang where CERS has our project is the center of the Tsou community, with over 800 people in the tiny village town, less than three city blocks square. Others spread out over the nearby hills and valleys, mainly conducting tea farming and other agricultural production.

Through a chance meeting five years ago with Amo and his wife Huiling, we got to know better the Tsou culture and its disintegration. The young couple were very keen to find a way to restore to some degree their people’s past. Hunting, a mainstay of the Tsou people’s traditional activity, had largely been curtailed. The culture that was attached to this subsistence livelihood likewise eclipsed and disappeared. Modern yet simple houses had replaced the indigenous thatched roof houses of the Tsou.

Amo and his wife had been dreaming of rebuilding at least one such house as a testimony to their past. Coming through their simple abode’s door was a CERS team exploring the area for the first time. We were impressed by their passion and made a multi-year commitment to assist them in realizing their dreams.

Through several more visits and multiple trips by our Taiwanese designer Sharon Ko and associate Eufung Hwang, the project gradually moved along. Today, two rather impressive buildings have been erected, sitting majestically deep inside a very remote mountain valley of Dabang. There are dormitory, kitchen, bathrooms, dining and even an exhibit area. A third building is being planned.

Since early this year, Amo and Huiling have hosted over two hundred local Tsou students to visit the premises. These young people not only come to look at the buildings and the collection of Tsou relics inside, but are taught how to use the traditional knife to make utensils, how to use bow and arrows in archery, how to start a fire over a traditional stone stove and cook a simple yet tasty meal. At times, they were invited even to stay overnight in the two houses.

During our own visit recently, we observed with keen interest nine Tsou children, barely ten to twelve years old, enthusiastically spending their Sunday learning to live as their ancestors had done in the past. Yes, this is another small CERS project, again started with little fanfare and visibility, now coming into fruition.

Heading back to “civilization”, I left Alishan riding the small-gauge train which was started over a hundred years ago by the Japanese. Along the way I occasionally caught glimpses of the many cars and busloads of people heading up to the famous tourist destination of Alishan. No one would ever take a detour to visit this unique Tsou people of Dabang, but for me even the nature and wildlife of Dabang are just as wonderful. But then, how many people have ever heard of such a small indigenous tribe. That might as well be. I knew in my heart that the future generation of the Tsou people would have a weekend playground where they would feel connected to their ancestors.

Perhaps with their own identity, they will also live with more dignity and integrity. With that, they may also fulfill a new mission, multiplying and perpetuating their population to enhance the headcount of these once majestic and gallant head-hunting people.
ARE YOU JACKIE CHAN?
by Xavier Lee
Inle Lake, Myanmar

This is the most frequently asked question when I am filming in the field with CERS in places like China, Tibet, the Philippines, Myanmar, Laos, Cuba, or in the middle of nowhere. My fellow CERS staff often teasingly introduce me as Jackie Chan to the locals, who only remember how this international superstar looks on a tiny TV screen. Word gets out fast in a small village. Soon the CERS team is surrounded by curious kids, and everyone is enjoying a few minutes of associated fame. “Yes, I am… not. Sorry…” I usually answer, and immediately flash Jackie’s signature big smile and Victory V hand gesture, making everyone laugh. In some places, children and adults, however, still request to take a photo with me; some even want my autograph. It is after all a wonderful icebreaker for the team carrying out research on the villagers’ lives. Back home in Hong Kong, I have told Jackie about this fake phenomenon. In my research on the villagers’ lives, I was introduced by a friend of a friend to a friend of How Man in 2007 and I immediately started to provide my volunteer services to make documentary films for CERS. I had been documenting Jackie’s career and family life for many years and was actively involved in the Hong Kong film industry, mostly in the marketing and promotion sector. Prior to joining CERS as a full-time filmmaker, I directed two commercial movies, numerous TV spots and music videos, and a few short films for charity organizations. In terms of career path, it seemed to be the right time for me to shift my production skills from the imaginary world to the real one. As it happened, I was introduced by a friend of a friend to a friend of How Man in 2007 and I immediately started to provide my volunteer services to make documentary films for CERS.

It is absolutely pure coincidence that I am able to work in depth with the only two of the twenty-five 2002 Times Magazine’s Asian Heroes who are from Hong Kong; Jackie Chan and Wong How Man. To me, they both earned my respect and deserve my service. As How Man casually told students, his philosophy on life as an explorer is that the majority of people seek a prudent approach by standing in the middle of the teeter-totter, also known as a seesaw, to maintain balance, avoiding any mistakes and taking no risk whatsoever. However, this is not the cardinal rule for an explorer, who must embrace another way to achieve balance effectively; by daringly stretching the limits, standing with feet on either of the extreme ends of the see-saw. Life on the edge is more exiting.

I am fortunate enough to have met these two heroes and to have had the chance to visit and experience some of those extremes. Such as a visit with Jackie to NASA’s aerodynamic wind tunnel in Langley, USA, and a chance to see the latest technology of Virtual Reality. Or trekking deep inside the unexplored Dinosaur Cave in Palawan, Philippines, 2 km underground, with Dr. Bill Bleisch and Prof. Zhang Fan of CERS explaining to me the natural phenomenon of a wind tunnel inside a cave and the primitive sensory system of a blind spider. I have visited Oxford, Cambridge and Harvard Universities with Jackie and was surprised seeing no students using the well-equipped and absolutely silent library. And I visited with How Man a remote small fishing village along the Irrawaddy River, Myanmar, where a kid used a candle as the only light source to read his book aloud. I have travelled comfortably many times on Jackie’s private jet from Hong Kong around the world, and with How Man and team squeezed onto a make-shift 7-seater motor-trishaw, named ‘Ferarri,’ in the Philippines. Extreme situations like these, to name but a few, while never life-threatening, have constantly inspired me to approach the boundaries and appreciate the possibilities of life. My position and role as a filmmaker are all objectively clear, in the sense that nothing is too big to glorify or too small to be ignored.

One thing I have learned is that mutual understanding between people is vital for balancing a wonderful life.

“How can we trust you and your team?” Miss Yolanda C Arangorin of Barangay Tagabinet village in Palawan asked me after the CERS Caving team completed all the necessary technical measurement of the Dinosaur Cave. “Don’t trust us! You know why? Because we don’t trust you either!” I replied so firmly that Arangorin was immediately sent into a state of shock. The local government had approved the efforts of Arangorin and her fellow villagers to open up the Dinosaur Cave system for tourism, providing that the villagers came up with a satisfactory business and operational plan. For the past 3 years, she painstakingly convinced the 70 families to cooperate in order to create a new income source for everyone. American and Italian caving teams had already come in turns to promise Arangorin a completed plan, and the villagers were delighted to permit them to explore the cave. Once the foreign caving teams had enjoyed their exploration, however, they haplessly left the village and went home, and vanished. After months and months of waiting, their promise of a plan was still not in sight. Life on the edge is more exiting.

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“Why do you help us? We cannot afford to pay you, you know!” Arangorin tried very hard to discover our motives. It took me a while to explain our NGO background and non-profit motive. “What if there is an argument between villagers; someone wants to open a karaoke bar at the cave entrance, whereas someone else wants a café, a hotel or a spa. Your villagers may even start a big fight and everything will get called off. Our efforts will be wasted.” Arangorin agreed with a sad face. “Don’t worry!” I said. “Time will tell. There is no need for us to promise anything to each other at this stage. Time will tell…”

Four months later, the CERS team returned to Arangorin with a full set of detailed 3-dimensional maps of the pristine Dinosaur Cave System, and also 20 brand new helmets and headlamps, and sponsorship funds for a 500m fresh water pipe to the village and other needs. Professor Zhang Fan and caver Wang Jian conducted an educational caving tour, particularly focusing on safety issues, for those villagers selected to tourist-guides. CERS is now committed to developing Palawan as one of its major research and education sites, with two research boats and a temporary base camp with infrastructure already in operation. Purchase of 7 hectares land by a river mouth for a future research and education site has already been confirmed. But there is still no “trust” between us and Arangorin, no business deal signed, nor any legal procedure submitted.

Simply because, whenever, whoever and however dealing with nature, time will tell.

To a lot of filmmakers I meet, going places looking for a story to tell then packaging it in a nice film output for public release is the standard practice. They then move on to another place for another story. I was very much one of them. The Dinosaur Cave story certainly is a documentary film production that can be presented as a classic tear-jerker. With CERS, nevertheless, I feel strongly that each charitable project by itself is inspirational and enables us to share the true spirit and real value of a path of life that should never be ended. A film or an article written about the people and their life is merely a by-product. It makes no sense to CERS to be just reporting it. Most of our work is “to be continued…” and never will a “The End” sign appear at the end of a CERS documentary film.

Perhaps when the CERS Palawan Centre or any other CERS site is completed, be it in Myanmar, Laos, Bhutan, Taiwan or in other countries neighboring China, one may not be surprised to see a teeter-totter set up in the compound. It is there to remind us that, in order to gain perfect balance, we must always remember to reach to the extreme edge. Stretch to our limits; it doesn’t even matter if our pants get split.

“I was all eagerness to catch my first sight of these animals…I saw in a boulder-strewn clearing, between the forest and the river, two queer looking light-brownish-grey beasts about the size of small cattle browsing on the young willow bushes… I was just examining them with my field glasses when they winded us and threw up their heads in our direction as all game do. The next thing I was aware of was a rush of a brown mass up into the forest. Below the two takin which we had first seen a herd of at least two hundred had been standing in and around a hot spring without our seeing them…”

One of the joys of working in CERS is access to the extensive library of historical records from past explorers from the 19th and early 20th centuries. Passing over their complaints about the cooking, the filth of rural hostels, and the difficulties of obtaining government permits, one can find gems of detailed description of a way of life and a state of nature that often no longer exist and would be lost from memory if not for the meticulous records left behind by these amateur ethnologists and naturalists. One such account that stands out from the rest is that by F.M. Bailey (1882-1967) as a young political officer.
Bailey reached Batang on the banks of the Yangtze on June 2nd. Today, one could make the trip from Brussels to Batang in less than a week. At Batang, he heard first hand accounts of the massacres and cruelties inflicted by Zhao ErFeng, the Qing General who controlled the Tibetan Marches. Zhao would be publicly executed and beheaded later that same year in the beginning of the Republican Revolution.

At Batang, Bailey also met local missionaries, Dr. Hardy, the Ogden's and the Edgars. Mr. Edgar gladly accompanied Bailey on the next leg of his travels, which found them travelling down the Yangtze, partly in yak-skin coracles, and then on foot along the road to Yunnan as far as the rope “bridge” across the Mekong below Yulin at Yerkalo. Here, by a clever bluff, the two foreigners and all their porters with luggage slipped past the checkpoint to the bridge-head. The porters were paid off and left. The other side had only recently been put under the control of Zhao’s troops, in 1907, and was strictly off limits to foreigners. “Here we fully expected to be prevented from crossing the bridge, but we were lucky, and, on calling across the river, then men at once came out of the cave in which they lived and crossed over, bring us the necessary thongs and ‘saddles,’ and started to take us across.” The next day, June 11, after a visit to the ruins of the monastery at Lagong, destroyed by Zhao’s troops, Bailey slipped into unmapped territory. From here on, he began making a careful route map with the sextant, compass and altimeters lent to him by the RGS. He would continue until he reached mapped territory in Assam and even beyond, until he lost his compass. He also made detailed notes of plants and animals that he saw along his way, and made a professional collection of birds, mammals and especially butterflies, for which he had a particular passion. Many species of butterflies and others organisms bear baileyi in their scientific names to this day.

West of the Mekong, Bailey found the people spoke a more familiar dialect of Tibetan and were more friendly. Beyond the village of Peta, he met parties of pilgrims doing the kora circuit around the holy mountain of Kang Karpo (Kawagarpo). Bailey describes them making “houses-of-cards” out of pieces of slate, as they still do today. At Menkong, he met many slaves of a dwarf race called Nung who were said to come from a place seven days beyond, until he lost his compass. He also made detailed notes of plants and animals that he saw along his way, and made a professional collection of birds, mammals and especially butterflies, for which he had a particular passion. Many species of butterflies and others organisms bear baileyi in their scientific names to this day.

In January 1911, Bailey took a leave from his official post and embarked on an ambitious solo expedition through Tibet. His goal was to find the rumored 50 meter high waterfall on the Yalong Tsangpo River, which had been described to the Indian pundit Kintup during his amazing 6 year secret mapping expedition. Bailey had a series of misadventures on his trip from Europe to Tibet, including missing his train in Moscow, being quarantined at Bonn, and deepening his knowledge of the country and its people. This gave him a sympathetic perspective towards Tibetans that was almost unique among his contemporaries.

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1907), Lt. Colonel in the British military and a Gold Medalist of the Royal Geographical Society. Bailey published one of his accounts under the title China-Tibet-Assam: A Journey, 1911. Oddly, the date of publication was 1945, perhaps because some of the information, such as his illegal border crossing, was considered classified and sensitive by the British government.

Bailey had unique credentials for this road trip across unmapped parts of Tibet. As a young man, he had accompanied Francis Younghusband on his bloody “Expedition” to Lhasa in 1903-04. While camped at Kampa Dzong, before the negotiating mission became a full-blown military incursion, he was able to learn to speak local Tibetan. Bailey went on to spend three and a half years as British Trade Agent in Gyantse and Chumbi in Tibet, perfecting his language skills, befriending the Panchen Lama, and deepening his knowledge of the country and its people. This gave him a sympathetic perspective towards Tibetans that was almost unique among his contemporaries.

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Myanmar has a long border with both China and India. At the moment, the situation along one small section of the long Myanmar border with India is a little tense, so naturally, I wound up exploring that region. Our boat the HM Explorer anchored at Kalewa along the Chindwin River. With a van, six of us headed toward Myanmar. With a few motorcyclists traveling back and forth. So what if the official border crossing was closed? The unofficial channel was conducting business as usual. That however was not unique to this border, but normal for many parts of the world.

We quickly drove through some wooded area, and there it was, an old British era army bridge. It provided our stealthy crossing into India. There was no border immigration or patrol, only a half-opened red and white bar across the road. A sign in English welcomes us into India. This prompted the temporary closure of the border market. Apparently a young Burmese man whose mother was Indian had been recently killed. In order to prevent further killings and revenge, the market was suspended. But our driver, someone quite local, knew a side door into India.

In another 500 meters or so, our road ended at a gate with barbed wire. This was the other end of the official crossing, if one were to head back toward Myanmar. Within a matter of fifteen minutes, we had circumvented the entire border official installations and entered India through a side door.

Once across the iron bridge, we drove past the Myanmar guard house with sandbags. A few soldiers were on duty but they looked relaxed, as if nothing had happened and left Tamu in a hurry. Consulting my satellite images, I had other plans in mind, just further down the road.

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Comparison to Myanmar, houses here on the Indian side looked far more poor and dilapidated with much trash lying around. The Hindu temple near the gate, however, was very clean. Through its opening, I could see many well-dressed Indian women and children inside. We stopped our van and peeked in gingerly. Some women gestured for us to enter and join in the festivities just underway. Off went our shoes and we entered the temple. Others motioned for us to go get some food. We declined politely and moved toward a stage where crowds were gathering.

The women and children were dressed most colorfully. This was the 15th Day on the lunar calendar and a full moon, a special day for them. They were paying homage to their gods in preparation of the safe construction of a new wing to the temple. To do so, some soil from a Hindu temple at Thanlyin in Yangon was also brought here to commence the ceremony. Two religious men were on hand to offer woven wrist bracelets to those attending the festival. Everyone was in their best dress. I was surprised that the Indians were so hospitable, as well as photogenic. No one minded being photographed. In fact, many posed for us, both men and women.

I felt a bit of apprehension that any moment the border patrol might start storming in to apprehend us I.I’s (Illegal Immigrants). After all, the garrison was only steps away from the Temple. We lingered for just half an hour and then went on our way. I would have loved to continue driving to Imphal, a city some four hours away. But full moon is also when devilish deeds may be exposed, so I thought I should play safe. I instructed the driver to head back into Myanmar. Crashing a party is one thing, being crashed is something else!

Once across the iron bridge, we drove past the Myanmar guard house as if nothing had happened and left Tamu in a hurry. Consulting my satellite images, I had other plans in mind, just further down the road. Twenty or so kilometers out of town, a policeman stood in the middle of the road and waved for us to stop our van. From the serious look on his face, we knew something was wrong. He was talking into his mobile phone. On the other end of line was the border immigration officer. We were noticed by the border guards of Myanmar, as we did not stop and register upon entry.
We got out of the van casually as if nothing was the matter. Sandra, our Myanmar manager is a dashing and assertive young lady. I heard her answering the police questions with a confident voice. Soon she took over the phone and was explaining to the immigration officer her story. I didn’t quite care what story she was telling, just that we should get through this barricade. Momentarily the situation was “handled” as Sandra gave the police a copy of our list of foreign passengers and passport information. We took off in a bigger hurry after that near impasse.

We left our boat at 7am in the morning on this mad rush to the Indian border, and now we are well into the afternoon. Satellite images told me that a long stretch of about 15 kilometers of our road would hug the national border with India, at times separated by 400 meters or less. This was good news for a defiant explorer. Three years ago, we hiked into India just to have a look from this point, but did not reach any villages on the other side. This time, I was determined to push my luck.

I could see from the satellite images that three villages, one large and two small, lay a short distance from the Burmese side of the road. A faint trail led to the larger village, the target of my visit. We stopped at the trail head and inquired at the village store. There were two motorcycles in the shop and we quickly negotiated for two men to take four of us, two passengers packed onto the back of each motorcycle, and headed for the trail head and inquired at the village store. There were two motorcycles in the shop and we quickly negotiated for two men to take four of us, two passengers packed onto the back of each motorcycle, and headed for the village.

After about one kilometer through some bushy and at times muddy trails, we reached Chang Pol, the largest of the three neighboring Indian villages; large in this case meaning fifteen houses. I had expected another poor and dirty village on the Indian side. But to my surprise, the village, including the surrounding grounds, was extremely clean and almost spotless.

A young girl dressed in an embroidered green Indian tunic was perched on the balcony of one house. We stopped and chatted. Sandra naturally spoke Burmese to her, given that the village is only one kilometer from the Myanmar side of the road. We were surprised that she spoke back in perfect English. It turned out Rosemary was one of seven teachers in the village, including the surrounding grounds, was extremely clean and almost spotless.

Rosemary’s complexion and features are closer to Burmese/Chinese than native to India. In fact, the entire village is similar in ethnicity. “We are the cookie people,” Rosemary said. “Hu? ‘Cookie’ like in Cookie Monster?” I asked. “Kaki. K-U-K-I is the spelling,” Rosemary quickly corrected me. They didn’t have television, but electricity was fed through wires brought in from the Indian side. Solar panels were around, as well as some tiny solar devices collecting sunlight on the ground. These small flashlights were provided by the Indian government.

Rosemary is 23 and not yet married. She said most girls get married around sixteen years of age. We asked how come she’s still single. “There’s no good man in the village,” she answered. “I am the youngest and here is my brother,” Rosemary said while pointing to a young man with his wife and baby. As they did not look Indian at all, I asked to see the brother’s I.D. He promptly entered the house and brought out his Indian citizen card - Jamminlen Mate. It said he was born in 1998.

“Didn’t you say you are the youngest?” I asked Rosemary regarding the discrepancy of the age difference between her and her brother. “Yes, my brother was actually born in 1989 but when they registered him, they reversed the two numbers,” mused Rosemary. I asked about local animals and in a moment her father brought out a rifle to show us that he could still hunt.

Next she showed me the rather primitive school house, with plastic sheets partitioning the different grades of students. I promised to send some English books for primary students and asked for the address. Soon the Postman, Mr Limkhojam, showed up wearing a cap. The middle-aged man dictated their village address and assured us that once the books were received, he would deliver them to the school. All mail would come through the Indian side, and the only currency they use is rupees, not the Kyats of Myanmar.

“We are all Catholic here in these villages,” Rosemary revealed to me. Next she showed us their Spartan church. Three old tombstones stood outside, probably graves of priests of the past. “Every Easter and Christmas, a priest comes to say Mass,” Rosemary assured me. Before we parted, her family treated each of us to a cup of juice from limes freshly picked and squeezed from the tree in their backyard.

Like the dialogue and visit of Aung San Suu Kyi to China at this very moment, my brief visit to India was a reminder that neighboring countries cannot move their land and people away from each other. Unlike man-made islands in the form of aircraft carriers, which can be moved from one ocean to another when national interests or priorities change, nations sharing a border must learn to live with each other. History will show that, with peaceful cooperation, everyone can prosper.
With six daughters, Thaung Wai must be a hard-working man, and he had better be busy working during the day. Thus he takes on one of the hardest jobs, rafting bamboo down the Chindwin River. Aged 12 to 30, none of his daughters is married, but his wife Daw Khin Mar San doesn’t seem worried. In fact, as she gets off the raft, her eldest daughter joins her at work in their home factory in Monywa, a factory that manufactures something used for perhaps 2000 years or more by practically all Burmese – incense.

Mother and daughter each make approximately 2500 Kyat to 3000 Kyat a day (USD2.5 to 3), depending on how many pieces of incense, or joss sticks, they finish. On an average day, they can make 15,000 or 18,000 pieces each. That would translate into the use of five or six large bamboo stems per day. And the raft I just boarded, operated by the husband and wife, is constructed of 5,000 bamboo stems bound together.

Rafters tend to disguise the size of their raft by stating a lower number of stems in order to confuse the marine control posts. There are too many such posts along the river, each imposing a levee on passing boats with cargo, especially private rafters with no channel for reprieve. These parasites would not be able to count the actual number of bamboos, some of which are submerged under water. And 5,000 seems a good even number. If unfortunately hit by too many of these water “leeches”, a rafter may run a deficit and be bankrupted by the journey.

The journey for the bamboo started deep in the hills bordering Myanmar and India. Only jungle bamboo growing to huge sizes are worthy of raft-making and floating down the Chindwin. The cutters harvest the bamboo and bring them down along small streams until they get to Homalin, a sizable town in the north. From there Thaung and his wife would buy the bamboo at 450 Kyats each. Others who acquired the bamboo from its source may pay only 150 Kyats per piece.

It takes about a month to collect and assemble a large raft, one that has bamboo walls stacked up on the sides like a house. From Homalin, to float a raft of that size down to below Monywa where it is sold would take upward of a month. Rainy season makes the work particularly hard. Though the river flows faster, it is also more dangerous, especially when rounding a bend. At such locations, a small motor attached to one end of the raft helps them negotiate around the corner where the current can be treacherous. Time seems irrelevant in such a venture, as the flow of the river will determine the speed of the raft. Of course, the raft stays ashore during the night.

Meals are cooked onboard the raft, fuel being dried drift wood collected along the way. Usually it takes three persons to handle a raft, thus a relative would generally come along. There is no bow or stern to such a raft, as the current may spin it around and suddenly the former bow would become the stern. Thus a long rudder protrudes from each end of the raft to assist in steering the raft.

I recall in the mid-1980s while working on covering the Yangtze River in China, I encountered frequent bamboo rafters as well as log rafters in the mid-section of the river, both above and below Chongqing. Within a few short years, all rafters disappeared. They were replaced by more efficient road or boat transport, and were also considered a hazard for other river vessels. It seems the days of the rafters on the Chindwin are likewise numbered. It is important that we now document their last days before this too becomes part of history.

A week after our rendezvous with Thaung Wai’s raft, we visited their home some two hours boat distance below Monywa along the Chindwin. As the motorcycles took us to the home in pouring rain, we entered the village of Shwe Kyaung in the township of Yay Sa Kyu. Most homes have large stacks of bamboo lying outside their fence or inside their courtyard. It is obvious that this village is engaged with the business of bamboo.

Drenched from head to toe, we found Thaung Wai’s house after tramping through some flooded muddy village alleys. When his wife Daw Khin Mar San learned of our visit, she rushed out of her house to greet us. It turned out they too had just arrived home a short moment ago. What took our boat a day to cover in river distance had taken them seven days to
be forest is dark. The old moon has ebbed and the new moon has yet to show his face. There is a whisper as the wind dies down. “Mom, I am scared, it is so dark out,” the tiny sapling raised his head and looked at the taller tree. Mother looked down and brushed her child with her arm of large leafs. “Child, don’t worry. In time you will grow up and see the sky, the moon and even the stars,” said the mother with a loving voice.

As she looked away, however, tears started dropping from her eyes. In her heart, she had no way of knowing whether her child would ever grow up as tall as she. Looking down at her own girth, marked with a white ring, she knew her own days were numbered. “Is it raining, mom?” The small voice asked. The mother quickly wiped her tears and looked down again. “No my child, it is just a few stars falling,” she said with a gentle smile. She must keep her child’s imagination alive.

As the night grew older, cloud moved in and the wind stirred up. The giant teak leafs started waving and flapping noisily. But mother has a hard trunk, standing firm and straight against the wind. In a moment, a tropical storm kicked up and rain started pouring down. The child was still weak and tiny, and braced himself closely to the foot of his mother. Some palm leaves, rather large pieces, began falling. Mother quickly brushed some aside to help cover her child. She thought, perhaps that was wishful thinking, as the child would be spared. But of course that was wishful thinking, as the child would someday outgrow the palm. “The faster he grows, the sooner he will be cut down!”

Mother has been raising her child as a widow for four years, ever since her mate was taken down by a troupe of loggers. Cutting had accelerated recently as word had spread that soon there would be a ban in logging. But that story had been told many times over, each time instigating a new round of speed logging, racing for time. Of course, the tallest and strongest would go first. For decades, trees, in particular teak, had been felled at their prime, never being allowed to grow old like in the old days in the old forest. Chainsaws replaced the axe, further speeding up the process of the forest’s demise. Now, even the elephants were gradually disappearing, replaced by heavy machines and tractors.

The river and stream that Mother knew as a child had turned from turquoise to muddy yellow, resembling what was known in this land as Burma tea, and more recently, as Myanmar tea. Top soil was washed off, carried by torrents from the mountains during the monsoon season, joining the Irrawaddy on its way to the ocean. Debris and driftwood floated down with the current, being collected by rafters and villagers along the river. Such tidbits were still up to the task of a simply cooked meal, especially for those living in plain thatched and bamboo houses.

Bamboo is for the poor, wood for the common folks and teak for the regal, or those who pretend to be regal. In the old days, tribal chiefs, even mountain and forest tribesmen, could afford teak for their homes. That was when Mother was a child. She had seen the British man, someone she heard called ‘Sahib,’ leading troupes of men and elephants into her forest. Soon trees started falling like dominoes, and before long her grandfather and grandmother, as well as her parents, were gone. Next came her generation, they were never given a chance to live out their lives, let alone to reach old age.

Logs used to float down to the Irrawaddy as rafts or barges, or in what were called flats, tied to a tugboat. Today larger and faster barges and boats with logs stacked high go from timber yards to multiple destinations lower down the river. These logs, dead relatives of Mother, were all destined for foreign markets.

A last bright lightning in the night sky followed by a huge thunder clap spilled the end of the rain, at least for this night. The child snuggled out of his mother’s shadow and looked up again. Momentarily a cricket started chirping, and soon the forest was filled with a chorus of insect songs. It seemed a moth had overheard some loggers chatting over a bonfire at their camp.

“Gossip has it that the camp would be pulled this weekend,” said the cricket. “There has been a change of government in the country and suddenly all logging is banned,” he added.

The message was relayed quickly among the army of night singers. The bat who helped relay the message chimed in “All timber yards, what some called the Cemetery of Teak, will also be closed.” Upon hearing this, Mother turned her head to heaven and made a prayer. “Please let my child grow. Let him be strong and be sturdy, so he would rise again with the beloved forest around us,” Mother whispered quietly from her heart, as a smile broke out as a tiny wrinkle on her face.

At that same moment, she moved her branch of gigantic leafs and brushed off the palm covering her child.

The teak sapling just woke up from his sleep and asked, “Mother, what’s the matter?” “Nothing is the matter, just go back to your sleep, baby!” Mother answered with a sweet tone, and began singing a lullaby into the darkness.
A SHIFT IN WORLDS
ON THE CHINA-TIBETAN
BORDERLAND: PART II
CHANGES IN THE LAND

by William V. Bleisch, Ph.D.
Zhongdian, Shangri-la

A mong China’s many stunning natural landscapes, two of the most famous are in the World Heritage Natural Sites of Jiuzhaigou Valley and Huanglong, both located near the historic town of Songpan in Aba Tibetan-Qiang Autonomous Prefecture, Sichuan Province. The tour guides describe these areas as fairylands on earth where primeval virgin forests and primitive natural beauty can be observed.

Historian Jack Patrick Hayes recently published a detailed history of the greater Songpan region, covering the late Qing Dynasty until the close of the twentieth century. In his analysis, Hayes points out that, throughout most of the imperial era, the Songpan region was not isolated from the rest of the world, but was linked by trade with the Han Chinese lowlands to the south. In the late Qing Dynasty, trade in wild products from Songpan’s forests was highly important, including musk, wild mushrooms and medicinal herbs. One of the most important products was caterpillar fungus, already a valuable commodity by the end of the 19th century. The trade in skins of wild animals was almost as important as trade in sheep and yak skins.

Hayes also demonstrates that Songpan’s wildernesses were not a refuge of pristine nature, untrammeled by the hand of man. He compiles convincing evidence that Tibetan herding and fire had major impacts on the distribution of forests and grasslands. Land clearance by fire in particular was so pervasive that the nearly universal pattern of deforested south-facing slopes was assumed to be a natural pattern by early explorers and later environmentalists. They did not realize that it was actually the result of deliberate human modification of the environment. The burned over slopes were not left bare, but were used for herding cattle that could efficiently convert grass and forbs into meat, milk products, animal fiber and hides. This agro-pastoral landscape, created deliberately, lasted through the end of the Republican era and into the beginning of New China.

With the victory of the Communists in 1949, the new state that followed immediately overturned the opium regime of warlords and criminal gangs that had dominated Songpan. The new regime also quickly targeted local Han and Hui communities for radical social reform. The socialist state also began massive investment in infrastructure, particularly new roads, as well as organizing a major transfer of non-Tibetan population into Songpan.

These measures effectively overcame the geographical and political isolation of the region. However, the same regime left the Tibetan elites in place in Songpan and at first treated them very gently, at least for a time. Then, quite suddenly in 1957-58, Tibetans were also forced to reinvent social and land use norms. Remaining poppy agriculture was destroyed and, after collectivization was extended to Tibetans in 1958, the presence of the state was felt at all levels of society. All of this sudden change led to a series of desperate but entirely unsuccessful Tibetan revolts in Songpan from 1958 to 1962.

Tibetans also lost access to forest resources in 1958, when private ownership of all forested areas was abolished. The new state completely overturned local traditional systems of natural resource management. In the past, exploitation of trees, herbs, grass, wildlife and minerals of the remote valleys and upper slopes had formed an economic basis of local Tibetan society. (Even as late as 2005, only 17% of the land in the Songpan region was under any kind of crop cultivation.) The development of the state-led forestry sector after 1958 led to mass changes in land and forest tenure, disconnecting Tibetans from the forests and the fire-maintained pastures that they had previously managed and exploited. Logging crews, mainly Han Chinese from outside the region, clear cut much of the accessible forests during rampant exploitation in the 1960s and 1970s, all justified in the name of nation-building.

The post-Mao era that followed the Chairman’s death in 1976 was marked by market reforms and more changes in land tenure arrangements, including eventual decentralization in the 1980s. This did not stop the environmental destruction. While clear-cutting on state forests continued, local people were given responsibility for forests on collective land. With no continuing traditions of forest management and with little trust in the future of their land tenure, they quickly cleared much of the forest that had been put under their management, leading to outside observers becoming known as the “Third Great Cutting.”

The environmental destruction eventually reached a crisis point. Following disastrous floods on the lower Yangtze in 1998, a blanket logging ban and the strict closure of timber markets led to severe restrictions on timber use and the nearly complete implosion of the state forestry sector. Almost overnight, the local administration for forest production was transformed into an administration for forest protection. State-led poverty alleviation programs and new environmental protection policies soon followed. These were eventually combined into a new economic regime based on eco-ethno tourism, centered on attractions like the World Heritage Sites at Jiuzhaigou and Huanglong. Hayes points out that contradictions were built in to the new policies. On the one hand, economic development programs struggled to further reduce the isolation of the region and put local means of production on a scientific basis. On the other hand, environmental protection and eco-ethno-tourism programs simultaneously promoted and marketed pristine nature and unspoiled culture. How these competing policies affect the environments and the cultures of Songpan is an on-going story.

Today, both Chinese and foreign discussions about Tibetan border regions like Songpan typically construct a black-and-white opposition between the Chinese state versus autonomous Tibetan institutions. For those supporting Beijing’s version of history, this serves to emphasize a long history of Chinese sovereignty. For those from outside who criticize China, the opposition is served up to contrast modern resource exploitation with a romantic notion of Tibetans living in harmony with nature. A closer look at the history of this region, however, reveals something entirely different from either of these oversimplified views.

Hayes concludes that there is no evidence to support the commonly held belief that the practices of the Chinese state were always bad for the environment while the practices of Tibetans were always good. Forest conservation is now a key issue in China as a whole and specifically in the upland regions of the borderlands. While state-led forestry was a key driver of environmental degradation in the 1960s and 1970s, destruction of forests by burning to create more grazing land was widespread and had powerful impacts before that, and the “Third Great Cutting” in the 1980’s was largely caused by a frenzy of forest clearance by local people. The over-simplistic notion that Tibetans are invariably environmentally beneficial while Chinese and the central government can only act as a force for environmental destruction is simply wrong. It is true that market forces that are currently driving environmental destruction in the region have been introduced from outside, but these forces are not inherently Chinese. They are part of the mix of capital flows, new technology and economic “development” that is spreading into remote regions throughout Asia. As Hayes sees it, “There is nothing intrinsically Chinese or Tibetan about changes in the landscape.”


2 According to government statistics, the Han population of Songpan jumped nearly 11% in 1951-52, and over 12% in 1959.
Vigan, Philippines

TREASURES
AND LITERARY
PHILIPPINES CULTURAL
DISCOVERING

N
ewly-minted President Duterte of the Philippines quoted three persons in his concise and succinct inaugural speech, two of them from America - Abraham Lincoln and Franklin D. Roosevelt. Only one person was mentioned from his own country - Francisco Sionil Jose. Sionil, known to his friends as “Frankie,” is a National Artist of the Philippines and an internationally renowned author with an uncompromising political and social stand, as illustrated in his many award-winning novels, some translated into over twenty languages worldwide.

One may not always agree with Sionil’s writing, at times abrasive and with progressive to radical viewpoints, nonetheless he is respected even by some of his enemies. This is due largely to his dare-say-it, as well as dare-write-it, character. That personality is a double-edged sword, serving him well in times of his enemies. This is due largely to his dare-say-it, as well as dare-write-it, character. That personality is a double-edged sword, serving him well in times of peace, and creating problems for the writer in more turbulent times. In a place like the Philippines, one can expect more of the latter than the former.

For four years during the twelve-year martial law period of President Marcos’ rule, Sionil had his passport taken away and was restrained from traveling outside of the country. There was even a time of terror when he did not dare sleep at home, but found refuge during the night at a friend’s home. What bewildered and hurt him most was when he found out that he was blacklisted through the betrayal by one of his close friends. Twice he recounted skirmishes of various armies, not the least the more recent ones of the Second World War and how each affected the region was all new to me. Pointing to the mountain passes along the Cordilleras to our east, he recounted skirmishes of various armies, not the least the more recent ones with the NPA or New People’s Army, the largest insurgent group in the country.

We made a stop at Sarrat, a town made famous by hosting the birth place of President Marcos. I visited briefly the house with a few exhibits. Sionil told me some lively stories about Imelda Marcos’s attempt to paint, or repaint, the history of her husband’s childhood, recasting him as rising from a higher pedigree in social rank. Of course the “Wedding of the Century” when her daughter got married in 1983, would not be better forgotten, with an anecdote of mass food poisoning from the special culinary menu prepared and catered to the town from Manila.

Rosales is a small town by the scale of Manila or Hong Kong, from where I had just come. I can image how much smaller it must have been almost a century ago when Sionil was born there in 1924. The town today would not provide much lingering memories for Frankie, as now there are too many McDonald’s, Jollibees and SevenElevens around. With Sionil’s instruction, his driver took us directly to the Rosales Elementary School. Here he recounted that, while attending fourth grade, he encountered spirits, or “dwarfs”, under the space between the school building and the ground. While retrieving a football dropped under the building, he found three tiny old fellows with wrinkled faces and eyes like burning charcoal. That memory stayed with him throughout his life. Climbing the water tower to look at the town from above was another adventure of the young boy.

Though our stay at Rosales was short, Sionil took the opportunity to drop off stacks of books at a neighboring private school that was lacking reading material in its library. He was obviously proud of his Ilocano rural and agrarian society, yet has written about the peasantry being tyrannized. As we drove, he looked lovingly at the rice fields by the roadside, as a new planting season had just begun. Occasionally we stopped to pick up his favorite popsicle or cone ice-cream.

At one point, I asked Sionel what other names he could come up with that have become an adjective in the English language. I cited Platonic and Orwellian as examples. He quickly came up with Quixotic. I argued that Don Quixote is only an imagined person, not a real name, so our game continued. I happened to bring two T-shirts, which I planned to wear in alternation. Both have Don Quixote imprinted on their front, a perfect coincidence, as Sionil has admired the author Cervantes since his early writing days. He even described how Cervantes affected his own writing during a lecture he delivered at a Cervantes Lecture Series at the University of Santo Tomas, where Sionil graduated many decades ago. Founded in 1611, Santo Tomas is the oldest university in Asia.

At every town we passed by on the way north, we stopped and visited churches, some older, some newer. The most impressive were those from the three hundred some odd years of the Spanish rule. Soon all the churches and their names eluded me and gave me spiritual indigestion, though Sionil had them memorized as part of his mental dictionary. I however remember that the Church of Our Lady of the Assumption, better known as the Santa Maria Church at Ilocos Sur, was the most imposing. It was first built in 1765, from brick and mortar with a separate bell tower, and was designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1993.

Sionil’s knowledge of the history of Spanish rule, United States rule, and the Second World War and how each affected the region was all new to me. While retrieving a football dropped under the building, he found three tiny old fellows with wrinkled faces and eyes like burning charcoal. That memory stayed with him throughout his life. Climbing the water tower to look at the town from above was another adventure of the young boy.

We made a stop at Sarrat, a town made famous by hosting the birth place of President Marcos. I visited briefly the house with a few exhibits. Sionil told me some lively stories about Imelda Marcos’s attempt to paint, or repaint, the history of her husband’s childhood, recasting him as rising from a higher pedigree in social rank. Of course the “Wedding of the Century” when their daughter got married in 1983, would not be better forgotten, with an anecdote of mass food poisoning from the special culinary menu prepared and catered to the town from Manila.

Outside a place called The Fort, a casino/resort built by Imelda Marcos, four flags flew side by side; those of the casino, of China, of Taiwan and Hong Kong, a rarity indeed. Politics aside, it may indicate that the most frequent customers must come from those three areas outside of the Philippines.
Without any advance notice, Sionil led me to Vigan, certainly the highlight of this trip. Culture has always been close to my heart, thus CERS while under my watch had conducted numerous culture conservation projects. Yet this UNESCO heritage site is unique, being a largely Spanish colonial town transfix ed in time, cast up on the northern coast of the Philippines.

We arrived at dusk. After checking into the Vigan Plaza Hotel in front of the Piazza, we went to dinner at the Leona Restaurant just steps away, adjacent to our hotel. This was not just any restaurant, but a diner which took up the former residence of an important Filipino woman poet/writer. When she wrote her feminist poems and prose she was much ahead of her time, a time when women were not encouraged, or were even prohibited, from expressing their thoughts. So much so that she was abandoned and censored by her own husband and even prohibited, from expressing their thoughts. So much so that she was abandoned and censored by her own husband and son, and then lived alone in exile.

That however did not deter Leona Florentino from penning the poem, “Blasted Hope”: 

What gladness and what joy, are endowed to one who is loved, for truly there is one to share, all his sufferings and his pain. My fate is dim, my stars so low, perhaps nothing to it can compare, for truly I do not doubt, for presently I suffer so. For even I did love, the beauty whom I desired, never do I fully realize, that I am worthy of her. Shall I curse the hour, when first I saw the light of day, would it not have been better a thousand times, I had died when I was born. Would I want to explain, but my tongue remains powerless, for now do I clearly see, to be spurned is my lot. But would it be my greatest joy, to know that it is you I love, for to you do I vow and a promise I make, it’s you alone for whom I would lay my life.

One citation had it that Leona had Chinese heritage in her blood line, certainly a high possibility given that the Chinese were already here in Vigan before the Spanish. Today a statue of Leona Florentino seated on a pedestal takes up the entrance to the main axis of the walking street, a cobbled avenue, into the Spanish settlement. But if one were to turn right on the first side street, two blocks away is the Nam Chong School, a Chinese kindergarten and elementary school that teaches Chinese after regular school hours.

During our trip together, Sionil had shown repeated interest in China when he asked me numerous questions about the situation there, in particular even asking about distant places and people like the Uighur along the Silk Road. He had visited China early on quite extensively, even travelling to the distant model commune of Dazhai, but had not returned to the country recently.

With his interest in history, in particular the complex contemporary history of the Philippines, his popularly cited disdain for the Chinese and even the Spanish must have been taken out of context. It is obvious that he holds respect for the positive contributions of these heritages, not to mention his love for Chinese culinary art. However, his distaste for the Oligarchy or cartel type, plundering its own people and country, let alone for the more recent influx of Chinese immigrants of the nouveau riche, is quite apparent. Among his circle of friends, there are many of Chinese or Spanish descent, especially those who are principled and disciplined. Certainly I hope I am considered one.

At one point when I mentioned that my first car was a VW Beetle, Sionil said he drove a Beetle throughout Europe, including Eastern Europe, during the Cold War. He occasionally even slept in it while being a reporter for the Manila Times, before he shipped the car back to Manila at the end of his tour of duty. When I upped my ante by saying that I drove a VW van from Canada to South America from 1975 to 1976, he countered that he had a VW van for a long time while raising a large family. Obviously we have more than just a love of writing in common, extending even to our choice of cars and our wanderlust.

The difference is that he is into his 90s, yet with the mind and spirit of an energetic youth. I told him that today 90 is considered the new 70, whereas for myself, while into my late 60s, I am barely into the new 40s. So our dreams will continue.

While driving back to Manila, I pondered upon my experience in Vigan, the alleys I paced alone in darkness as well as at dawn, before the old Spanish quarters were flooded with tourists. Of the small percentage of old buildings that have been restored in this UNESCO World Heritage Site, all have been turned into boutique hotels and a few restaurants. All other shops, meaning tourist shops, are in largely dilapidated buildings, sorely needing restoration. It seems the heritage designation is only a façade masking tourism and commercialism.

Cann not some of these buildings be restored to become cultural facilities or artistic residences? As usual, I feel we should demonstrate that it can be done. I quietly promise myself that we should look for a small house within our capacity to restore, and turn it into a cultural showcase, perhaps as a gallery for Filipino photographers to exhibit work that focuses strictly on their own country and her people. It may be a high mark of ambition, but we always have lofty goals. Some of them have turned into reality, though not without hurdles. I feel honored to be guided on this excursion into the distant north of the Philippines by someone who is so passionate about his country, and about life. Sionil is much more than a guide, but a guiding light.
A DAY OF LEISURE IN PALAWAN
by Wong How Man

Palawan

Palawan in phonetic Chinese means “sent to play”. So I should take it easy for just a day. And I am seeing orange today. My Omega Solar Impulse watch has an orange band. I am laying in a bright orange hammock I bought in New York. Earlier this morning, I cruised in our brand new mat orange colored, special edition Yamaha motorcycle, after having my fresh-squeezed orange juice. And the sleeping bag I use on the balcony bench as my bed is, again, bright orange. All of these, however, except the motorbike, are by chance rather than by design.

By the same token, most of our projects came about first by chance, followed then by design! Opportunities manifest themselves. We simply seize them where and when appropriate. Maybe some of my readers won’t mind taking a break from reading about my projects, and instead would appreciate hearing about how I shoot the breezes in a slow morning. After all, it is a public holiday here in Palawan, Ramadan that is. Here in the southern Philippines, the holiday is not just for Muslims, but everyone gets a day off. A slow life just got even slower.

Rainy season, as well as typhoon season, has arrived. Typhoon Butchoy is looming to our west, near the Spratly Islands, adding nature’s storm to a political one. The new President provides a new outlook, as Duterte, an unusually proactive president, announced that he would open dialogue with China, even if the International Court at The Hague should rule on the side of the Philippines in the dispute over the islands’ sovereignty.

A strong government produces results whereas a weak one can provide at best a consensus. I believe that the current Chinese government is a strong one and the new Philippines government has a better mandate than previous ones. This is an opportunity not to be missed.

Politics is moment to moment, whereas nature is more sustainable. So let’s talk more about the weather, or about our environment. I just wrote a short philosophical note as opening statement for our Myanmar natural history exhibit of freshwater aquaria, which are stocked with both indigenous and invasive fish from Inle Lake. My note seems perhaps relevant to much of the world today, so I share it here:

“Our forefather left us many treasures; knowledge gathered over millennia, and much pristine forest, blue oceans, green rivers and turquoise lakes, meadows with an abundance of wild flowers and wildlife. What are we, after one generation, leaving behind in this world for our next generation? Verbalizing it would make us all sadly ashamed. This exhibit will serve as a reminder of the beauty handed to us that would likely be ruined within our lifetime, unless we start modifying the way we live, and begin nursing and repairing the ills we have inflicted upon this earth over the last few decades.”

My thoughts momentarily went back six hundred some years to the time of the First Emperor of the Ming Dynasty. When Zhu Yuanzhang was a young student monk, returning to his temple late one night, he found the gate to his monastery was closed already. He decided to sleep where he was. Laying in the open, he wrote,

“The sky my canopy and the ground my rug, the sun my company, together with the moon, stars and constellations I hug; At night I dare not too far my legs to stretch, in fear of crushing over the ocean’s edge.”

The future Emperor seemed to at once enjoy nature as well as prophesize, in his very daring stroke, the human impact on it. It serves as a metaphor of what we human are inflicting on the earth around us today, poking holes and creating damages all over the world.

But in less developed areas, we can still find certain pristine hidden treasures, relatively untouched by our so-called “civilization”. Being a life-long explorer, for over forty years of my adult life, I have been fortunate to visit and experience some such sites. Those times are the most precious to me, when I allow myself to enjoy that rare moment of romanticism, which human romance can hardly replicate.

At low tide today, I walked out the mud flat to visit our exploration outrigger banca boat, HM Explorer II, a smaller and younger brother to our HM Explorer I in Myanmar. This is the first time I saw the boat out of water, sitting on the mud. Nearby are hundreds, perhaps thousands, of Fiddler Crab, crawling out of their hide as the water recedes. Showing off their huge orange claws, one huge and one miniature, I watch the tiny claw playing fiddle in between the large one. The scene reminded me of yet another poem by a Chinese revolutionary author Lu Xun, “With cold eyes I watch with slight the crab, how long can you walk sideways I await?” In Chinese, “walking sideways” means “bullying”. （長將冷眼觀螃蟹，看你橫行到幾時?）
"Time flies so fast." It has been almost a year since I said “Good bye” to my corporate life. And I’m counting every blessing this year for joining CERS.

First and foremost, I would like to say “Thank you” to my friend, Lei Lei, for introducing me to CERS, and to Mr. Wong How Man (Herman), for giving me the opportunities to work together with CERS. My dreams did come true, and I got the chance to explore within and outside of Myanmar, for which I had been wishing for so long.

A series of flashbacks comes to me when I’m thinking about my days with CERS.

The very first things I did together with the CERS team was exploring along the Chindwin River upstream from Monywa to Kalaywa. We distributed a short film, the so-called Jackie Chan Film, wisely made by CERS for a campaign to save the Irrawaddy Dolphin and to stop electro-fishing. I had the experience of sailing on a raft, and I helped in making a documentary about the lives of rafters. The horrible, sad stories behind their lives were so bitter for me to hear. While I was working in an air-conditioned room in front of a PC in my previous work-life, I did not realize that some people’s lives are so tough or their survival so precarious. Maybe that is the reason that Albert Einstein said, “Look deep into nature, and then you will understand everything better.”

I have learned not only about people’s lives, but also I have had opportunities to enjoy both the beauty and the ugly of my country. I say the ugly of Myanmar because much was systematically destroyed by the pervious military government over the last 50 years. Most of our civilians were crushed by that bad government system. The trees are crying, just as are the rafters, while the guards who watch the rafters and ask for the fines along the Chindwin River are building new houses every year. It would be unbelievable to accept that the fines along the river are between 50 lakhs to 100 lakhs, depending on the amount of bamboo and wood the rafters bring, but this is what I saw in the record book of a 50-years old rafter’s family. The family consisted of father, mother and their two nephews, who were all floating on the bamboo raft, leaving five pretty, adult daughters at home for two months. Our organization cruise arrived near the rafters’ village on the same day they arrived back at their home, and we got a chance to hear more about their lives. Other rafters were also waiting for us, to ask for our help to let the government know their difficulties. It was really a heart-felt feeling for me. On the way back from the rafters’ village to our HM Explorer boat by motorcycle, I was not clear whether the water on my cheeks were my tears or the rain drops.

Another exploration, to the border crossing to India from Tamu, was also an interesting trip. I found my brothers and sisters in Christ and visited the Roman Catholic Church in Changpol Village, India. Those places seemed so far away before we went there.

Moreover, I was so lucky to spend a week observing in Shangri-la, at the CERS Zhongdian Center. This was after a many-hour drive from Kunming by car in March. The temperature in my home country at that time was around 42 degrees C, while in Shangri-la it was snowing. That was my first time to touch the soft snow, and also to see the systematic and well built CERS Center. I was so awed at how Mr. Wong How Man could receive the gadgets and stationery of Japanese climbers who died under the avalanche at the Sacred Mountain Khawarapro.

My desire to preserve the culture and nature of Myanmar became stronger after coming back from this trip, with a lot of ideas to contribute to CERS projects in Myanmar. We have been working for the awareness program against electro fishing and reported about the things we observed with the rafters since January, but it seems like it needs a bit more time to change people’s mindset and to get serious action by the Government, as these things are still happening until today.

I feel that I am just a small tiny ant trying to change the whole wrong system of my country, but anyhow, if people are aware and ashamed of their behaviors and if they start changing for their own sake, it would be a great offering to the country as good citizens. Our country is now led by our new President, U Htin Kyaw, alone will not be able to change the whole country. All the citizens at all levels need to participate in this change enthusiastically. It is time to both change and preserve the old culture and heritage of Myanmar.

I am really thankful to Mr. Wong How Man for making a lot of documentaries along the Chindwin and Ayeyarwaddy Rivers, and because he has been doing a lot for Myanmar, like restoration of the Burmese Cat and preservation of bamboo craft at Inle. These will be the very best presents he could give to our country.
CERS IN THE FIELD

- Construction of a new museum inside the premises of the CERS Zhongdian Center is recently completed and ready for installation. The traditionally designed building including a fishing pond will have an integrated exhibit to illustrate the history of exploration in China, CERS culture and nature projects, as well as a photographic gallery/studio of How Man’s work. On the second floor is a Buddhist chapel with a set of rare Dege edition of the Kangyur Sutras printed in cinnabar red, as well as hand-painted murals and other important artifacts from the CERS collection.

- Tashi, CERS’ most dedicated guard dog for our Zhongdian Center, has gone on and reincarnate after providing a full and loyal service for 15 years since the Center was completed in 2002. Surviving 15 bitter winters living largely outdoor at 3200 meters elevation is worthy of a special medal. He will be remembered.

- Filming of a documentary commenced in Bhutan as CERS partner on a new project patronized by the Royal Grandmother in documenting a disappearing cultural and religious practice of Tashi Gomang, an elaborate made traveling pagoda to propagate Buddhist stories and legends.

- The old Shek O Man Sheng School house restoration is now completed and being put to use. CERS and several of our directors/patrons are the main supporters in reviving this building for use by the Shek O Village community for their educational and recreational activities.

CERS IN THE MEDIA

- A new book to commemorate CERS’ 30th anniversary is being authored by Daphane Liu and released.

- Two new books, the 17th and 18th titles in a long series written and with photography by Wong How Man, are being released. They are Nature My Fate and Culture My Destiny.

- Cathay Pacific Airways, celebrating its 70th anniversary, began airing four documentary films produced by CERS on both Cathay Pacific and Dragonair flights (photo – CX Discovery). This include a film on Three Centenarian Pilots, a film on a Cuban Cantonese opera performer, one on the Burmese Cat and lastly on Yak Cheese.

- The Manila Bulletin newspaper published a full page article by Wong How Man on the Hanging Coffins of the Philippines.

- A 10-minute film produced by Taiwan’s Commonwealth Publishers was released to commemorate the Honorable Monk Hsing Yun’s 90th birthday and showcase the relationship between How Man and the renowned monk.

- Dr Bill Bleisch lectured to a group from Stanford University visiting Hong Kong.

- How Man lectured to a group including several WPO members in Mexico City. He also gave a lecture at the Hong Kong University to Alumni of HKU on the topic of the Matrilineal Moso of Yunnan.

- On October 2, Dr. Bill Bleisch gave an hour long talk to the Kunning Green Drinks Group, a forum on environmental issues, at the Elephant Bookstore in Kunming. The talk covered Bill’s 30 years of involvement with conservation in China and SE Asia, including CERS’s work on the community-based ecotourism and wildlife conservation in Laos and trekking tourism to build and preserve connections between wildlife habitats in Yunnan.

LEFT TO RIGHT:
HM’s twin books.
Manila Bulletin article.
Cathay Pacific inflight article.
Cathay Pacific film menu.
We thank President Htin Kyaw of Myanmar for visiting the CERS Burmese Cat Sanctuary at the Inthar Heritage House of Inle Lake. His entourage also visited the adjacent CERS Aquarium with freshwater fish indigenous to Inle Lake. The President held on to one of our Burmese cats the entire time during his visit. Our project partner U Ohn Maung, now Minister of Hotels and Tourism, accompanied the President’s visit.

We thank the Royal Grandmother of Bhutan for hosting our filmmaker Xavier Lee while he was conducting a film to document an ancient and disappearing religious tradition, the Tashi Gomang traveling storyteller. Her Royal Palace’s office provided an official vehicle as well as protocol officer to help coordinate our work in this lovely country where CERS is expected to expand our work in the future.

We thank Governor Alvarez office in Palawan in assisting and expediting our boat HM Explorer II’s operation in the Philippines, obtaining all necessary permission and permits for us to sail to new destinations.

We thank Prim Jitcharoongphorn and her Allied Metal Company for designing and installing a professional kitchen on our boat HM Explorer in Mandalay. Her team of four traveled from Thailand to Myanmar in order to install our new kitchen.

The Shun Hing Education & Charity Fund has made a sizable two-year donation to CERS.

Dora Wu, long-time supporter of CERS, has made another substantial donation to CERS.

Gilbert Wong and Bull Capital made a special donation to CERS.

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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.