A NEWSLETTER TO INFORM AND ACKNOWLEDGE CERS' FRIENDS AND SUPPORTERS

CHINA EXPLORERS
CHINA EXPLORATION AND RESEARCH SOCIETY

VOLUME 19 NO. 1 SPRING 2017

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP:
A Manip carrying Tashigomang.
Chin of Myanmar with tattoo.
Crab of Palawan.
Naga warriors.

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President's Message

As I write this, today ushered in a new year on the lunar calendar. Conventional thinking holds that the Zodiac sign begins with the Lunar New Year, which is a misconception. In fact, the start of the Year of the Rooster will follow in eight days’ time. Such signs in the Almanac actually follow another calendar based on the sun, which was commonly in use historically by farmers. The start of the new sign coincides with the day of the arrival of Spring, as in the Chinese term Li Chun, “Standing of Spring”, set by the rotation of the earth around the sun and usually falling either on February 3 or 4.

Is the earth spinning faster? Yes, especially for those of us advancing in age towards that inevitable destination. The external clock is the one ticking, which everyone shares, with hours, days, years, and multiples. But to each person, his internal clock is also ticking, but directly proportional to the fraction of duration he has spent consciously in this world. For example, one year is only 1/10th for a ten year old, thus quite a substantial proportion, which also naturally feels long for the child. But one year is 1/60th to someone 60 years of age, thus it feels much shorter to a senior.

Of course, it also depends on what a person is doing with the time, whether the duration can feel longer or shorter. When busy, time tends to fly, and when at ease, time is like a snail. When Ho Chi-minh was asked by reporters in Paris how long he spent in prison? His answered, “In prison, time is always long.”

So, for some of us considered seniors by mainstream demographics, we charge ahead, despite energy def执教, as if time will soon run out. As for myself, while such rushing may not be kind to my heart, it is certainly more productive when work is done with some urgency, hopefully without compromising details and excellence.

This issue of the CERS newsletter brings to our friends a good range of our work, from culture and nature, and from China to Bhutan, and from Myanmar to the Philippines. Many of these projects, including exploration ones, were done in a rush. But it is not rush just because our lives are running out, it is because so much is disappearing even before we ourselves are gone.

Hopefully such salvaging and documenting of our cultural and natural heritage will in time be appreciated by future generations, who may have more time at hand, yet with fewer and fewer...

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President: WONG HOW MAN
Founder/President: CERS
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With respect to the entire contents of this newsletter, including its photographs:


NATIONAL TREASURES, a dying tradition, a country neighboring China, a not-for-profit project, and certainly great fun to be involved; it all fits perfectly with CERS. And this is not even to mention the significance of the project in terms of education and conservation. CERS, with the blessing of Her Majesty The Royal Grandmother Of The Fifth King Of Bhutan, is now on board for sponsoring the production of a documentary film.

Tashigomang (Many Doors of Auspiciousness), according to the French diplomat and a scholar in Asian Studies specializing in Himalayan studies, Dr. Mathou, can be considered as an indigenous Bhutanese tradition or perhaps a genuine Bhutanese national treasure, even though the invention of this vanishing tradition has been closely related to Buddhism as a whole since the 16th century. However, it is in Bhutan that the Tashigomang has been, in Dr. Mathou’s word, “part of the local culture in the most comprehensive way,” which contrasts with other Buddhist territories where it has totally vanished.

So what is a Tashigomang? In simple language, it is a two foot tall sacred miniature shrine or temple with colorful paintings and sculptures of various saints and deities hidden behind many tiny secret doors and tiers. It is built of clay, wood, leather, silver and sometimes gold, and it has been a showcase of Bhutanese craftsmanship since 1637. In the old days, long distance travel was inconvenient for most farming families. A Manip (storyteller) carries the portable shrine around villages to tell Buddhist stories by chanting and singing. Children find it fascinating as layers and layers of secret doors are opened whilst the story unfolds. Like the Transformer in movie world, the four-sided shrine can be transformed into an UFO-like spacecraft by...
stretching out its arms and doors to all directions. Spinning the pinnacle will give rise to a tiny saint figure, usually the lotus born Guru Rinpoche.

The Manip will change his tone and rhythm dramatically to create mysterious effects and excitement. The narration style revolutionized the orthodox way of religious teaching, making the easily distracted children sit still. Adults bow and give cash offerings for blessings of health and their family’s well being. This entertaining yet religious ritual usually takes place in a market corner on holidays. The Manip, as a quasi-monk, acts as both custodian and storyteller, performing as an ambassador of the temple to make the ceremony mobile and generating a new source of income. His story-telling talent determines the amount of cash the temple can make.

I am assigned a ten days assignment to travel to Bhutan alone. It is my first ever trip to Bhutan, a country that I learned about from internet. “Don’t worry! If anything happens to you, just say HM, that will save you for sure!” CERS president How Man Wong assured me. “HM, How Man? Are you sure of your popularity over there?” I doubted. “Very popular, everyone knows HM, Her Majesty, the Royal Grandmother!”

The pressure is on. I travel to Trongsa, 220km east of Thimphu with a local TV journalist Surjaman Thapa and the 74 year old Manip, Kuenzang Tenzin, the youngest of the three remaining Tashigomang story-tellers. We are set to go to the temple named Sinphu Goenpa where the old Manip has started a class teaching Tashigomang tradition to young monks.

Bhutan is a country situated within the East Himalayan range. The road to Trongsa, or as the locals call it, “the Highway,” is currently being widened. The heavy construction process makes it difficult for every driver and in fact lethal for those who drive faster than 20km per hour. But not for our young drivers Karma and Surjaman, who drives his own pick-up truck leading the way. They both cruise the cars as if we are on a racetrack. I dare not to say a word but count an average of 8 curves per minute, so for the whole 7 hours 220km journey, there are approximately 3,360 curves to conquer. I do not see a straight road longer than 100 meters. Either side is a gorge as deep as 300 meters. It would be 7 seconds to impact on the riverbank below, I guessed.

After we drive across the first mountain pass at altitude 3000m, the 74 years old Manip suddenly feels very sick and demands to pull over. I give him the Chinese must-carry medicated white-flower embrocation (白花油), but it doesn’t work on him. We immediately re-route and send him to a nearby hospital. When I see him lying weak on the hospital bed, I realize how fragile he and the National Treasure are. Building up a tradition may take hundreds of years, but losing it could be just a matter of seconds.

Thanks to Surjaman who flashes his charm to urge the nurse to treat this National Treasure with priority. After putting him on a saline drip for four hours, Manip Kuenzang is able to walk again. He then refuses to carry on with the journey and insists we take him back or call a taxi to Thimphu with his Tashigomang. The Protocol Officer warns him on his sudden change of plan and the consequence, but in vain. Surjaman finally manages to persuade him to perform the ritual once just for filming. We immediately set up outside the famous Punakha Dzong, once the old capital of Bhutan.

The Tashigomang attracts villagers even before the ritual starts. The master, chanting merely for half an hour, happily makes around Nu3500. Then, we are allowed to take his Tashigomang back to his temple where his young students there can perform without him.

Surjaman’s help turns out to be valuable for our not-for-profit project. The whole of Bhutan knows him as a dedicated investigative TV journalist. Whenever our car passes by people, I notice well that Surjaman, still driving at speed, sticks his head out and looks cool for a second or two, just to make sure his face is recognized. When his fans do, they wave hands and smile at him. “These two provinces are under my jurisdiction, everything happens here is my business. I am more busy than a judge and a policeman added together.” He declares with pride.

Driving back and forth from Thimphu to Trongsa for a lot of villagers cannot be a daily routine. Our pick-up truck stops momentarily as Surjaman unloads some of stuff to a shop or to a man waiting besides...
the road. I ask if he does that for free, and he shakes his head, using the Indian gesture for a YES. “It’s a favor I offer to everyone in these two provinces. Everyone here is my friend, alias informants. Sometimes, I need to provide them with phone card from my own pocket. Without them I cannot do my job” Surjaman says proudly.

Back in the National Library and Archives center in Thimphu, shooting schedule is tight. Everyone stops working at 5pm sharp. “You cannot interview the Princess without approval from the Royal office. The approval is very difficult to get anyway, so you might want to think of interviewing others.” CERS friend Uygen advises me not to get into trouble. “But didn’t we have the blessing of Her Majesty the Royal Grandmother?” I protest. He returns with a speechless smile.

I build a make-shift studio with a 4x2 meters long black color flannel fabric and 4 wooden bulletin poles borrowed from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs office. The camera and lighting are set to record macro details inside the Tashigomang, in particular the tiny peanut sized clay figures of deities made over three hundred years ago. It is amazing to capture the details of Bhutanese craftsmanship on film. Things seem right, but not being able to interview the Princess who leads the restoration team still makes me a little bit uneasy.

“How do you support yourself if you are not-for-profit?” This is the blunt question raised by many who encounters us for the first time. The Protocol Officer Sherub, being the most curious one, asks me politely. I try to take on the mysterious air of his country and say “Well, we need to have guts. There are the Invisible Man and Wonder Woman existing in our world. They have Batman’s financial power but not the time and energy like Flash Gordon to help the Land of the Thunder Dragon. We are just the rebels willing to face the challenge.” Sherub seems to understand. “Your contribution to my work is as valuable as a profit. Our profit is measured in value, not in currency!” I believe that it is too philosophical for him.

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“Can you tell me what you are doing?” I stick my camera with an extended microphone at a dusty Tashigomang where the masked Princess is carefully brushing off the dust. Naturally, she answers me with great detail about the procedure of restoration. I then request her to show me the restoration lab and say a few words about her vision for this project. I spend altogether 20 minutes with her. She speaks softly. Her intelligence and elegance match exactly my expectation of a Princess, of course. I feel I did the right thing regardless that this is a wrong thing to do in Bhutan.

Later that evening, Uygen was in a state of shock with his mouth open O-shaped when I show him the footage. “I will edit the film in Hong Kong and dropbox it to you. You will present the film to the Royal Family. Good luck!” I shake his hand and he shakes his head.

This documentary film is targeted to audience ages from 10 to 25 years old. They are the generation to carry on the tradition into the 22nd century and beyond. People often put the blame of losing a tradition on the new generation. Saying that nowadays there are too many unimportant distractions in their life hence lacking a successor. I feel the blame should not be laid on the young, but on us who did not conserve and protect tradition properly.
We leave the Old Town in Zhongdian bright and early on a Thursday morning on a kind of cultural and spiritual exploration.

Because of road construction, we must travel south down to the Yangtze, then follow the river upstream. We finally leave the river’s banks at the bridge to Qi Zhong, where we cross into Weixi Lisu Minority Autonomous County. A new bridge across the Yangtze, slightly higher than the old one, is nearing completion just upstream. Because of road construction, we must follow the river upstream. We finally leave

cave. Although recently rebuilt after a disastrous fire, their location is quite impressive; they are built high in the mountain, pressed against the cliff. Tibetans know this holy place under the name of Dampa Cave, since the Great Saint Padampa Sangye is supposed to have meditated in the cave inside one of the shrines. He was instrumental in the origins of the Tibetan movement called Chöd, or “Cutting,” which was founded by a very famous religious woman named Machig Labdrön (1055-1149). In this meditative practice, generally done in lonely and dreaded places like cemeteries, the object is to overcome all fears as the practitioner visualizes giving her or his own body to the spirits as an offering. The aim is to cut attachment to one’s corporeal form. Padampa Sangye generally taught naked to express the importance of simple living, a matter of asceticism. He is often portrayed with a single topknot and black skin, a reminder of his Indian origin, holding in his right hand the double-headed drum called damaru and in his left, a thighbone trumpet called kangling. His piercing gaze is another constant in Padampa Sangye images. This may explain the blue colour of the eyes of the statue in the Dampa Cave.

We visit the nearby monastery that belongs to the Drigung Kagyu school of Tibetan Buddhism. There are 3 days. We are received by Rangchung Rinpoche who promises relatively fast, not therefore necessarily easy, achievement of Buddhist Enlightenment”. He was instrumental in the origins of the Tibetan movement called Chöd, or “Cutting,” which was founded by a very famous religious woman named Machig Labdrön (1055-1149). In this meditative practice, generally done in lonely and dreaded places like cemeteries, the object is to overcome all fears as the practitioner visualizes giving her or his own body to the spirits as an offering. The aim is to cut attachment to one’s corporeal form. Padampa Sangye generally taught naked to express the importance of simple living, a matter of asceticism. He is often portrayed with a single topknot and black skin, a reminder of his Indian origin, holding in his right hand the double-headed drum called damaru and in his left, a thighbone trumpet called kangling. His piercing gaze is another constant in Padampa Sangye images. This may explain the blue colour of the eyes of the statue in the Dampa Cave.

We visit the nearby monastery that belongs to the Drigung Kagyu school of Tibetan Buddhism. There are around 150 monks, and among them 5 are in meditation retreat for the traditional time of 3 years, 3 months and 3 days. We are received by Rangchung Rinpoche who explains to us that the monastery was established during the reign of the Emperor Qianlong (1711-1799).
Lastly we are also able to pay a visit to the meditation house that CERS restored at this place. Located directly under a statue of Padampa Sangye and a stupa, the wooden house overlooks the valley below where the Yangtze River can be seen flowing south.

Just as we reach the meditation house, a policeman comes along side, out of breath from rushing to catch up. Oddly, he is accompanied by his mother, who is very friendly and talkative. In spite of our wish to spend the night at this peaceful place, we have to go down to the city of Qi Zhong, since the local authorities do not seem pleased to see foreigners here so late in the day. The policeman seems quite relieved later when he meets us on our way down the mountain to stay at the New Bridge Hotel.

Looking down to the Yangtze from Damo Cave.

"Yaaaaah-ahwooo-ahwooo!" Tarzan calls out while swinging from one tree to another, catching one liana after another, like a monkey through the jungle. But his yell, now registered as a trade mark, may well be a cry of pain, from catching the wrong vine, with a hand full of thorns. Thomas, our Chin guide, showed me a young rattan cane plant, about ten feet tall with its viney trunk covered with sharp thorns.

In South and Southeast Asia, caning is considered a traditional penal code even today. As a child growing up in Hong Kong, I remember going to the wet market with our maids where I would see canes for sale. Parents would use them to reprimand their children and it was then reckoned as the best tool for disciplining. I, as well as my sisters, have all been recipients of such punishing discipline.

At school, caning was also considered acceptable in my childhood days. But in today’s “modern” societies, teachers are no longer allowed to inflict the slightest bodily pain to students. In time, perhaps students may get away with inflicting harm to teachers instead. That was exactly what happened during a student demonstration at Hong Kong University a year ago.

“You see those dead vines hanging down from a tall tree? That’s cane. The locals cannot get to the top so they chop off the lower branches, as it can be used to weave the best baskets,” said Thomas while pointing up a tree. Even when cut into fine thin pieces, rattan cane is strong and resilient, lasting many years when made into baskets. We visited a basket maker, U Aung Kwee, but he revealed that cane is too hard to find now and too expensive to purchase for basket making these days. Instead he weaves only from bamboo.

If the thorns of the cane hurt, the application of facial tattoo to a traditional Chin woman can be even more painful. A young girl would have her face fully tattooed with tribal markings, usually by her mother, using cane thorns to poke the face and injecting into the skin an indigo ink derived from charcoal and bean leaf. “With four to five persons holding down the young lady, those who can take pain can have it done within two days. But for those who cannot withstand pain would take a couple years, adding a bit of tattoo to the face each month. The most painful being tattooing to the eyelid,” Thomas revealed to me the secrets of the practice.

Though face tattoo has been abolished by the government since 1960, remote villages still conduct it secretly. I have seen women below age 50, and younger, still bearing face tattoo. And of course, all older ladies, or at least “elegant” old ladies, would sport face tattoo.

Thomas, at 33 years old, had spent four years studying in India, thus is fluent in English. He is married and with two children; one just started school. “I am a
Christian, but formerly Chin people are animists and shamanists. Today most Chin people in the southern part of the State are Buddhists whereas those living to the north are mainly Christians,” Thomas revealed to me. “Nonetheless, here in the town of Kanpetlet in the south, we have 11 churches of various denominations in all,” he added. Singing is part of his Christian training, and today Thomas plays lead guitar and perform with a band during his spare time.

It was a Wednesday and in the evening after dinner I could hear the chanting of some unintelligible hymns from a distance. “These are the church goers singing. They get together on Wednesday evening and Sunday for church services,” Thomas explained to me. “My late uncle married a German lady who invented our Chin writing, using alphabets. For that, she received a doctorate. Now my auntie still lives in Yangon though she is over 80 years of age,” Thomas added. I got her address and told Thomas that Dr. How Man would certainly look up Dr. Hard Man, a.k.a. Daw Helga So in Burmese, when I next visit Yangon.

Kanpetlet is a small Chin community high up near the mountain ridge, part of almost half a million Chin people in the entire country. Many families, like Thomas’ parents, moved here only recently. For Thomas, he came when he was four years old, hiking with his parents for three days from the former village to the south. They moved such that their children could receive better education. In most villages, there are only primary schools. In order to attend secondary school, many Chin families moved here within the last ten to twenty years.

Shwe Htain’s family moved here seven years ago for the same reason. From their previous home, they could buy cotton from India, dye it to their colors of choice, and weave the very lovely Chin blankets. Today, they can no longer make the same, and Shwe Htain said she hadn’t even seen a single cotton seed since arriving in Kanpatlet, high up in the mountain. Her living room cabinet was filled with stacks of colorful blankets, nicely folded, that she brought from her old home. There were also two stacks of white ones with red stripe designs.

I asked how much for a blanket, each measuring roughly eight feet by six feet. Shwe Htrain said 40,000 Kyats, or the equivalent of $30USD. I quickly picked out six blankets of various colors and offered to pay her. Suddenly the prices went up 50% to 60,000 Kyats. I thought she was most greedy and speculating on prices.

After rounds of negotiation, it turned out that she really did not want to part with her blankets at all, as they could no longer make them. They are considered heirlooms, and it is a demonstration of wealth in the family to have as many blankets as possible, and in
full sight. Money cannot be shown, but livestock and blankets are the measure of wealth in Chin families. As her stacks must have over forty blankets in total, I patiently negotiated and begged, and finally left with half a dozen blankets at 45,000 Kyats each, an important collection for CERS. Before we parted, I even acquired a knife sheath woven from cane, as well as an old hornbill head.

Thomas told me that it was customary in the past that if someone killed a pig to share with the community, he would be given five blankets by different families. If a cow was slaughtered, 15 blankets would be received as honor. But today such sharing and traditional reciprocation of generosity has all been lost.

We stayed at a newly opened mountain lodge with six cottages which was set up as a community social enterprise of Sorlong Village. It turned out we were the very first customers of the lodge and were given VIP treatment. Thomas is both the manager and the guide. I asked Thomas whether, in all his years of guiding, he had seen any Chinese visitor to the Chin region. He put up one finger, and then lowered his finger to point at me. In the evening the nearby villagers treated us to music by a traditional orchestra and dancing around a very warm bonfire.

On the second day, Thomas took us into the village to visit an old lady, Daw Bwe Htang, 70 years old with full face tattoo. She was sitting on a stool and smoking a gigantic water pipe. It had brass rings all around the long spout arriving at a gourd at the end. The bubbling noise of water sounded with her every puff. Next she brought out a long bamboo flute. Without saying a word, she put the flute to her nose and began playing. I had heard nose flutes played by the Hainan Li people over 30 years ago, but this flute was much louder, due perhaps to the effort this 70-years-old used blowing into it. After a moment, she stood up and started a small circular dance without ever stopping the music.

A few minutes later, after two songs, Bwe Htang sat down on her stool and took up a bamboo Jew’s Harp hanging around her neck and started playing. The rhythm was very charming. Next, she changed to another Jew’s Harp with a slightly different tone and continued. Thomas said such music had largely disappeared and in their area this lady was the only performer remaining. It would naturally die with her passing.

It brought to mind once again that such unique culture must be valued and recorded, as soon as possible. In my mind, I knew our filmmaker would soon be here to document this treasure lady. It also crossed my mind that the preservation and saving of these indigenous cultures should be the concern of a country seeking its own identity and integrity. How difficult would it be to pay for a couple young Chin ladies to learn from Daw Bwe Htang? In countries like France and Japan, cultural preservation and persons with such talent would be put on a pedestal, revered and valued as a living national treasure. Daw Bwe Htang’s rendition could have graced any stage at the most prestigious performing halls of the world.

As a parting present, the old lady chose the better of her two Jew’s Harps and presented it to us as a souvenir. I could not thank her enough, but promised in my heart that we would soon return to record her art and her story. Her song on the Harp was inspired by the Hornbill, the State Bird of Chin State. I was told that it imitated the flapping sound of the huge bird, which in life can be heard from a great distance, some say up to one kilometer!

But like Daw Bwe Htang’s passing songs, the Hornbills that the Chin people hold as symbol of their tribe are becoming more and more scarce. Thomas said that they haven’t seen any in their region for over ten years now. They’ve simply been hunted out. In a nearby café, a huge painted Hornbill on a bamboo screen stood to eulogize the passing of a stately bird.

Back at the community lodge, I went to sleep with mixed thoughts about the beauty of the Chin and their eclipsing culture. In the middle of the night, I was awakened by a rooster’s call, soon followed by a chorus of answering calls from all around the distant villages. I looked at my watch and it was barely past 2am. Their calls soon died after a couple minutes and I gradually fell back to sleep. After all, the roosters had called prematurely, as the Year of the Chicken was still two weeks away.

The sun would soon rise. Perhaps the Chin also will rise again, and their young generation will take up from where Daw Bwe Htang left off. Hopefully it is not just another dream!
have flown a lot on Airbus. As for AirTruck, only twice – the first time was four years ago and now again. It is something I wasn’t quite looking forward to, except the destination where this truck is taking me, to the once-a-year Naga Festival along the Myanmar border with India. These AirTrucks are more cool and definitely more bouncy than Air Jordans, the Nike shoes bearing Michael Jordan’s name. It is called AirTruck because the passengers sit on top, enjoying the cool air from above. And in this case in the winter of the Naga hills, it’s cold air. As for bouncy, it is an understatement for lack of a better word.

Covering myself with a hat, neck cloth and face-veil to shield the sun and the dust, I resembled some kind of an insurgent or terrorist. Insurgents there are indeed in these hills, extending into the at-times turbulent territories of Nagaland on the Indian side of the border. On the Myanmar side however, things have settled down quite a bit. The many military sentries four years ago are no longer in sight, or at least not as blatantly visible as before.

My small CERS team of four is guests of my long-time friend U Ohn Maung who became Minister of Hotels & Tourism last year. Otherwise we would have to pay a rather exorbitant price to the one travel agency which, as the only tour operator, monopolizes this annual event. In return, we will produce a trailer film for the ministry to promote this colorful festival of the Naga hill tribe, until quite recently best known for their head hunting practice.

The five-hour ride, much of which on low-gear four-wheel drive, negotiated up and down many slopes with extreme gradient. Unlike four years ago when the entire route was dirt and mud, this year the most difficult parts have been “paved”, allowing for better traction. Even the temporary “hostel” where we stayed above a restaurant overlooking the biggest crossroad of Lahe town, has been upgraded. Rather than sleeping on the floor with a straw mat, there are beds now, though squeaky - they came borrowed from some homes. On the wall hung a complimentary calendar with full-color photos from 2014, printed by the People’s Republic of Nagaland. Full-color photos depict the army forces and leaders of independence movement of the Naga on the Indian side of the border.

With the new civilian government in place, army presence was kept to a minimum, whereas police force must have been expanded. The once-prevalent automatic machine guns carried by soldiers can hardly be seen. Perhaps Myanmar has really turned a corner. On January 13, Naga tribes began to arrive, village by village. We took the day to visit three nearby villages. Nearby easily means an hour or so of tough-terrain driving.

Things remained much the same as four years ago and these villages still look primitive and dilapidated. Modern changes to Myanmar cities like Yangon and Mandalay are not reflected here at all, perhaps with the exception of young men with mobile phones. There are obviously no mobile services reaching far out to such locales. But that does not stop young folks from using the device as a camera to share photos and music of choice.

All that backwardness however may be about to change, with the arrival by Army helicopter of two loads of advance party to the festival ground. This was followed by a white helicopter with the Myanmar tri-color flag on it. The President of Myanmar was making a special appearance at the festival. He stayed for two full days throughout the festival, including meetings with local leaders. To come this far despite his busy schedule is a major commitment of time, perhaps reflecting on the importance he would accord this distant land with only 120,000 or so Naga people.

Over an official lunch during the height of the festival, we had the chance to meet and chat briefly. He was surprised that I was instrumental in reintroducing the Burmese Cats to Myanmar. Just two months ago, he visited our Burmese Cat Sanctuary at Inle Lake. He told
minutes or so apart. Both of them had canvas shoes on, yet losing to the Champion who ran on flip-flops. Each winner was given a tube of Colgate toothpaste, and the Champion had a small cash prize of 10,000 Kyats, equivalent to about US Eight Dollar. While the organizer claimed that 59 runners participated, we saw few passing the finish line. Perhaps some may simply ran home.

As in previous year, the official announcement by the emcee was done strictly in Burmese language followed by brief English translation. Few if any of the Naga tribes attending would understand even Burmese. Only sign of support and integration was the President wearing a Naga hat and vest. It would be more proper if in future Naga language could also be used for the event.

Furthermore, the pop music by a live band on stage obliterated the traditional wild chants of the Naga warriors. No wonder only two groups cared to play on their traditional long drum, relegated to an obscure corner of the fair ground. In the past, almost all groups spent time in unison beating of the drum, something unique to Naga culture and related to battle calls and return of a triumphant head-hunting expedition. Such an eclipse of the Naga culture was disheartening. It seems strange to me that preserving pseudo-Burmese architecture with colonial overtone got so much attention in Yangon whereas the disappearing of living indigenous culture receive little notice or support.

Several Myanmar television channels were on hand to record the festival, more so focusing on the President’s every movement. Not only were they filming on the ground, there were at least four drones at different times above us. This turned out to be a major distraction throughout the ceremonies and performances, with the Naga heads all turning to the sky.

In between all the performances and festivities, we managed to collect a small number of Naga artefacts. Among them is a warrior hat with boar tusks and a Hornbill feather, a Naga sword, a bamboo liquor container with stylized motif of a person with two spears, various hand-woven textiles in the form of blankets or plaited cloth, and necklaces with images and animal skulls. Some pieces were acquired after long rounds of negotiation and persuasion. But the most prized piece is a hand-woven basket decorated with the head of a Wreathed Hornbill. The entire collection would soon be put on display on the upper deck of the HM Explorer, our research vessel, complementing a special library of books on Myanmar.

As the festival came to a close, the AirTruck horn was blowing, urging us to again ride back to Khamti town by the Chindwin River, from where we would fly back to Mandalay. My body was aching a bit from the hike to villages as well as from the hard bed I slept on. I had not had a bath for only four days and my beard was growing thicker. I pushed myself out of bed at 4:30 as the truck was to leave at 5am in darkness. But my butt was dragging. No doubt its memory was still fresh with apprehension from the bouncy ride of just four days ago.
In my birthday they threw a big parade. I don’t know how the remote island community of Cagayancillo knew that I would be there on my birthday, 200 km off the coast of Palawan, but I appreciated the celebration none-the-less.

Actually, it was a celebration for International Children’s Month. The community marked the starting day with parades and competitions. A complete marching band with drum majorettes, drums, fifes and glockenspiels, all in bright satin uniforms led off, followed by rows of teenagers wearing identical brightly colored T-shirts and youngsters ranging in age down to kids of pre-school age with their parents in matching tees. The crowd lined the narrow streets of the capital. On a signal, the parade began a rapid march around the town to a rousing tune from the band. It was a hot, sunny day, but the festive occasion enjoyed by all.

It seemed like an important even for the community. This tiny town in the Sulu Sea seemed surprisingly self-sufficient. It had to be. The church, school and clinic were all within easy walking distance of the port, but from there, it was up to 20 hours by boat to the capital of the province in Puerto Princesa. There did not seem to be a cinema or a karaoke bar, but there seemed to be plenty of recreational opportunities. The outlying reefs provided excellent fishing, and the lively parade seemed to bring out the entire community to enjoy the fun, and some lucky youngsters got ice cream and chips.

After the parade, we drop by the homes of Jocelyn’s aunties, her father’s sisters. Her father left with Jocelyn and her mother when Jocelyn was only six years old and has not had a chance to visit since. The old people hold hands and laugh together, and there are some tears. Family ties are very tight here, and the need to go out to find work takes a toll on people emotionally.

Of course, it is easy for me to be nostalgic for a simple life in a remote community – I would be back in Hong Kong within a week. But I am not surprised when a member of the village council tells us that she had given up her life in Manila, where she owned a house, to come back to live in Cagayancillo. It started me pondering again a question that has been bothering me since long before the U.S. primary and election turned it into an existential crisis. It is the same question that has nagged me in Luang Namtha in northern Laos, where eager Chinese business people, their noses to the grindstone seven days a week, are out-competing and displacing local businesses. It is understandable. Those local businesses are often closed with no notice because the owner is helping a family member, or attending yet another wedding party, a temple festival, a football game, boat racing, or just a party for no reason at all – just for the purpose of enjoying life.

But the question I can’t stop asking myself is what is it that they should all be striving for? Of course economic growth can lift people out of poverty and desperation, as it has in China during the last three decades. Economic growth depends on increases in productivity, and parties and parades are not very productive. In fact, economists know that there are limits to the ability of many human endeavors to contribute to economic growth. It is not just type-setters, color separators, and assembly line workers that can no longer contribute; educators, musicians, writers – none of them can really contribute much to increasing productivity and growth, even if they are as productive as Mozart or Howman Wong.

As global economic activity continues on its exponential expansion, it seems fewer and fewer of the benefits are trickling down to these professions. And it has not only become more and more difficult for the “bottom billion” to climb up onto the ladder to get out of poverty. It seems more and more people, even in developed countries, are falling off the ladder altogether.

If economic growth is not helping to lift people out of poverty or...
providing a basis for the growth of knowledge and cultural achievement, what then is the goal? Is it to build a platform to launch Elon Musk and a few of his wealthiest investors off to Mars to escape a planet ravaged by extraction and roasted by climate change? Actually, it will not be Elon Musk, and in fact, it is likely that it will not even be humans that colonize Mars. Years ago, when I worked at the California Institute of Technology, my roommate was an engineer at the Jet Propulsion Lab in Pasadena. He explained to me that JPL robots could do everything that NASA’s astronauts could do, and at much less cost. Sending astronauts to do a machine’s job was just human sentimentality.

I try to look at the bright side. Artificial intelligence means that soon machines will be making most of the important decisions, unclouded by psychological biases created by evolution in the Paleolithic. They can decide based on the evidence, they don’t need R&R, they don’t form unions and they don’t read fake news. Machines can increase productivity and spur global growth infinitely. Machines are the future!

I am sure machines will do a much better job at running things than humans do now, but I cannot help but wonder. After the machines take over, will they have any sentimentality about us? Will they save a place for humanity the way we are urged to save a place for wildlife? Will they treat us better than we have treated our non-human primate relatives?

Perhaps some idyllic spot like Cagayancillo will be set aside, where our AI descendants can visit and learn about the quaint habits of their “ancestors.” Perhaps they will come for the annual parade on my birthday.

We spent the night sleeping in the Hundred Caves visitor’s center, where we met our friends who were running the new adventure caving operation that CERS had supported with helmets, headlamps and training by our CERS Caving Team. Although we had brought enough tinned and dried food for an army, expecting a much larger group, the team arranged a chicken adobo dinner for us. Perhaps we were eating the loser from the cockfight that afternoon; the winner lived to fight another day.

We also met the captain and crew for our trip, three Batak men from the village of Yayasa. The Batak people have endured a certain amount of fame since the 1980’s, when an anthropologist studying the eco-economy of hunter-gatherers declared them to be a group that arrived in Palawan 50,000 years ago, but who were now on a path to extinction. The Batak people did not go extinct, or at least their language and culture are still alive, despite assaults from NGOs, tourists and missionaries, no doubt all well-meaning. There are still about 500 people who recognize themselves as Batak and speak the Batak language, and the village of Yayasa is one of the largest. The Batak have a reputation for avoiding other groups, moving their villages whenever outsiders approach. Traditionally known as hunters, today, the Batak make a living chiefly from collecting non-timber forest products such as rattan and alma siga, an aromatic tree resin that is known as copal.

At 5:00 AM in the dark, we packed up and set off on a rickety trishaw. It soon left the main road onto a bumpy dirt and stone jeep track. I clung to the frame every time the driver gunned the motor to climb another slope. Within a half hour we reached a small stream – the three-wheeled contraption would go no further. Crossing on foot, it was only a moment to the main river and the bamboo rafts. There were two of them, each about 1.5 by 10 meters. We all agreed to...
Poling through the forest. The boatmen kept their feet on the narrow raft sealed tight. But somehow, the lashing held, a crash of heart-sinking bamboo against rock. Current to push us down off the cliff, but the bow and got the boat in alignment for the raft up against a waiting cliff below at elbow. The same species that we had seen nesting in that they were probably Edible Nest Swiftlets, swiftlets foraging over the river and realized on the left bank. I saw small square-tailed monkeys in habitat that had so many people. We soon passed a banana plantation on the right. Suddenly, a flock of cattle egrets attending. We floated through a large patch of logged over forest on both banks. We passed a banka moored where men were skidding logs down out of the forest and to the river and Adi echoed “Monkey!” Up ahead, a large group of cattle egrets were foraging on the bank and a rare Stork-billed Kingfisher scolded us and flew off. It was only then that we realized that we had forgotten some of the Batak heritage. It seems to me, considering about creating a kind of human-plantation on the right bank while one of their mother’s was doing laundry. This was familiar territory, as I had been working next to each other. The bamboo raft was almost at an end. The phone charger had been working and the cell phone signal. Luckily, a local boat, one of the small modern world, our captain had come equipped with a cell phone charger. There had been working and the cell phone signal. Luckily, a local boat, one of the small...
The stars are sparkling, but my nearby mangrove tree, rising to three story height, is also flickering with lights. I wonder — has Christmas come early?

I had gone to bed at 8 pm soon after it got dark, and now I am awake at 1 am. Momentarily a firefly flies across the floating dock where I had slept and joins the other flickering lights. The fireflies must be partying and dancing through the night. Females are known to sit and wait with their tail-lights on, attracting a male to rendezvous and mate.

The chorus of the forest has come alive — live symphony staged by all the insects of the night. They may be nameless to us, but are celebrity star performers of the animal world. Even the fish jump into action, flipping in the air and splashing back into the water. Without seeing them in darkness, I can still imagine each joyous summersault.

It must be low tide. The tiny fiddler crab, as well as huge mud crab, which at times grow to three kilos, are out in droves. Earlier yesterday, I saw two types of crabs coming out of their sand holes, just steps away from our floating dock tied to the shore. One type is bright orange red, with eye-like markings on its shell, behind two real eyes sticking high up like two antennas. The other crab sported yellowish white claws, with the tiny claw frequently fiddling and cleaning the larger one, like a bow playing a violin, thus the name Fiddler Crab.

Just yesterday, our team saw several crocodiles along the shore. So it seems safe to say that they too must be busy at night, feasting themselves or simply playing when we humans are less intrusive.

“Awoo,” then silence for maybe ten second, then “Awoo,” once again. This howling came occasionally throughout the night. At times it felt like it was just ten meters away, and other times it went off gradually into a distance of hundreds of meters, yet still distinctly audible. Jocelyn said these are a special kind of being, very scary, like aliens. Some say it has a third eye. They are supposed to cast spells on people and kill. On my first night hearing such sounds, I tried to imitate and answer. Jocelyn stopped me quickly, warning that it may bring bad luck. She seemed obviously and seriously concerned.

At the rate the sound traveled, I thought it must be some kind of a nocturnal bird, moving from tree to tree. Later this was confirmed by Roy who has roamed this jungle forest. He too said it is a bird. A bird of sorts perhaps, but Jocelyn still insisted that this bird or animal carries ill spirit. Imagination is often, quite boundless.

Roy knows these forests like the back of his hands. He offered to clear and clean the wetland which is part of the eight hectares that we have acquired to set up a base here in Palawan. It was he who

EIGHT HECTARES OF PLENTIFUL NOTHING
by Wong How Man
Maoyon River, Palawan
said our land hosts a group of monkeys. Certainly there are some Monitor lizards, Bayawak as the locals call them, the large reptile whose calling sound is now familiar to me, despite being a novice of a naturalist. Egrets are plentiful, waiting for their catch by quietly strolling up and down the river banks. A giant kingfisher, a regular visitor or perhaps a resident here, perched on the tall mangrove tree waiting for its next prey, be it a dragonfly or a fish.

Earlier yesterday, Roy showed me first a trap he had set up to catch crocodile, then led me inside the dense forest to a huge wild bee hive covered with bees on the outside. He offered to collect the honey for me in the morning. When it is cool the bees are less active and more or less harmless. He said the bees won’t like his sweaty, day-time smell, with sweat, so he should come back clean in the morning.

Our eight hectares fronts a very pristine river, Maoyon River, which literally cuts the long island of Palawan into two halves, from west to east. By setting ourselves up strategically here, we can study the river and freshwater life all the way up to some limestone hills, at the foothills of the World Heritage Underground River. Our caving team can then explore caves of the region while our biologists focus on other wildlife and ecological issues. Our land is two bends from the estuary and perhaps less than half a kilometer from the vast ocean of Honda Bay. Here is where salt water merges with freshwater, thus providing a habitat for both types of life forms. From here, our HM Explorer II boat can sail the blue ocean, studying marine life, coral reefs, bird nesting atoll, as well as human life on the many islands.

Our land here and its peacefulness give me a moment to think and reflect. So what is eight hectares? For those of us in Hong Kong who are more concerned and familiar with only square footage, it is 800,000 square feet, or 1,000 apartments of 800 square foot each! The world is all relative, and very much about relevancy. In our crowded city, square footage would be of utmost importance to a person’s life.

But here in Palawan, acres or hectares are the denominations of choice. Going further, for example at the Arjin Mountain Nature Reserve in Xinjiang where I was formerly Chief Advisor, we calculate by an even larger metric, in square kilometers. The reserve is 45,000 square kilometers in area, almost 10,000 square kilometers larger than Taiwan, yet with only a dozen or so families living within it.

When I used to work with NASA Space Shuttle images, the spectacular high view offered totally different reference points of a country, a continent, and even our globe. Thus we can have a more elevated perspective of our world, and at times interpret our own philosophy of life.

This was long before Google Earth or GPS became a household word. Unfortunately for some of us, our viewpoint will forever continue to be minuscule, microscopic and self-centered. No doubt, the Chinese classical idiom, “A Frog looking at the sky from the bottom of a well”, can be a valid reflection of how small minded some of us city dwellers have become. We don’t look down on our earth, not even with a drone. Instead, we look down on others, including intruding into their privacy, dramatizing and sensationalizing situations to arouse public sentiments and create relevancy.

For now we at CERS are pleased to have acquired eight hectares of emptiness. To some it may seem nothing of value. But I woke up in the night to feel that this is a most precious eight hectares of nothingness. We now have a chance to add value to it, hopefully with sensitivity. Research, conservation and education values are what CERS can bring to this new site in the foreseeable future.

Some people may mix up priceless and worthless. Instead, for some of us, priceless means everything! Borrowing from Zen, emptiness is wholeness.
Captain Moon Chin is chewing a moon cake and enjoying the full moon in his San Francisco home; certainly it is something romantic to do. This 103 year old Hump pilot cannot tell how many more full-moons he can see. Knowing his clock to take off from this Earth is ticking. Captain Moon is well prepared to count down the departure time. But until the gate closes, he cherishes his wonderful experiences and adventurous life, everyday, with a big smile.

After premiere of the CERS film about Hump pilots at the CNAC annual reunion, I decided to live with the captain for another week. There must be many more stories to be told that should not be missed. Keeping my camera by my side, I stood by in his living room all day for a week, hoping to capture on film as much verbal history as possible.

The Captain is surely one of the most energetic men of his age. “X, make sure you take the initiative to stop him from talking, otherwise he will go on and on even with his eyes closed. He never likes to quit and upset people!” Patty, a niece of the Captain advised me on my arrival. The Captain speaks slowly with a soft tone but his facial expressions and hand gesture reflexes are fast and agile. “NO” is his usual remark to start a sentence, not because what others have said is wrong but to establish for himself a different viewpoint.

“I am 103 years old, do you think you know more than me! ” This is how he confidently asserts his super memory capacity, thus making others speechless. True, Billy McDonald II is the son of another famous pilot William Mac who was wingman of General Chennault in 1934 and later flew for CNAC. Billy has asked Captain Moon for historical information while researching his new book, “The Shadow Tiger.” Moon’s accuracy on each account is correct up to the time and date, perfectly coinciding with official records.

Despite long years, memory lapses do not seem to happen in Moon’s brain.

I found it fascinating to live with Captain Moon, not just because of his war-time stories, but also his discipline and determination. Recent implant of a pace-maker has prohibited him from his daily glass of beer and 10 minutes of morning exercise on a NordicTrack. However, he insists on striding 50 steps from his bedroom to the dining table with a walker. He habitually writes down his blood pressure and pulse rate in a log every twenty minutes.

A nurse comes to visit him a few times per week. “You have gained a few pounds in the last few days, please watch you diet!” The nurse from Sutter Health Hospital scolds. “No! The electronic weight is not working properly!” Moon makes a joke about this but nods his head to signal his obedience. It turns out the main reason is an increase in body fluid due to his lack of urination. The doctor on the phone suggests he take diuretic pills to remove liquid from his body and eat less salt to reduce sodium levels.

The second reason he has gained weight is that he dresses up properly even at home with or without guests visiting. When standing on the scale, he doesn’t want to remove the bunch of keys and the i-Phone 6+ that have been strapped to his waist belt everyday for many years, and his i-Watch, his wallet and an old address phone book in his pocket, not to mention a jade ornament necklace with the main door key attached. “No! When we flew a C-46 over the Hump, the maximum cargo weight capacity is two tons and height 22,000 feet. We often overloaded the plane and fly lower, around 18,000 feet, it works too,” Captain Moon protested.

After every breakfast at half-past eight, he would excuse himself to his study to put on his compression socks, take some pills, then check his e-mail. I am amazed to see a centenarian maneuvering the mouse and keyboard so smoothly. These medical routines, as I observe, are not done through reminder from his Indonesian helper Aicinjap but often the other way round. Whenever he starts to walk, he checks his path ahead. He first tells Aicinjap to remove all obstacles, be it a chair far away, a lose wire or a folded carpet corner. It is his sharp eyes and mind that made him a good pilot after all. Everything is fully checked before take off.
Captain Moon enjoys his four o’clock coffee break after his afternoon nap. His favorite seat is in the living room by the window where he can see afar the busy traffic of the San Francisco Airport. He sits alone for hours. “You know, every afternoon I used to sit here with my wife to watch aircrafts come and go!” About 18 years ago, after his wife Elsie had a stroke, he extended his house so that his bedroom had a patio for Elsie to walk directly into the garden. It’s been 15 years since Elsie passed away, but the Captain’s habit never stop.

“Do you miss her?” I asked the Captain sentimentally. “Yes, sometimes. You know I have to borrow 500 dollars from a friend to marry her… Then we moved to Chungking from Shanghai… I fly the schedule flight between these two cities everyday back and forth for the next 18 months… I earned some money but not time spending with her…!” Captain sighed. From his words, I feel strongly his responsibility and the will to survive during wartime. There is a saying from other Hump pilots describing that period “when sex was safe and flying was dangerous”. But for Captain Moon, he is a family man no matter what. Gilbert King, Moon’s two captains, friends of over 70 years, sit side by side in the living room. One would expect them to chat nonstop as others would if reunited with long separated classmates. There is always too little time for too many topics. However, this doesn’t apply to the two captains. Perhaps they have said it all before or are simply too tired to talk. The two centenarians seem to enjoy their companionship through their hearts. I try hard to disperse the dead air by throwing out questions related to both of them but in vain. Only Captain Moon answers me briefly, and at one point, Captain Jack falls asleep on the sofa. I soon realize the proper manner is to leave them alone. Speech is silver. Silence is golden.

A week of time flies by and many stories are told. Captain Moon resumes his daily routine as I say goodbye to him. His house is a living museum with more than 30 airplane models of various types. I can imagine how he plays the role of air traffic controller and radio-operator in the living room, using aviation jargons. This is the man who successfully explored a new Hump route by daringly flying over the Western Himalayas at night from China to India during the War and the pilot who flew numerous chartered flights for the Chinese OSS (the Nationalist Army equivalent of the CIA) to unknown territories during civil war in China. He is the entrepreneur who founded Foshing Airlines in Taiwan during the Cold War and the breadwinner of the whole family at all times. There are many more achievements under his belt, but I see nothing could beat his spirits to live on. I certainly feel sorry that I am late by a hundred years to be one of his co-pilots, his friends, his partners or his family. May the force be with him.
CERS 30th Anniversary Dinner

CERS celebrated its 30th anniversary at the Football Club with over 400 friends and supporters.

President Htin Kyaw of Myanmar met with HM and CERS colleagues during the Naga Festival in upper Myanmar.

Richard Friedman, CERS supporter, and friends visited CERS in HK.

Professor Wang Binghua, long-time CERS friend and retired Director of Xinjiang Archaeological Institute, visited us in HK.

Several groups of friends visited CERS’s Myanmar project sites, including sailing on the HM Explorer, the Burmese Cat Sanctuary, Aquarium of Inle Lake fish, and Exhibit House.

CERS provided several grants in support of the following: jointly with Virginia Yee, Jeffrey and Cheryl, and Ankana Liu provided support to the Tashigomang Trust Fund to preserve a historical tradition of Bhutan. The Tibet Heritage Fund for urgent restoration work to two houses in Ladakh, Flora and Fauna International (FFI) for research and conservation of Horseshoe Crab in Guangxi, Prof Lau Pok-chi for work on history of Chinese in Cuba.

CERS new base in Palawan has completed its first stage construction with accommodations and logistic support for our boats.

From top left to right:


News

CERS in the Media and Lectures

- A trailer film is produced on Tashigomang, a disappearing religious tradition of Bhutan.
- A short film on the Naga Festival is being produced as a contribution to the Ministry of Tourism of Myanmar.
- Three new books are launched in Taipei, including “Classic of Mountains and Seas” authored by Liu Yun to mark CERS’s 30 years, and “Nature My Fate” and “Culture My Destiny”, both authored by HM.
- Dr Bill Bleisch gave a lecture to the Xishuangbanna Tropical Botanical Garden of Academia Sinica, on the topic of Community-based ecotourism, trans-border market hunting and wildlife presence in Nam Ha region of Laos, a CERS project area.
- Two half hour programs were produced by DaAi TV of Taiwan and aired internationally, one on HM’s forty years of expeditions, and the other a joint interview with author Liu Yun’s book marking CERS’s 30 years.

Clockwise from top:

- CERS team at 30th anniversary dinner. HM meeting President Htin Kyaw and wife at Naga Festival in Myanmar.
- CERS guests visiting Myanmar. Professor Wang Binghua with HM in Hong Kong.
- Richard Friedman, CERS supporter visiting Hong Kong. Myanmar President meeting CERS staff.
Karl von Habsburg flew in from Austria to deliver a lecture on “Cultural Preservation at War Zone” during the CERS’s 30th Anniversary Dinner.

David Mong, CERS Director and the Shun Hing Group donated close-circuit security devices and installation at several CERS premises in Hong Kong.

Billy Yung, CERS director, donated of new van for our Hong Kong use.

Margot and Thomas Pritzker Foundation made another donation to CERS.

The Stephen and Margaret Gill Family Foundation made another donation to CERS.

We thank Nury Vittachi for serving as Master of Ceremonies for our 30th Anniversary Dinner with Angelina Kwan as co-emcee, Elaine Kwok for acting as auctioneer, and the following companies and individuals for providing special gifts for the evening: William E. Connor & Associates, Cultures by Toni P Ltd, Esquel Group, Jebsen & Co., Omega, Shokay, Toppan Vite Limited, Yen Sheng Factory Limited, and Billy Yung. We also thank all the individuals who helped or volunteered during the evening.

Barry Nalebuff made a contribution to CERS.

Scott Chiu of HCG supported CERS construction projects in Palawan with donated equipment.

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.