CLOCKWISE FROM TOP:
Prayer flags in a high pass with sacred Mount Kailash in the distance.
Kirgiz man with his hunting-eagle at Xinjiang's border in 1984.
Super typhoon Mangkhut hit CERS Tai Tam premises.

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It seems strange that, as someone who was trained as a journalist and who worked as a journalist for some years, I have begun to question our relationship to the media. I prefer to think I am at a mature age now, as I have started to view the role the media plays differently.

Recently, I gave a hard look at some of our work, in particular the film, photograph and archival material we have collected painstakingly for over four decades. Suddenly, it dawned on me that these archival materials are not valuable because we could use them to influence others through the mechanism of the media. Yes, there are times we have used these source materials under certain context to press an agenda we wanted to address, be it in promoting CERS’s exploration, conservation, or education work. But there is more to it.

If we use film and photography for this generation, indeed it becomes part of media. More and more, however, I look at these materials we have collected as a “record” instead; records of our past, be it our individual or common past - our heritage, our history. By that definition, these records would not only be a benefit for our generation, but for generations to come.

In fact, at the rate things are disappearing, be it within the natural or cultural realm, we need to fast-track documentation of such “records,” rather than stop to process these materials for current consumption, or even for advocating certain issues we believe in today. That is, of course, unless we are dealing with a crisis that requires immediate intervention. I can readily cite some examples for which CERS has felt an urgency to bring our work to the forefront of media attention.

It is with such perspective that now I feel the mission of CERS, with limited resources, must prioritize documentation of our eclipsing present, while giving fair attention to dissemination in special circumstances. In this issue, Xavier Lee, CERS filmmaker, explains his work regarding the several functions of recording, managing the archive, and producing documentaries for dissemination under such special circumstances. Another piece by Astor Wong, CERS staff anthropologist, describes the difficulties in organizing and preserving our very special-interest library.

The phrase that “species can disappear before they were discovered” rings truer today even more than in the past. This “record”, or recording work, should certainly not be done to create a legacy to feed a sense of vanity, but from a sense of responsibility, not just to this generation, but to future generations. Despite that we are in a fast-paced, information-filled internet age, perhaps someone in the future will thank us for keeping a record of our heritage. I certainly thank those who have done it before me.

I hope our friends and supporters, when reading our writings and viewing our films and photographs, will concur.

Many of our friends are good in creating wealth. They support CERS so we can deliver value, tangible and intangible value, for this generation as well as for future generations.
Now we have descended to a more “comfortable” 4794 meters to set our camp. It is barely seven hours since I reached the source of the Brahmaputra, a source long established by locals as a sacred glacier fed river and for a long time endorsed by the Chinese government, as well as foreign geographers, as the official source. This is the sixth major source of an Asian River I have reached.

But what is considered official, traditional, even religious, has only measured significance for an explorer. It seems strange that as a younger person some years ago, being accurate, scientific and definitive seemed to count a lot to me in my pursuit of excellence. Now at a more senior age, on the margin of finishing my seventh decade, things begin to move into a blur. Exacting details have come to seem somewhat irrelevant.

Perhaps complementing my failing eyesight, not to mention my declining energy, I have become more abstract and philosophical, and also more traditional. I’ve been known for defining new sources over the last two decades. But this time, I made an exception and went against my own tradition and decided to endorse the tradition of the local Tibetans.

Recent remote sensing data published by experts from Beijing, as well as our own processing of current satellite images, have revealed a yet longer source nearby, at Angsi glacier. I have deliberately decided to lead my team to the traditional source, the Chemayungdung glacier. The two points are less than 30 kilometers apart as the crow flies, the traditional source in Zhongba county and the other in neighboring Burang County.

The debate about where the Brahmaputra river begins has baffled more than a generation of geographers and explorers, spanning over a century. There are multiple theories, based on exploration of the region, measurements of quantity of flow, or related as legends and hearsay.
from local Tibetan nomads. The Indian scholar Swami Pranavananda made an exhaustive research, both on the ground in the 1930s and from scrutinizing previous literature of other explorers who had pursued the same in the region.

Citing works by German explorer Julius Klaproth dispatched by the Qing court, and foreign explorers like Dutreuil de Rhins, D’Anville, Henry Strachey, Ekai Kawaguchi, Graham Sandberg, Nain Singh, C.H.D. Ryder and Cecil Rawling, all famous for their work in western Tibet, he wrote a long chapter in his book “Exploration in Tibet” to refute the assumption and conclusion by stellar famed explorer Sven Hedin, and maintained that the Brahmaputra source is at the Chemayungdung glacier. Angsi glacier, while also mentioned being massive as Chemayungdung, was considered secondary.

At noon today, we were above 5,300 meters looking across at the Chemayungdung glacier source of the same elevation that is still a few kilometers away across a deep ravine above a glacier lake and alpine marshes. On a straight line, where I stood is approximately 7.6 kilometer from the tongue of the glacier that feeds the 1.9 km long glacier lake, which in turn is the source lake of the Brahmaputra. Such measurements are made through a Vector map I use on a Galileo app in my iPad.

A stone tablet, roughly half a meter tall, was anchored to the ground, near some old, torn prayer flags and a few meters from where we parked our vehicles. On it is inscribed in Chinese, “Source of the Yaluzangbu,” meaning Brahmaputra. Here is where we set up our own length of prayer flags, released the sacred longda paper offerings, and took our group photo.
We literally drove to this source, easy compared to the previous five river sources that I have visited, to which we had to drive, ride horses or yaks, and hike before reaching our goal. This time around, there was a dirt road leading up to this point, finished last year, one year after a Chinese scientific expedition set foot here and established this point, looking down on the glacier lake, as the source of the Brahmaputra.

The feeder Chemayungdung glacier is approximately 7 km in length, and an entire range of high peaks behind form the Himalayan range separating Nepal from Tibet of China. This glacier is the longest and largest of three glaciers adjacent to each other, each feeding the lake below. Our original LatLong and Altitude measurement was done from space. Now we are finally on the ground with the Chemayungdung glacier source within a short distance.

Two weeks before, in a rush to leave from our Zhongdian Center for this expedition, we spent an entire day packing and making sure everything was in order for a month-long journey. Provisions, tents, medical kit, vehicle spare parts, precautions against altitude sickness in the form of oxygen tanks, air-concentrator machine, compression chamber - everything was finally in place. We even brought longda, or Wind Horse cards, paper slips inscribed with the form of a horse carrying special offerings to deities, set on its way when released to the wind. These were for dispersing at high mountain passes and at the source itself.

Long strings of the five-colored prayer flags were also put aside for attaching to special sacred sites, as we had done at other river sources we had attained. But by my own error, I neglected to bring our CERS flag for the all-important group picture at the river source! Thus for the first time our photo at the source has no display of the CERS emblem, another inadvertent adherence to my newly-gained philosophical outlook.

In the past, another tradition was to open a bottle of Moet Chardon to celebrate the occasion. This time however, it was omitted, not by design but by negligence. I had a metal hip flask that contained leftover Louis XIII brandy from my centenarian pilot friend Moon Chin, given to me when I visited him a few months ago in San Francisco. I took it out and toasted myself. Though no champagne, it cost around $4,000 US a bottle, multiple times that of Moet Chardon. The ease with which we arrived here took away some of the usual emotion and drama. The Louis XIII however, did take me higher, beyond the already high altitude.

The dirt road breaking off from the main road from Lhasa to Kailash is totally obscure. We were fortunate to have along 48-year-old Nanda, a local who is the party secretary of nearby Yuelai Village. He was dispatched by the local government to accompany us as our guide, having been to the source three times before. Without Nanda, we could never have identified the branch of the road, let alone followed the 65 Km track to the source. Before the road was completed last year, this distance would have translated into three days on horse back, each way.

There were a few camps of nomads scattered around, who had already moved their livestock, mainly sheep, goats and yak, up to a high camp. Now that we were into June, the summer season on the plateau had started. On the way out, we made sure to stop and interview the “first” family on the Brahmaputra. It was actually two tents and two families, living next to each other. They were conducting cooperative livestock herding, staying at this high camp for up to three months, planning to move down to their winter home near Puyang Township at the end.
of September.

Nanga Chomo, the lady of the first tent, greeted us and invited us into her tent. Soon goat and sheep droppings, from a dry pile, were added to the stove, and she went about boiling tea for these unexpected guests. In a matter of fifteen minutes, milk tea was served while we sat on the right side of the tent, a place reserved for visiting guests.

My camera was trained on the wonderful face of her daughter, barely three years old. Nanga, at thirty-three years old, also had a son at five years old. We were also eager to pick out a few pieces of the nomads’ utilitarian objects as memorabilia to grace our own yak and nomad camp exhibit back at our Zhongdian Center. As they needed everything they brought to camp, we ended up only purchasing a hundred dollar’s worth, or about two catties, of freshly sheared wool. At local market, the same price would pay for half a kilo of wool.

On this day, the goats were being sheared. They were separated from the sheep as goat’s cashmere command a much higher price than sheep’s wool. The men were busy rounding up their herd for this yearly routine. Each year their goats, over three hundred strong, could yield over 10,000 RMB worth of cashmere.

Someone would come by to collect the wool, which was destined to be made into the highest grade cashmere, given these were high-altitude goats valued for their finest quality wool. At Rmb100 per half kilo, the added value to finished product would produce multiple returns, perhaps ending at branded stores in fashion capitals of the world. I thought of having leading wool merchants like Loro Piana come here to source their raw materials from such an exotic location in the Himalayas. Imagine, a cashmere sweater knitted from goats grazing the scanty pasture of the Brahmaputra source at the dizzying altitude over 5000 meters. Can’t get more romantic than that for a product story.
It seems most appropriate that our next stop, within less than half a day’s distance, is Mount Kailash, the most sacred mountain for Tibetans and Hindus alike. Fresh from the source of the Brahmaputra, five members of our nine-person entourage decide to make the circumambulation (kora) pilgrimage. Miraculously, they manage to complete the circuit in just one long, long day, leaving before sunrise and returning by late evening. It seems a grand finale to complement reaching the Brahmaputra source - a double-crown achievement.

I had already hiked the 53-kilometer circuit kora during the auspicious Year of the Horse in 2002. On such a special year, one circuit equates to 13 circuits in a normal year, and likewise the merit gained is multiplied. So I opt to keep that record and instead spend a day to explore the border town of Burang near the frontier with Nepal and India. Though the Indus source is nearby to the north of Mount Kailash, it must be left to the future, as the Lord of Kailash would find me too greedy if I were to challenge two major river sources on one single trip.

Our road ahead into Ngari, Xinjiang and the Silk Road beyond is still long. But for the moment, I can lie back and contemplate a little. While the rest of Asia and coastal China are baking in the summer heat of 35°C to 40°C, we’ve been operating in snow, hail and high winds at sub-zero temperature during many nights of camping out in our effort to get here. Pictures of myself clad in thick down jackets and multi-layer clothes should give my friends on the receiving end, even those hiding in alpine resorts, a moment of chill.
When I first got on board CERS, one of the assignments given to me was to organize How Man’s library at Tai Tam and relocate everything to a new site in Shek O. I have faint memories from childhood of visiting How Man’s residence in Tai Tam along with my parents, remembering how I really appreciated the aesthetic of the place, adorned with various ethnic artifacts, and how the secluded location of the house – which could only be reached by speedboat – resembled the secret hideout for spies that I had seen in movies, a place to perform exciting undercover missions. Little did I know that one day I would have my own mission here as well and somehow the speedboat would become part of my weekly commute. It was the first time in years that I had revisited How Man’s home, and of course, there were some notable changes. To make a long story short, a series of unfortunate events have befallen the house, from involuntary remodeling to invasion of flood waters. Most recently, serious assault from typhoon Mangkhut rendered the lower floor of the front house library a ruins. In the face of the constant cycle of destruction and restoration, the CERS team strives to defend and protect How Man’s dwelling at Tai Tam, along with his treasured kunstkabinett.

Kunstkabinett, literally ‘cabinet of curiosities,’ first appeared in 16th century Europe and was the prototype of museums where rulers or aristocrats collected extraordinary objects from around the world and categorized them. Spanning diverse fields;
ethnography, archaeology, natural history and art; their existence was an endeavor to tell stories, and more importantly, construct particular discourses about the world. The Tai Tam library is essentially How Man’s personal kunstkabinett, only it isn’t a collection of exotic antiquities, but exceptional books instead. One is amazed setting foot in his private library premises, overwhelmed by the extensive collection: rare manuscripts handwritten by esteemed scholars on indigenous law, internal ethnology reports on the ethnic minorities in China assembled by the government at the early stage of reform and opening up, out-of-print books on western explorers’ voyages to the then unknown Far East and mysterious Tibet dated over a century ago, compilations of renowned explorers’ journals delineating the wonders of their odysseys, and How Man’s invaluable personal field notes dating back to the days when he was the first journalist of the National Geographic to explore the impervious land of China that at that time banned visitors from the west. It started from a cozy, private library built on personal interests, but with years of hoarding and research, it gradually evolved into a priceless collection with huge potential.

For ethnographers, anthropologists or cultural enthusiasts, the collection’s significance goes far beyond the vast knowledge it holds. After months of studying and reorganizing the library, I have concluded that its strength lies not only horizontally in terms of the huge volume of books and the wide-ranging subjects they cover, but more importantly, vertically in terms of the depth of history it enfolds. By cross-referencing ethnologic works from authors with distinct backgrounds and from different periods of time, one can gain insights into the development of discourses and ideology describing indigenous people and the ‘far east’, into changes in government policies and global politics, and more. How did research on ethnic minorities change in response to the government’s tightening control of the non-Han population? How did Western explorers perceive and present ‘Far Eastern’ culture to their audience? Was any kind of propaganda involved? To me, the progression of popular ideas and political statements revealed from the books is a really intriguing subject. While data and statistics may become outdated with time, the information that can be extracted from these manuscripts depends on how one analyzes the materials. The wealth of knowledge they offer is boundless for those who appreciate it and are willing to invest time to delve into it.

While being instrumental academically as a source of references for scholars, the front house library at Tai Tam is also deeply personal and sentimental. It acts as a theater of How Man’s fifty years of hard work, reflecting the immense passion and tireless efforts he devoted to his career; it is a microcosm.
of How Man’s world that manifests his worldview, thoughts and experiences. For one, the library revolves around the direction of CERS, filled with books specialized for different field sites and projects, which explains the huge volume of Tibetan wildlife books amongst the ethnology-based library. The library also reveals How Man’s aspiration for documenting and recording culture. Change is inevitable, and in an era of unprecedented technological advancement and globalization, the momentum of change has accelerated at an unparalleled rate that could not be found in the history of humanity; in the midst of change in livelihood, one finds also change, if not the complete loss, of culture. A lot of ethnic minority cultures recorded in books found at the Tai Tam library are now facing extinction, threatened with losing their customs to mainstream culture. Soon, tales and wonders of these indigenous populations will only be known to future generations by reading books and journals. This adds extra bearing and weight to the library collection.

Sadly, after two severe attacks by Mother Nature, the Tai Tam library is never going to be the same. Luckily, books were cleared out from the tide-level storage space after the last flood – though many were left in poor condition due to prolonged exposure to sea water. At least some of the categorized books had already been transferred to the newly created Shek O library before the latest super storm, so it wasn’t a complete
loss. But the book rescue is no easy task. The books are steeped in dust, debris, dead bugs, dried leaves - and the most unbearable of all - deadly molds. It’s as if a mini nuclear bomb is detonated every time you accidentally drop any of the molded books on the floor, creating a mushroom cloud of poisonous gas. Getting our hands dirty, quite literally, every visit to Tai Tam to catalogue and dispatch books has left me as filthy as a coal miner, with my clothes and hands covered with dirt and mold spots. However, when compared to the mental challenge of categorizing the books, such physical hardship seems minimal. At first I felt quite inadequate for the task for I am no librarian nor did I study bibliothecography; at times I feel lost in the sea of books pondering how to systematically categorize a private personal library into something that could make sense to outsiders. The issues involved are complicated and somewhat dull and I dare not bore my audience here. But with time and hard work, step by step matters starts to fall into place. I am quite happy that the Shek O library is now gradually taking shape.

The Tai Tam library has indeed come a long way, experiencing ups and downs, withstanding rough storms and waves, witnessing the impermanence of existence, while the CERS team, undeterred by such vicissitudes, has gone and will go the extra miles to preserve this precious book collection so that it can be of use to others and do great things by serving more people.
A documentary film is more than an infotainment. It lies between the category of hard and soft news. I would regard it as one form of record. Its content must be based on a true event and presented with journalistic integrity. However, in order to have it appeal to an audience, it would be better received if supplemented by some aromatic compounds such as aesthetic camera movement, fine-tuned colour saturation and intriguing background music. Such cosmetic would certainly enhance the story-telling even if its content is not typically compelling.

I have tried to avoid exaggerating the cause and effect or dramatising the incident to arouse emotion. However reluctantly, editing is executed in order to capture attention and keep the theme straight forward. Significant segments will be selected and decorated with purpose. Some with slow motion for a clearer viewing, soothing background music for bringing out the right mood and occasionally a narrator is there who acts like a tour guide monitoring us not to drift away from the focus point. These are the crucial ingredients taken for granted by me and many others, in fact all documentary film-makers who know pretty well that these elements did not exist in real life, especially while actually shooting the scene. It is a common and long-standing dilemma. How should a documentary film-maker portray a real person or depict an actual event truthfully whilst at the same time not making the audience feel bored?

For long, I have had a desire to utilize the CERS 35 years of old film archives to produce a single full length documentary film. I have thought of combining captured
scenes of excitement and boredom, sadness and happiness, knowledge and entertainment into a complete story. So ambitious that the film is like a song composed by all the musical instruments available on earth with all kind of tune in play. I cannot imagine how weird it would sound or how awkward the film would look. The reason for this unreachable goal is that, story is story, life is life. I could command a story but never a life.

On location filming such as interviewing with someone of interest, it could take hours of non-stop recording. Take the story of WWII CNAC pilot Captain Moon Chin for example, I had spent a whole week with him in his home in San Francisco where he talked about many of his wartime adventures. Due to the limitation of editing a documentary film, the rest of his interview has become archival footage despite being equally as interesting. Only a few of his most relevant dialogues that lasted for not more than a minute in total were selected to be shown. I could also see his loneliness and grief over losing his wife who passed away some 16 years ago. No way on film could I describe his hour-long deep silence looking out across the far-off airport runway sitting alone on the chair where his wife used to sit next to him every day after lunch. Although Moon replied to my question casually about the chair and his wife, it was nostalgic enough for me to make an affectionate scene out of it. However, for most of the hour, it was only him who knew what else was in his mind. Am I over-sentimental in a self-indulgent way to influence the audience?

Another incident that is worth mentioning is that Captain Jack Young who passed away earlier this year at 103, and was a friend of over 70 years to Captain Moon Chin.
They met for dinner at Moon’s home during the time of my stay in September 2016. The photo I took as they were shaking hands was sentimental, well at least to me, no one would have known or dared to say that they were together for the very last time. This segment could have been used to begin the documentary film to set the audience’s mood. If I did, is this a form of manipulation?

Take the complete traditional process of a sheep skin raft making along the Yellow River as another example. The basic process involved a kill, skin off, hang dried, blow up, tied down, polish and many more know-how that the film did not capture. Just for the buoy, the maker would need five minutes just to blow an emptied sheep skin bag before it was fully inflated. He usually needed thirteen buoys to float a raft. In other words, thirteen sheep were killed to give the raft buoyancy. One raft would take half a day to build, one sheep a year to mature. Well, the nomads would kill the sheep for food and fur for clothing anyway. I always appreciate the intelligence of local people and the ways they improve the quality of life with limited resources. Nothing is wasted for no reason. Given this fact on a nomadic life of today, I don’t think people have the patience to spend time to watch the whole process.

In a documentary film, we only see the process from beginning to end in a few minutes. It is this duration calculated and with controlled theme presentation approach that knowledge is partially provided through television or YouTube, and by many other forms of visual media. But bear in mind that it is the audience’s expectation that paves the way a documentary film is presented. I believe that it is a supply and demand relationship.
I have the privilege to play back the huge quantity of raw archival film footage in the editing computer. It would take me weeks and months just to complete watching it all. True, these footages seem a lot and revealing many things. But in fact, when it comes down to editing, a.k.a. the selection process, movement is trimmed, unnecessary camera point of view excluded, and content that is not a means to an end will certainly be cut out. Running time can be manipulated hence merely the selected information is used to serve a particular theme. A commercial feature film would make use of the unselected out-take footage as bloopers, a bonus track for fun watching. For a documentary film, it is inappropriate for the rest of material to be packaged and released in that way. So, I am constantly feeling indebted to the future generation that the complete set of knowledge should be shown.

There is so much that we have missed in the past, I believe, and many more to be lost in the present, and damn so little that we could know about the future. In the struggle of looking for the real deal, I realize the importance of a personal touch, a real life experience on the spot wherever you like because once you are out there connecting people with your own hands, no editing is needed.

“Yesterday is history, tomorrow is a mystery, today is a gift of God, which is why we call it the present.”
— Bil Keane, American cartoonist

ANTICLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT:
The bamboo raft lady of Myanmar.
Three of the many procedures in making a sheep skin raft.
Anne Marden of Hong Kong on history of Shek O Village.
Lt. Chan Bing Shin on his Flying Tiger days.
Captain Felix Smith on his secret mission with CAT.
YC Arangorin of Palawan explaining the caving business.
Captain Peter Goutier on his CNAC flying days.
You are fortunate, dealing with us People's Liberation Army,” the PLA officer said politely. “The Gong An are on their way and they may be more strict and harsh,” he added with a smile. But I fully understand what is behind that smile; it means business. Better settle now than later, before the police arrive. At least now we can have a graceful exit.

We have just travelled across much of Tibet and southern Xinjiang, going through over 80 police check points within one month, and certainly we would not want another engagement with the Gong An. Practically all check points in Tibet are staffed by Tibetan policeman and those in Xinjiang by Uighur, a great surprise for me. They are very professional and usually quite polite. However, each of these security check points may mean 15 minutes to an hour of delay to our trip, and this one at an international border may mean days, if they should turn suspicious about our presence.

Fortunately, all three soldiers now approaching us are from Yunnan, and six out of nine on our team are from that same province. To neutralize the situation, I mention to the officer that two members of our team are veterans of the PLA, having fought in the war between Vietnam and China in the early 1980s.

The tone behind the politeness of the officer is obviously a soft threat. He has two junior officers with him. Everyone is dressed immaculately, with dignified uniform, as if ready for a ceremonial parade. At an international border, proper looks and protocol must be the norm, to represent their country, though the capital may be thousands of kilometers away.
The young but distinctive looking officer is no doubt of higher rank, with a desert-colored camouflaged greatcoat. It is necessary, as day-time temperature can suddenly drop dramatically if a cloud should move in. At such elevations, we are susceptible to even summer snowstorm and sub-zero weather.

Indeed, the Army always carries more weight and muscle than the police, and not only in the weapons and military gear that they carry. Thus, they may feel no need to flex their muscles. How unlike some countries, which cannot stop displaying their strength outwardly even though everyone already knows they are strong.

“You must move out of here,” the officer insists. We are pleading to stay for the night. After all, the sun is setting and there may be only another hour of light, and our camp was set up a few hours ago. “This is unsettled territory, and the Bhutanese army sentry is just a bit further down the valley,” he adds. I take particular note of his term, “unsettled”, rather than “disputed”. Such measured language speaks a lot about the difference between rhetoric and politics.

“But, but… we have our border permits, and the other PLA soldiers I ran into this morning said it was ok to drive in on this road,” I protest. “Their jeep ran off the road and we towed it back up before I asked to come off the main road,” I explained. “Yes, you can come in for a look, but not to stay for the night,” the officer further emphasizes his request, now sounding more like an order.

“You see those tents of the nomads. They are both Bhutanese and Tibetans. They both use this valley as summer pasture. This area of the border has not been settled as belonging to Bhutan or China yet.” he points his finger at a few yak-hair tents spread out in the valley as he speaks. Valley perhaps is an exaggerated description. There are high snow mountains on both sides, and the narrow pasture is sandwiched in between with a stream running through the middle.

“By the way, please allow us to check through everyone’s mobile phones. We need to make sure nothing sensitive is recorded,” the officer adds, after I agree to pull camp and leave the area. There are trenches dug around the hill, though we saw no installation of artillery. Would writing about this incident be considered sensitive and revealing of a state secret, I wonder silently? Would discussing such matters create another political fiasco like what happened at the nearby border of Doklam last year? But I have more immediate issues to take care of.

Within a matter of twenty minutes, all our gear, five small tents and one big dining tent, are packed away and back in the cars. I want to get out before the police arrive, in case more complications develop. We might be escorted out of the mountains, or even detained. I have handled such situation many times, but I certainly know my limits.

While the officer in charge had asked each of us to hold up our ID card in front of our face for a photo for “memory,” he ultimately forwent checking our phones. Actually, my camera had recorded much of the nomads, especially the Bhutanese ones, in their camps. My innocent face must have done the trick.

We quickly wind back through all the switch-backs of the dirt road over which we had come, over a high pass of 4659 meters and back to the main road to Phari. It is barely ten kilometers away, though the mountain road has taken us some twenty kilometers into the valley. On my Vector Map, as well as on satellite images, the border between China and Bhutan was shown at the high pass, before we dropped down into the valley.

That was exactly what I had come for; to have a look at a remote and little-known international border, perhaps even having a photo taken of myself standing next to a border marking stone, which I had done at many well-demarcated borders of China. But here there was no border marker.
As we exit a simple gate at the end of the side road manned by a Tibetan, three men in Bhutanese costume are setting up their camp by the road. With loads of baggage, these are the traditional traders who occasionally came with their caravan of horses or yaks across the mountain passes from Bhutan into Tibet.

While there are no diplomatic relations between Bhutan and China, such age-old civilian trading has been maintained. Bhutan is the only country within China’s orbit that has no diplomatic relationship with China. But that situation may soon change, after twenty-five rounds of informal negotiation and consultations to settle border disputes over the last two decades. Such dialogues have been cordial and peaceful, and may one day lead to formal recognition of each other.

Even last year’s tension at Doklam near Yadong was handled peacefully, despite India, the “big brother” of Bhutan, intervening and escalating the dispute. Today, despite the military presence, things have turned quiet and everything seems to have returned to normal along Yadong’s border with Bhutan and Sikkim, which we have visited over the last couple days. Even the border trade with India’s Sikkim has gone up at the border trading post near Yadong. My last visit to Yadong was in 1999 when it was a quiet border town. Today it is a bustling small city with many modern buildings, restaurants, shops and finely paved roads.

I suspect such disputed, not necessarily confrontational, areas can become pawns on the chess board of international politics. While China has a record of conceding to neighboring countries territory it has claimed as its own, there could be bargaining before such trade offs. It is to the advantage of China, with such a huge area, to act as the nice guy with smaller and weaker neighboring nations. It certainly does not
want to be portrayed or viewed as a bullying big neighbor.

I hope that the current impasse with Bhutan is just temporary posturing, trading off one piece of territory for another perhaps at a more strategic location. What may be crucial for one nation may be less important for another, and such trade offs can be based on political, economic or military importance.

The area here at Yadong has been used by trade caravans, religious pilgrims and political missions for centuries. Numerous explorers used this route as entry point into Tibet from the Indian continent. The scholar Professor Tucci passed through this route no less than four times, the last being 1950 just before the PLA marched into Tibet.

British expeditionary forces led by Colonel Younghusband fought their way to Lhasa between 1903 and 1904 through exactly the same route, leaving a bloody path of massacre of the ill-equipped Tibetan army with the decisive battle at nearby Gyantse. The fortified town at Gyantse was the third largest settlement in Tibet before 1949. Throughout history, Tibetan aristocrats from Lhasa or Gyantse would intermarry with royalty from across the border in what was the Kingdom of Sikkim. Such courtship abruptly ended with the 1962 India-China border war. Sikkim was absorbed into a state of India in 1976.

Even during the Chinese Nationalist era and well into early Communist rule in the 1950s, when China and India were undergoing a short-lived honeymoon, dignitaries and government officials used Yadong as transit point to and from Tibet, offering the shortest distance to the nearest ocean. Yadong was also the exit point for many Tibetans in the late 1950s and early 60s as they fled into exile, first to India and then continuing on to many areas of the world.

Though we have to pack and leave the “unsettled” border between Bhutan and China, we are lucky to manage interviews with two nomad families of Bhutan before the PLA locates us. One can distinguish their tents from those of the Tibetans from the Chinese side by a flag they fly outside their tent. The white flag with three lines of color, red, blue and yellow, signifies that they are from Bhutan. The Tibetan nomads herding their livestock here fly a Chinese red flag with stars. I have a feeling that such measures of patriotism and nationalism may be choreographed, part of posturing and staging to show that both countries have traditional grazing rights in this particular summer pasture for their livestock.

Bienmo is the Bhutanese lady tent owner we visit. She is most gracious and stops milking their yaks as we approach. Leading us into her tent, she quickly puts fuel, yak dung, into the fire and soon we have a hot cup of milk tea to sip as we sit and chat. From her, we learn that this valley is called “Jiu Wu.” Bienmo is 49 years of age whereas her son Bienjau is 29.

They also hire two helpers during the summer busy months, as they own over 100 yaks. From the number of calves at camp, life must be prosperous, and their future bright. Herding the yaks and milking the cows twice a day during the three months they camp here can be quite time-consuming tasks for them.
Our route footprint crossing a contending border between China’s Tibet and Bhutan, at an elevation of 4299 meters. The switch-back road into a nomadic valley in high country. Final destination where we set camp but later abandoned our camp.

Consuming and exhausting. So far, they seem to live peacefully right next to Tibetan nomad camps within earshot of each other, and their language seems to be largely the same. Perhaps they feel closer to each other, physically and emotionally, than toward their respective leaders far away in the capital.

Inside Bienmo’s tent is a nicely set up altar with Buddhist statues and deity images, oil lamps and an assortment of other religious paraphernalia. At the base of the altar I notice a mug adorned with a picture of the current Fifth King of Bhutan and his Queen. Apparently, this mug is used as an ornament of respect rather than for drinking. Without taking too much of her time while her yaks are waiting to be milked outside, we thank her and head back to our camp. That is when three PLA officers arrive on motorbikes to check on us.

While there seems to be no immediate tension and confrontation at this border region between Bhutan and China, here is also where the most sacred mountain of Bhutan stands, astride the two sides of the two countries. Chomolhari is a majestic goddess of the Himalayas. Standing at 7325 meters elevation, it has watched over the people of both Bhutan and China in kindness for millennia. With her blessing, I hope the peaceful relationship between the two countries and its people will continue into the future.
There is nothing old about the Xishuangbanna Old Town, except perhaps some of the brown, pie-shaped cakes of sheng cha in the tea shops. I am staying one night in the James Joyce Coffetel, next to the arched entrance to the Old Town. Old Town is guarded by a herd of cement elephants, and the Coffetel reception desk sits in front of a wall of bookshelves filled with large books with titles like Contemporary Art, London, Paris, New York, and so on. Tomorrow I will catch a direct flight to Shangri-la on the edge of the Tibetan Plateau, but right now I am still in the tropics. The coffee shop on the first floor of the Coffetel serves me a real coconut, but it is not very fresh. I sit on a bar stool and try to remember my first impressions of the town of Jing Hong from 31 years ago.

In 1987, Howman and I drove down from Kunming in the CERS Toyota Land Cruiser, the fledgling Society’s only vehicle, inherited from Howman’s days with National Geographic. The big four wheel drive car was emblazoned with decals announcing “Equipped for Off-Road” and “Dick Cepek,” with tires and headlights to match, and it was quite an oddity at that time. We attracted a crowd of gawkers everywhere we stopped.

I remember that I sat in the front seat next to Howman as we drove and we talked for much of the trip. Howman taught me how to recognize the different minority groups by
their distinctive costumes, which were bright and colourful in comparison with the drab blue and grey Mao suits worn by nearly every adult in Kunming at that time. We visited the homes of Yi and Dai and Aini people, collecting hand made embroidered bags and making an inventory of wildlife on the walls and in the kitchens. We stopped to check roadside markets where I marveled at the biological oddities on sale.

March 19, 1987 Jing Hong: “Yesterday in Si Mao, had 5 minutes to photograph a traditional herbalists display, with elephant skin on the left, muntjac antlers displayed in front center. Here, a Chinese herbalist had feng hou [Slow Loris] skin (for fever), an otter, a python and an elephant tusk. I asked a second one for feng hou, he pulled a skin out of his bag; 8 kuai.”

In addition to teaching me how to recognize the minority groups, Howman helped me to appreciate their distinct cultures, much of which depended on the forests as a source of materials and inspiration. In turn, I shared with him my sense of urgency that the wildlife needed to be protected from hunting and deforestation. When we were not talking, I tried to figure out the age structure of the human population from the people we saw along the side of the road. It was overwhelmingly school-aged kids in the early morning and afternoon heading to and from school. Biased perhaps, but still, it was clear that the swollen proportion...
of young people to adults foretold a continuation of the increase in the human population, despite the newly strict one and two child policies.

What I could not see coming then was the rapid pace of China’s development over the next thirty years, which far out-stripped the growth in population. With a growth rate of GDP fluctuating between 6 and 8 percent per year, year after year, China’s economy has roughly double three time since 1987. That has meant double the amount of roads, of mining, of infrastructure every ten years. The result has been the creation of untold financial wealth and, at least in Xishuangbanna, the destruction of untold wealth in ecological health and biodiversity. Biodiverse natural forests here have given way to vast plantations of heavily fertilized rubber and pesticide-laden bananas, leaving the remaining wildlife in small blocks of protected nature reserve, as if ship-wrecked on islands surrounded by a sea of uninhabitable monoculture.

“In March 22, 1987, Meng Lun: On the street, saw many Dai women with their beautifully printed long sarongs, plastic sandals, thin blouses, earrings (or small golden ear plugs for the older women). Also Jino women, with knee length black, black skirts, embroidered, colorful anklets, bare feet, hair in 2 braids and either a Mao cap or a kerchief with a peak. Also 2 Akka women dressed in red skirts, with huge ear plugs, full of flowers, money, etc. They would not let me photograph them. The Dai women put their long hair up in a bun in back, then wrap a towel around that or wear a straw hat.”

In Luang Namtha today, many women still wear their beautiful traditional costumes every day. As China developed at a break-neck pace that startled everyone by continuing with few pauses for three decades, Laos was left behind. Now, however, this frontier town is poised to develop quickly, with Chinese investment pouring in. Construction projects and new roads push back the forests and the quaint minority villages.

In 1987, Jing Hong was also a town in transition. The majority of its residents were still local people, and mostly minorities; Dai, Jino, Akha, Miao, Lahu,... All of the signs in Jing Hong were bilingual then, in Chinese and Dai, a language resembling Thai, but written in a script that is similar to Burmese.

That was my first trip to China, but I had little time for sight-seeing. I was on a mission to find gibbons, the
I had joined CERS at its inception in 1986, driving down to San Diego in my little VW bug to meet Howman at one of the inaugural lectures. I already had a small grant for field research in China from the Avery Foundation, and I somehow convinced Howman to take on my project as a joint project with the new organization.

By February of the next year, we were traveling around the Ai Lao and Wu Liang Mountain Nature Reserve of central Yunnan, where we found Black Crested Gibbons inside the protected forests, and Yi people outside, cutting trees and hunting. We then continued south to Xishaungbanna, where another species of gibbon had been reported. We soon discovered that the famous Xishuangbanna National Nature Reserve for protection of tropical forests had been broken up into a collection of small patches of natural habitat. We checked each patch for reports of gibbons, but found none. We drove deeper towards the borders, into areas where commercial goods and Chinese characters were few and far between. When we reached the frontier town of Meng Lun near the Lao border, we congratulated ourselves on being the first outsiders to travel into the region since China’s opening up, as foreigners had only been allowed into this border region a few days before. Our self-congratulations were premature. In front of a roadside...
Mohan in China and Boten in Laos, are now becoming modern twin cities. Boten, rechristened Mo Ding, is being transformed into a major inland port; as a Chinese city is constructed on Lao soil leased from Laos by China for 99 years. Towers of condominiums have sprung up where there used to be jungle. The town already has an upscale International Duty Free Store and a real estate office with impressive murals of the future city, showing people strolling around an urban park, a hospital, a modern school and a horse-racing track. It will be a major stop on the high speed rail line from Kunming to Bangkok. It is already a major shipping hub, with lines of northbound trucks filled with bananas and fruit from Thailand and rice from Laos jockeying with southbound trucks filled with Chinese manufactured goods and machinery.

I am no better at seeing into the future today than I was back in 1987. But I am still optimistic, for CERS at least, that our future will be filled with more adventures and discoveries on the borders. It has been a fantastic journey so far, and it promises to be amazing in the years to come.

We continued on, right up to the border with Laos, where there was a strip of good old-growth forest protected by the border police. The border guards must have been bemused to see us. Perhaps they welcomed this diversion in their boring day at this quiet post. They let us walk right up to the boundary marker and put one foot across the line into Laos.

I passed by the border stone yesterday on my way back from our CERS project site in Luang Namtha northern Laos. Today that same border post is the site of a modern Chinese customs and immigration station with computers and fingerprint scanners that checks hundreds of travelers and truckers every day. When I crossed this time, the hall was packed with Lao scholarship students returning to their schools in China after the October 1 holiday break. What thirty years ago had been tiny grass-hut border towns, eatery where we stopped for lunch was a handwritten sign on cardboard announcing “Cold Beer” in English. Perhaps some intrepid American or Australian had arrived before us and convinced the proprietor to put the beer in the fridge and the sign outside.
Over my decades of exploration in China, I twice had the opportunity to observe hunting-eagles up close. First was in 1984 when I was with the National Geographic and traveled to Akqi along Xinjiang’s border with the then Soviet Union, and stayed among Kirgiz people. That experience was the most unique as I was allowed to ride out with a group of men with their eagles for a hunt. The second time, less significant, was in 1996 during a visit to northern Xinjiang with the Kazak.

Using golden eagles and falcons to hunt was an age-old tradition among Central Asian people, including the Kirgiz, Kazak, extending to Mongolia and even among the Manchus in the past. Hunting was most active in late autumn into winter. Though out of season in late September during my visit, I was feasted not only to freshly slaughtered sheep, but also had an insider look at the hunting-eagle’s anatomy and dynamics.

The border “commune” I visited was Sumutaxi, adjacent to the national
I found out that the eagle riding with me, an eight-year-old bird, was one of the champion hunters. It successfully hunted 17 foxes and 15 Blue Sheep the previous winter, netting its owner over 500 Rmb, given a fox skin was traded for about 20 to 30 Rmb at the time, whereas a finely trained and mature eagle could be traded for 300 Rmb. Only fox skin were sold whereas wild sheep were retained for self-consumption and use. Throughout Akqi county, there may be over 150 families raising hunting-eagles, with a few having one of four kinds of minor falcons. Eagles between the age of four to eight years old are the best hunters.

I interviewed 37-year-old Kumashi, a Kirgiz living three kilometers east of town. His eagle named “Bosom”, meaning fully grown at two years, had been with him for four years. At times eagles are named according to the hill or ravine they were caught. Others may be named due to their characteristics. Kumashi caught his bird some years back while herding sheep. At the time, it was about one year old and stood 1.5 feet tall. Birds were usually born in the summer and he caught it the following year when it was starting to learn to hunt in the wild.

They were usually caught within two months after the young adult birds learned to fly and hunt. At that time, leaving their nest and mother for the first time, such birds were not experienced. They would usually eat too much after a successful hunt, became too heavy to take flight and could be caught easily by chasing them on horseback. The bird would fly and stop, until it was exhausted and could take flight no more and be covered by a huge winter coat to take home.
Another method was to wait until the parent birds left to fetch food and catch the baby birds from the nest. Two to three persons could lower the catcher with ropes down a cliff where the white dropping from the birds were obvious, giving evidence of an active nest. Such young chicks could then be raised at home for training when they reach one year old. Such home-raised birds are however generally noisier, as being young chicks in nests, they always cry for food to be fed, and never learned to stay quiet. As they became a family member of the household, they seem more spoiled, like a child, being hand-fed from chick to juvenile. It was said that a nest would have three, five or seven eggs, usually in odd number. An even number of eggs were said to be unlucky, often producing chicks that died young.

A third method is used to catch an adult bird. A pole around four feet high with a foot trap or snare would be set up on the ground. A trained eagle would be tied to the ground or another pole nearby, and a piece of raw meat or a small live animal like dove or chicken as bait would be put between the pole and the tied eagle. A wild eagle hovering above would catch the scene with its sharp eyes. Because another eagle on the ground can be a possible rival, the wild one would assess the situation carefully before homing in on its target. It would generally descend to rest and perch on the higher pole first. Once the eagle was tangled by the snare, the eagle catcher hidden nearby under camouflage of the surrounding bush would rush out to secure the captured bird.

It was said that the first and third methods of catching produce the best result, netting an adult wild bird. Such birds would always be afraid and a bit apprehensive of people, unlike those taken from the nest as young chicks and raised by hand. Birds taken from the same nest should avoid being on the same hunt after training. They are said to gang up and fight other eagles at times. However, the adult birds caught should be trained within three months of being caught. Training, or breaking, of an eagle requires patient and persistence. A long but light chain must be used to secure one foot of the eagle. Heavier metal beads would be used as anchor at the far end, allowing the bird to move and feed, but cannot fly away. A leather eye hood must be used to cover the bird’s head, day and night, though it is left off during the summer and employed only before and during the hunting season, from October to March for a total of six months.

A hunting-eagle can live to be twenty years old. Some family would have up to three hunting-eagles. If there were babies within the household, some caution must be taken as at times eagles may attack tiny babies. Both male and female can be great hunters. Those within a family don’t mate and don’t fight, and would eat any raw meat, not considered costly given the economic
return of the hunted prey. Kumashi’s eagle hunted eight rabbits and eight fox last season. For this year, he intends to go after Blue Sheep. They rotate the hunted animals in order to allow the animals to be replenished.

An eagle is not released with its hood taken off until an animal is sighted or fresh footprints seen on the snow. Then a good horse can follow the flight of the eagle to go after the hunt. An eagle would catch a fox by the mouth, and a Blue Sheep by its ass. The largest game can be a wolf or even a big horn sheep. When a prey is caught, the eagle would never devour its hunt, but wait for the hunter to arrive. Usually a fox tail would be dragged behind the horse as a way to call home an eagle that would then return to its perch on the horse saddle. A small part of the meat of the prey must be given then to the bird for encouragement and incentive to secure the next hunt. One must not feed an eagle until it is full. When full they are too heavy to take flight for a hunt and not eager for a kill.

Occasionally an eagle, after training and heading out for a hunt may take off and never return. First, those fed too well at home, may take off and never come back. Second, those with too heavy a chain that makes the eagle feel burdened and upset, may thus leaving and never return. Third is a bad and temperamental owner who treats the bird badly. This last type may even attack the owner before flying off.

Training of an eagle will probably be considered brutal harassment by animal rights advocates. First, you feed the eagle until it is fat and heavy. Such body weight, called “false strength” does not reflect real strength or stamina. It has to be turned into muscle before an eagle can become a real hunter. Next comes the “pulling of the fat” process. Starving it comes next, even “washing its stomach” as the locals called it, followed by giving the bird a warm bath to make it hot, sweaty and hungry. At times, the eagle would become so tired it rolls its eyes showing only the white part.

Then the eagle is put on top of a thick rope stretched between two poles. Of course, the eagle finds it difficult to balance, especially as the trainer keeps shaking the rope to disturb the eagle, which is soon flapping its wings wildly to retain balance. This is called “Sleepless exercise”, prohibiting the bird to have any rest. Once the bird is fully exhausted and falls to the ground, the trainer would carry it and wash its head with water, and feed it with some tea and salt water to resuscitate it. Repeating such an act would thin the bird to only bones with barely any extra fat. Dispirited, the eagle could then be gradually trained with a hood on, feeding it bit by bit live rabbit, dove or other fowl. In time, the eagle would feel tied to its trainer and allowed to be tamed.

There are sixteen tail feathers to an eagle, allowing the bird to maneuver and steer in flight. These feathers
would be tied up with thin strings accordingly, not too loose not too tight, such that the eagle could still fly but not for far. Live prey would also be tied in a yard and the hood taken off the hungry eagle so it would go after its prey. An eagle would first attack and take out the eyes of its prey before enjoying its meal. The trainer would grab away the prey repeatedly, then finally giving back some meat to feed the bird.

In time, the string on its tail would be removed one by one gradually, until the trainer is confident that the bird would not fly off. Usually it takes fifteen days or more to get through this training process. The release of the bird was first done indoor until the bird is used to returning to its master. When feeding, one should never fully feed an eagle and give only lean meat, not fat. That a fully-fed eagle would not hunt for a rabbit has become an idiom. Also until an animal is sighted, never take off the hood, so the eagle learns that once the hood is off, it expects to find prey. The metal chain is the last obstacle to a release.

For the Kirgiz, a good eagle is more valuable than a good horse. They felt such hunting activities were part of subsistence rather than a sport, though the communal outing would build bonds among men and pride for manhood. Hunting expeditions would involve at times over a dozen hunters with their respective eagles. That however was my reminiscent and notes from 35 years ago. Perhaps things have changed, especially with the One-Belt One-Road initiative. Back then, hunting-eagles were not part of tourism, not a lifestyle, but life itself, for the Kirgiz along China’s western frontiers.
Winter in eastern Hokkaido sees not only a convergence of migrating birds, but also one of the largest concentrations of active cameras, lenses and tripods. At locations where the Red-crowned Cranes are regularly roosting or feeding, photographers flock from all over Japan, and now also from around the world.

The recent arrival of photographers from China, professionals or aspiring pros, further crowded the few locations where the cranes are known to be active during the day. Scheduled artificial feeding draws the cranes to these locations. These sites now resemble the Olympic press box circle... or circus! This being winter, it’s the Winter Olympics, as we are surrounded everywhere by snow.

Since my first rendezvous with the Red-crowned Crane and the sea eagles many years ago, I have tried to return every winter, not unlike a ritual pilgrimage to a religious site. In the beginning, I brought along my largest lens and tripod, just like everyone else. Two Nikons, a 600mm and a 300mm fast lens in rare white coating, with 1.4 and 2X extension converters.

Soon I realized there was no need to use such heavy and apprehension-inducing devices. Let alone my ageing arm would soon become aching arm. There was no need even to impress others, an act which some serious amateurs as well as novices occasionally try to do. Every photographer was armed with an arsenal of big ‘weapons’, mostly with camouflage cover. Whether that was to insulate the equipment against the extreme weather...
or to pretend to blend into a treeless environment at fixed shooting locations was beyond my comprehension.

These heavy cameras and lenses are only a liability, limiting the agile movement called for in such photography. It is not an asset at all. The tripod is even more of a hindrance, prohibiting easy and fast maneuvering to follow a bird in flight. The only use of a tripod is for steadying the heavy devices when shooting the birds on the ground. In such cases, a pivotal monopod just to help carry the weight may serve better. For me, I generally rest my camera on the tall fence for support.

Today, with digital cameras that allow for ISO settings upward of 6400, thus giving speed settings into the thousandth of a second complementing a lower f-stop to provide more depth of field, there is no question of capturing a moving object like a bird, and no need to worry about unstable hands of a photographer affecting the results due to motion. Such advances in cameras have rendered the use of a tripod a liability, especially in its limitation of fast movement of the camera to follow a moving target. Think of a marksman with a skeet rifle using a tripod and one would get the point I’m trying to make.

Of course, if a photographer is still bent on photographing the grace of the crane on the ground, their courtship dance and other activities, perhaps having a tripod is still called for. But such photographs can soon become mundane and redundant, bordering on boring, and never quite enough of a challenge for a seasoned photographer. For me, the greatest satisfaction is to capture the birds in flight or a composition on a frame with specific crane or cranes.

Climate, especially drastic climate like during a snowstorm, provides for that climactic moment. I have always believed that
drastic weather provides for the most dramatic pictures. Full sunshine is counter productive to the discriminating photographer, unless the shadow-play provides for some measured opportunities.

For photographing wildlife, I’ve always found the use of fixed focal length more conducive than having a zoom lens. The singular length allows me to focus on the subject matter, and not be distracted by more options and possibilities. For me, that is more important than having variable choices of focal length. My choice has been a 300mm f2.8 lens for the job, occasionally with a 2X converter. Others may dispute the quality of a 2X, but my failing eyesight, counting down to 70 years old, make such issues irrelevant.

While on the subject of sharp focus and clarity, let me define my own philosophy on this matter in photography. There are pictures for which I pursue extreme sharp focus, especially when dealing with scientific subjects, like aerial photos for geographic study, insects using micro or macro lenses, features of architecture, even portraits illustrating specific elements of character. But when I am photographing a scenic subject or even a moving object, at times clarity is not what I seek, but the mood or motion. Therefore, seeking sharpness and clarity is not absolute, and at times counter-productive. To be obsessed with such a pursuit, especially for those with more advancing age, can be compared to a person with failing ears going out for the best music speaker with high fidelity that only an electronic instrument can detect, whereas their own physical faculties can no longer discern.

My long study and observation of the crane, in particular the Black-necked Crane of Tibet since 1988, has allowed me to understand their every gesture and movement. Certain calls can signify readying for flight, together with a straightened neck at a fixed angle tilting in a forward posture. Running starts for flight...
and wing motion for landing are guided by certain routines of wings and body.

As with the Sea Eagles, both the White-tailed and the Steller's species, they are guided by another set of rules which would manifest themselves to the beholder after extended observations. I find it most challenging not when the eagle is in flight, at rest, or even grabbing a fish with its talons; it is most gratifying to catch one of these majestic birds in flight making a fast turn to descend on its prey. It may not be the most graceful shot, but it is something which reflects the instantaneous decision and motion of the bird.

By the way, as reference, I use spot focus on such outings, with a hit rate of 2 to 1 in terms of focus and capturing the object within the frame. In other words, I may delete 1 out of 3 pictures I shoot. This may be superfluous compared to many photographers by my side who fire off their shutters like a machine gun, then spend time deleting most of the pictures of the shoot.

Another note of interest, perhaps due in part to my own stubbornness, since my early days of photography, including during my several years stint at the National Geographic, I have always treated my shutter with respect, considering it sacred and pushing it to take shots, one at a time. This is perhaps a remnant from before, when film was treated as a rare and limited commodity.

Though I have had a motor-drive attached to all my cameras since my first Nikon FTN of 1974 era, I have never, not once, fired off my shutter with a motor. I have only used it as a simple film winder. The current digitizing of all my slides images since 1974 can verify to that effect. In fact, my philosophy and mentality from the film era has not abated to this day. For me, digital photography with large memory capacity does not mean unlimited resources at hand. A disciplined use of the camera with respect would yield results of due value.

Yes, some perfect shots require a bit of luck, and I must confess to having a few of those very special moments. I am not one who would stand in the snow waiting for things to happen. In fact, I don’t even have the patience to wait out a sunrise or a sunset. But snow scene and shadow often play a wonderful backdrop as a stage made by nature, where the wildlife, be it a crane, a swan, a goose, an owl, an eagle, a deer or a fox, can be the main actor or supporting actors.

With that in mind, I am always ready to lug my simple equipment and, with a cheery mood, dressed up warmly, head out into the cold snowbound winter wilderness of Hokkaido. For now, I have my reservation at my favorite farmhouse abode again for next winter, right adjacent to one of the perfect sites where the crane return every day during the winter.

As advice to young and fellow photography enthusiasts, the sooner you for go the equipment as an outfit of vanity, the sooner you take pictures for yourself rather than to show off to others, you will find a great improvement in the result.
The Royal Grandmother of Bhutan Her Majesty Kesang Choden Wangchuk hosted a lunch at her palace for HM when he visited Bhutan recently. She further open Bhutan House, her hereditary home in Kalimpong for our visit, including a specially prepared lunch and a viewing of the shrine room where the 13th Dalai Lama had stayed for six months.

Professor Derek Collins, Dean of Arts at the University of Hong Kong, together with Prof Catherine K.K. Chan and Dr Andrew Xu of Architecture School, visited CERS Zhongdian Center in Shangri-la, as well as several nearby CERS project sites.

Shih Man-yi and Shih Chueh-chun, two nuns from Taiwan’s Fo Guang Shan, visited CERS in Yunnan, including to Dongjulin, our former Tibetan nunnery site.

Hans Michael Jebsen, a long-time supporter of CERS visited the CERS Shek O premises, including our Exhibit House and new Library.

A CERS team visited our site in northern Lao, with intention of the construction of a small premise within a tribal village for future student use. The team also tried kayak from Namtha to that remote site.

Construction commence for CERS in Mandalay, establishing a future home for our boat crew and staff, as well as mooring of our exploration boat HM Explorer.

Princess Kesang Choden Wangchuk of Bhutan visited Taiwan as CERS hosted a dinner with a presentation in her honor.

A new book, Enlightened Sojourn, authored by How Man Wong, is published in Taiwan. This new series merge his writing on nature and culture into one single volume.

Ten Yung Yau College students, after visiting CERS site in Taiwan among the Tsou former head-hunter hilltribe of Alishan, produced an animation film, winning First Place in 3-D Computer Animation Category at an international film festival in Melbourne.

Matt Percival, CNN Senior Producer visited CERS in Hong Kong. Matt had previously produced a half-hour program on CERS with anchor Richard Quest, as well as a second episode.

Zhang Fan authored an article for China’s National Geography Magazine on “New route from Yunnan to Tibet”

Song Haokun, CERS Associate, joins Zhang Fan in lecturing to students of geology at Yunnan University.
THANK YOU

LEFT TO RIGHT:
Ashi Kesang Wangchuk visiting Barry Lam’s museum in Taiwan. Tibetan monks enjoying fine noodles. Chote Sophonpanich with HM. New Zodiac operational for HM Explorer in Myanmar.

- Princess Kesang Choden Wangchuk of Bhutan, during her visit to Taiwan, visited the private museum of CERS Chairman, Barry Lam. A special lunch was also served.
- Tony and Shelly Malkin join CERS in matching fund to support an architectural restoration project in Ladakh of India, managed by the Tibet Heritage Fund.
- Ms Dora Wu, a long-time CERS supporter, made another substantial contribution to our organization.
- Mr Martin Ma made a multi-year pledge to CERS.
- David Mong and Shun Hing Group support the new CERS library in Shek O.
- Anna Yeung provided for field consumption the latest popular noodles by celebrity star/chef Nicholas Tse.
- Chote Sophonpanich of Thailand continues his support to CERS.
- George Yeo, Chairman of Kerry Logistics, assisted in shipping of our new Zodiac inflatable boat and outboard motor from Hong Kong to Mandalay.

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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.