CLOCKWISE FROM TOP:
Batak traditional Lambay Festival.
Tibetan boys travelling to school on yaks.
Thangtong Gyalpo, both young and old.
Boarding the boat home.

3 My Journey of Auspicious Coincidences
7 Expedition reflection
11 Future of the Batak Tribe, with CERS
14 Rethinking Development: Reflection on Progress and Relationship with Nature
18 Into the Boondocks - Exploring Palawan’s Longest River (Part II)
22 First Decades of Exploration Highlights
28 Old Haunt of An Old Hippie
33 A token of my friendship and gratitude for your 70th birthday
35 News / CERS in the Media and Lectures
36 Thank You / Current Patrons
President’s Message

I am on a flight from Heathrow London to Hong Kong. It is August 5, and Hong Kong is having strikes and much disruption to its traffic. In online news, Cathay Pacific was said to have suspended most flights. I thought my flight might be delayed or canceled. Not so; it left right on time. However, for myself, I have left behind friends, footprints and impacts in many of the places I have seen. The world is a book and those who do not travel read only one page.

My flight will land in Hong Kong in less than an hour. I recalled the very first time I took a flight 50 years ago this same month, in 1969, when I left for college in America at the age of 19. I did not get to go home for the next three years. Today’s youth are far better traveled than my generation. Many have traveled the world. It is interesting to realize that in 1969, I was in college in America, and a lot of people were in college in America at the age of 19. I wonder how many young adults have visited. Today’s youth may have fewer years behind them and less capacity than I have today. Yet I hope in the younger generation something to be optimistic about. Do I have the answer? Obviously not. But CERS will continue to do the little that we can, providing the younger generation something to be optimistic about. For me, I have now left behind in the world: friends, footprints and impacts in many places I have been. The younger generation have legitimate reason to feel fear as well as loss of hope. There are many theories and explanations for this loss of hope. However, I believe there are many reasons that the younger generation have legitimate reason to feel fear and loss of hope. Let us give our young adults with field experience and curiosity to learn about the world around us, be it the natural world or society as a whole. Let us work where we feel we have an impact, little as it may be. Let us give our younger generation something to be optimistic about. Dustmug Monastery - Iron chain bridge in Bhutan.

Modernization meant excellent roads, electricity and economic development. However, it also meant that my romanticized vision of the Tibetan region was somewhat curbed. As we zipped along the smooth highway from the airport to the CERS Zhongdian Center, the numerous modern homes and structures that were composed mainly of glass windows stood in stark contrast to the otherwise traditional sweeping landscape of Tibet. Workshops and garages came to mind! As we sped along in the iconic CERS expedition Land Rovers, foremost on my mind was our most recent and finished their three-week program in China. CERS has been involved with education for over two decades, always teaching young adults through experience in the field.

CERS and my own office, the Buddhist Art & Cultural Conservation Centre, have one thing in common - a commitment to ensuring the preservation and continuity of cultures and the arts of the Himalayan region. Himalayan cultural and spiritual research being part of my line of work, one can imagine my excitement upon visiting the eastern Tibetan regions of China for the first time; I was like a kid heading to the candy store! Immersing myself in a culture and place after a lifetime of reading about it was absolutely thrilling.

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A NEWSLETTER TO INFORM AND ACKNOWLEDGE CERS’ FRIENDS AND SUPPORTERS

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My Journey of Auspicious Coincidences

By Ashi Kesang Choden Wangchuk

Thimphu, Bhutan
A man of unusual caliber, Thangtong Gyalpo, or Drupthop Chakzampa (the Iron Bridge Builder Saint) as he is locally known, was the Leonardo Da Vinci of the Himalayas. He was not just a Buddhist saint; he was also an architect, an engineer and blacksmith, as well as a poet and the producer of the very first Tibetan Opera, called Ache Lhamo, which is performed to this day.

Our most exciting discovery happened a few weeks before my journey. Our team had discovered a section of the original wall paintings from the 15th C behind a large dusty altar that hadn’t been cleaned for centuries! Curiously, our team also discovered perhaps the only existing painting of Thangtong Gyalpo’s son, Kewa Zangpo. Kewa Zangpo is usually depicted in the form of statues, and no mural paintings had previously been discovered.

The new discoveries meant our team had the difficult task of further researching the historical facts. Much of Tibetan Buddhist history is intermingled with spirituality that at times borders on fantasy; making it tough for a researcher to separate the spiritual language from factual history. I had left numerous instructions and delegated responsibilities to the team; however, I felt uneasy - this was the first time I had left such a large responsibility to others.

Arriving at the Zhongdian CERS site, we were welcomed by the deep husky barks resonating from the chained Tibetan Mastiffs. Entering the dining hall, my eyes fell upon a huge familiar-looking white mask hanging above a doorway. I stood staring at it for quite some time, pleasantly surprised to find the main deity of the Ache Lhamo opera smiling benevolently back at me. Howman explained that the rest of the masks were inside the room, and that he felt that it blessed the place with its presence. Thangtong Gyalpo had managed to manifest himself even at CERS!

The CERS expedition continued auspiciously to Damozong Cave, or Meditation Cave of Bodhidharma, known to both Tibetan and Chinese as the first patriarch master who introduced Zen Buddhism from India to China and beyond. CERS has a project site here, restoring a meditation facility where our group stayed for the night. From there, we reached Khawakarpo Mountain, one of the four most sacred mountains of the Tibetan region. The peak is usually under veil of clouds, but graciously decided to let us have a glimpse shortly after our arrival. From there we proceeded into Litang. We had the rare opportunity to have Tashi Rinpoche’s merry spontaneity and knowledgeable presence with us throughout our stay - a most unexpected honor! Tashi Rinpoche, or Droga Tashi (Nomad Tashi) as he seemed to be affectionately called by those close to him, is a young Rinpoche or Tulku (incarnate lama), the reincarnation of a Mongolian Lama. He is also the descendant of the family of the 7th Dalai Lama, Kalzang Gyatsos (1708-1757), a famous poet, reformer and practitioner. Naturally, we were given a personalized and detailed visit of Renkang, the birth house of the 7th Dalai Lama.

Perhaps it was because of his presence or perhaps our group was a harmonious bunch, but the natural circumstances for auspicious coincidences, tengdrel, followed us on our journey.

Entering the breathtakingly scenic Litang valley, we stumbled upon a local horse race festival. As we sat under the snow-white tents pressed up against each other, the very first drops of rain fell as the racers readied themselves. The word Druk means Bhutan, but it is also the word for Thunder, as well as Dragon. Tashi Rinpoche jested that we had brought the dragons from Bhutan. He was referring to the rainfall that continued to pour nightly at our campsite, accompanied by lightning and deafening thunder. (Pix 4)

This was followed by a huge rainbow around the sun during our hike up to the sacred sites. The pathway leading through the narrow valley had innumerable sacred sites associated with the Kalachakra Mandala. Tashi Rinpoche’s nephew, Geshe Tenzing, informed us that it would take one to two weeks, at the very least, to visit all the sacred sites!

We passed the Lenggu Gompa that was founded by the 1st Karmapa, Dasum Khyensa, in 1164. It still evoked
majestic beauty, nestled amidst the rocky cliffs with the snowy Gye’nyen mountain range as its backdrop. However, its silence and semi-dilapidated condition made me wonder what it would have been like when it was considered one of the three major monasteries of the Karma Kagyu sect in Tibet, many years ago.

Returning back to the CERS Zhongdian Center was a retreat in itself! Cozy log cabins were hidden away amidst the pine trees, interspersed by an occasional fishpond and cobbled winding pathways that interconnected in the shape of the number eight - an auspicious number in Chinese.

I had the opportunity to spend some quality time with Howman Wong, the founder of CERS, by one of the fish ponds. It is rare to find Howman at leisure. Our short but valuable conversation made me realize something - to not expect anything from others. Howman’s words echoed my own sentiments, that one will and should ask a lot from your own self. It is up to you, and your own choices and decisions will determine your path. But what you receive from others in return remains a gift! To do things solely because you want to help, to do good or to give in the service of others, should be done without expectations, with a heart that listens and a mind that can let go. And as a perfectionist, I responded to Howman that the lesson I needed to learn was to let go.

Inspired by all that I had experienced with Howman and our group at CERS, plans for a very first expedition were underway at our office; this time to the valleys of Merak and Sakteng in eastern Bhutan. I am determined to find out more about Thangtong Gyalpo’s son and the elusive stories of his family. The area of Merak Sakteng is the only place where the famous Ache Lhamo Opera exists outside of Tibet; with modernization, it is fast becoming a dying tradition.

Similar to butter tea, rural monks, nomads and villagers rely on simple natural resources provided by their environment; they put in a lot of hard work to make a living that is unique to the Tibetan area. Living a simple life, these people are in tight-knit communities. We got the opportunity to visit one of their annual community festivals involving horse riding competitions and dancing. The festival is hosted by people from nearby villages in a large grassy plain behind the Genie mountain. It is held every fourth month of the lunar calendar that is considered a holy month for Tibetans. These villagers celebrate their holy month by hosting horse riding competitions, dancing and prayer, as well as by participating in a varied amount of merit-making activities such as not eating meat, dressing up in traditional clothes and releasing the lives of life-stock animals.

Bombarding their holy festival, these villagers knew nothing about us. In their perspective, we are just tourists who know nothing about the nomads, monks and villagers I encountered during this week-long expedition.

When I first met the people that I would be spending the next two weeks with, little did I know the amount of fun and knowledge I would gain when I once again return to the Zhongdian center. Being accompanied by uncle How Man, his son Saine Gee, five guests from Bhutan, Xavier and other CERS staff, I got a one of a kind experience. We visited many CERS sites, monasteries and sacred mountains but more importantly, many significant people with their own unique stories.

By Meagan Ma
Hong Kong

Butter tea is a hot beverage found in almost every household in the Tibetan area. It is completed after 15-20 minutes of churning and is made with simple, affordable ingredients such as black tea and butter. After having butter tea everyday, I realize that it is the perfect metaphor for the nomads, monks and villagers I encountered during this week-long expedition.

Utter tea made with simple ingredients, very little preparation and a hot beverage to warm oneself up, just like the nomads I met on this expedition. Utter tea is so simple yet so beautiful, it is almost like a gift from the nomads themselves. And as we discovered throughout our expedition, simple things can be so beautiful and meaningful. It is the little things that make our journey worthwhile.
about their traditions and customs, yet they accepted us into their community by allowing us to take part in their local festival. They even allowed Ugyen to ride one of their race horses and taught us the steps to their traditional dances. Though the festival wasn’t fancy or sponsored by anyone, their smiles made up for all of it as they forgot all their worries and enjoyed themselves for a whole week, celebrating their beliefs and customs. Like the villagers in the local festival, the nomads were very friendly and welcoming towards us and invited us for meals into their homes that were tents.

We so happened to stumble upon two families of nomads and among them were grandmothers, fathers and even a one-month old baby tightly bundled up. They lived in tents made of yak hair and had animals such as yaks, dzos (hybrid of yaks and cows) and horses. These nomads lived very minimally and migrate seasonally. For all they know, we could be bandits, yet they invited us warmly into their nomadic homes and offered whatever they had most generously. People from cities would rarely be hospitable to strangers let alone invite them into their homes. The simplicity of their uncomplicated lives gave them a profound perspective of the world, allowing them to be more open, compassionate and trusting.

We visited 11 majestic monasteries around Lithang as well as the birthplace of the 7th Dalai Lama, interacting with many local monks and viewing countless sacred rocks, mountains, trails, pond and rivers. These experiences gave me a deeper insight of Buddhism in the Tibetan area and its effects on the customs, perspectives and traditions of the local people. Walking into every monastery, there are towering, countless Buddha statues, detailed thangkas and specific paintings that tell a story. The details of the monasteries alone suggests the devotion people give to Buddhism and the importance it must play in one’s life.

In my mind, I had already stereotyped the atmosphere of monasteries and monks to be serious and solemn. I had imagined them to be completely isolated from society in order to let go of their desires. Initially intimidated by the whole monastic environment, I was fearful of accidentally being disrespectful and therefore kept my thoughts to myself.

After interacting with the monks during the local festival and wandering through the Lithang area with everyone else, I realized that the typical depiction of googled photographs of monks praying in a temple represented only a very small part of their lives. Curious, I started to ask more questions when visiting monasteries as well as getting to know Tashi Rinpoche better. Tashi Rinpoche joined us for four days of our expedition; he is a very well-respected Tulkur reincarnation of a well-known Mongolian Lama. His current family are descendants of the 7th Dalai Lama. Tashi Rinpoche played a big yet quiet role in preserving the customs, traditions and heritage sites of the locality that lead to positive developments and opportunities for the local people thereby helping the Lithang area as a whole.

One of my favorite moments of this expedition was when Tashi Rinpoche brought his portable speaker to the camping site and everyone was expecting him to start playing traditional Tibetan songs. We were very surprised and a bit startled when a pop song played with inappropriate words started playing! He shocked us even more when he started singing and dancing to it, not realizing what the words meant. If I had let my stereotypical perspective of monks shape my mindset before actually getting to know them and hearing their story, I wouldn’t have gotten to know the serious yet very playful characteristic of Tashi Rinpoche; and those three nights around the campfire would always remain as one of the most memorable events of this expedition.

Every person that I encountered and interacted with during this expedition had their own story of how they got to where they are. Whether it was one of our Bhutanese guests who told us that as a child he had received a western education, but inadvertently
ended up becoming a monk instead; stories of a nomad’s moving; or Laorong Drolma’s story of her cheese business succeeding. These stories all involve hardships that had to be conquered and cannot be bought or found anywhere else in the world. It is the lifestyle they had to adapt to, the environment they live in and the religion that they devote their life to that brings these stories to life. I not only got to opportunity to listen to these stories, but I had first-hand experiences interacting with the characters in it. Being inspired by these people, I hope that one day I can proudly tell others about my own story that I created through experiences.

Never having experienced a CERS expedition, I was embarrassed travelling with such a big group and was afraid to take pictures. These people had every right to stereotype me as a rich privileged tourist that didn’t really care about their lives but just came to take pretty pictures. The beauty of CERS is that they don’t help people for the sake of it or do it for publicity. Instead they engage with the people, creating lasting relationships with them, but most importantly, listening to their stories and offering help in places that benefits both parties. The CERS experience sets us apart from regular tourist groups, allowing us to have first-hand experiences interacting with the characters in it.

After this expedition, I am overwhelmed by the power of religion in this area of China. The monks and nuns carry their beliefs with such honor and pride. Seeing the sheer amount of prayer flags in this region, I’ve realized how serious everyone takes Buddhism by dedicating their lives to the Buddhist practice. Being raised in a city, religion can be a sensitive topic and there are not many who devote their whole life to their religion but it is close to the opposite here. I’ve never been to a region where religion is such an important aspect of one’s life and this experience really changed my perspective on the impact of religion and how it shapes the people of a region.

Something that is commonly mentioned in the CERS community is the word “explorer”. To me, being an explorer is getting out of my comfort zone and exploring new geographical places but after this trip, the definition of “explorer” meant something more. Being an explorer now also means exploring someone’s personality and story which can shape one’s perspective. Through talking to people with stories, perspectives and personalities that is unique to this region and their lifestyle, I was inspired and my perspective was definitely changed.

The simple yet happy life these people lead are truly amazing. I’m very honored and appreciative that I got this opportunity to learn about their stories, culture and traditions first hand. Living in a fast-paced city, life can be overwhelming for a lot of us but we should take some time to think about the people who are less fortunate than us, and think of ways we could benefit them. As the world is becoming more modernized, China and Tibet are also progressing along with them. Every time we pass by a village, uncle Howman mentions how undeveloped it used to be and how different aspects of the village have changed. The world we live in is very complex as it changes every second thus losing many traditions along the way. It is left to us to make a difference to ensure that the next generation would appreciate and continue their traditions as well as having the opportunity to learn about their own culture and history.

The Bataks are one of the three indigenous groups in Palawan, inhabiting the central region of the island. Scholars believe they are descendants of Australoid populations, genetically known as Negritos, which migrated to the Philippine Archipelago during the Upper Pleistocene (45,000 – 50,000 years ago). The most recent census conducted by anthropologist Novellino in 2005 identified only 155 individuals with both parents being Batak among a population of less than 300 people, a decline of 57% in thirty-three years.

Both the physical and cultural identity of the Bataks are continuously threatened by intermixing with neighboring Tagbanua tribe and migrant Filipino settlers, encroachment of the market economy and the shift from subsistence lifestyle. They are also vulnerable to debt bondage, patronage, land grabbing by illegal mining or logging companies, and other forms of exploitation. Traditionally subsisting on hunting, gathering wild vegetables as well as swidden agriculture planting rice and root crops, the Bataks are now facing food scarcity and malnutrition due to the government’s environmental conservation policies which ban shifting cultivation and hunting. To compensate and fill their dietary needs, they have had no choice but to deplete their non-timber forest products (NTFPs) like Agathis resin (locally known as almacega), wild honey and rattan canes for sale in exchange for money to purchase rice. All in all, the cultural repertoire of the Bataks is collapsing as the festivals, shamanic practices, myths and beliefs are becoming less and less relevant to their day-to-day life.

In an attempt to explore the Maoyon River, on the banks of which CERS has established its base, Dr. Bleisch and CERS filmmaker Xavier embarked on a bamboo raft journey floating down 21 kilometers of the river in December 2016. Incidentally, the three skilled rafters were all Bataks. This was CERS’ initial contact with the indigenous group. Subsequently, in 2017, How Man and the team went the extra mile, quite literally, to the secluded Batak village Kayasan up in the mountains. Rather shy and timid, their
conclusion of the ceremony, conducting interviews, carrying out participant observation and documenting their festival on film. It is one of our goals to document the vanishing culture as a record of humanity. Nonetheless, these trips serve not only academic research and recording purposes, but also spread goodwill to the Bataks, so that they understand that we mean no harm and are eager to help.

During our visits to the Batak villages, we often bring along daily necessities like rice, coffee, sugar and stationary to give out to the families. However, apart from providing for them, the CERS team is looking forward to working with them to create a better living environment. We are currently exploring various opportunities. Firstly, we can help add value to the raw materials collected by the Bataks through secondary production, repackaging and suitable marketing campaigns. Wild honey, for example, is a priced commodity in various oversea markets. Paired with ethnic-style packaging, like Batak traditional woven baskets, and a good Batak backstory about the honey, the price of the wild honey can be tripled, thus providing a higher profit margin for the same amount of labor.

There is also potential for developing eco-tourism in the Kayasan village region. Tourists can be offered a trekking tour, guided by local Bataks, in which they can explore the forest and learn about the Batak’s way of interacting with the forest, including their traditional beliefs about forest diwatas (spirits), medicinal plants and edible wild vegetables. At the end of the hike, the visitors could return downstream via bamboo rafting. Finally, the trips would end with a rest night residing at the Batak lodges at the CERS base, which have been remodeled with modern washroom facilities and even air-conditioning. Tourists could also be served a traditional Batak feast for dinner.

The CERS vision is not only to preserve the Batak people’s identity, protect their cultural integrity and give them a better economic outlook - all mainstream goals yet almost a mundane cliché.  We hope to celebrate with them their “coming out party”, during which we would showcase some aspects of their culture and practises that are ahead of our so-called “modern” world that is only now learning to live a simpler life and become more environmentally sensitive.
Crossing paths with indigenous people, who are materially less affluent, technologically less developed, socially less stratified and politically less organized than we are, it is almost one’s natural instinct to think, what can we do to help them or what can we teach them? We tend to jump quickly to the conclusion that, being the ‘modern’ and ‘civilized’ one, we possess the capacity, and thus also the responsibility to help those who are less fortunate. Such desire to improve the life of others formsulates a certain development narrative that measures others’ livelihood with our own societal standard, in terms of economic index, literacy rate, infant mortality rate and so on. This ‘great power, great responsibility’ mindset has given rise to the ‘culture of aid’, to which a lot of NGOs has thrived, and did much good if I may add, throughout these years. Moved by a well-edited documentary on the ‘poor’ living conditions and struggles that the tribal people have, we feel like we can rescue them by donating to trustworthy NGOs that can rescue them by donating to trustworthy NGOs that

The ‘civilization’ we thought we have achieved today – the modernization, the technological advancements, the social movements milestones, the knowledge we have accumulated, so on and so forth, is driven by the urge of progression. While progression has definitely served us well – greater convenience, efficiency, improvements in livelihood and wellbeing – without tactful balance, what once we regard as cleverness become recklessness.

Western societies distinguish nature from culture, conceptualizing them as dichotomous entities. Men of culture are capable of manipulating nature to create desired environment that secures survival and ensures prosperity. Nature is deemed as rather passive, inactive, and static existence that awaits to be tamed and surmounted by human, based on the latter’s needs. Under the said dichotomous mindset, western civilizations actively conquer, exploit and modify nature, justifying their actions in the name of ‘culture taming nature’. In the turn of the 21st century, when western societies realized they have gone so far and done some irreversible damages to the environment, they stepped in, once again, this time in the name of protection; but the logic behind exploitation and protection remains the same – dividing nature from culture, the former being non-active agents prone to manipulation that needs to depend on human for conservation while the latter, manipulates and conserves.
However, the division between nature and culture itself is also a cultural construct. In many cases for non-western societies, the boundary between the two is blurred, and to differentiate them as binary opposites, with hierarchy, is rather incomprehensible. Let’s say the Bataks, they believe in a ‘vital breath’ (giinawan) shared among humans, plants and animals. Each natural resources have their own superhuman guardians, for instance, the Master of Bees is in charge of honey and the Master of Rice is responsible for rice, whom share the qualification of ‘person’ (taw) with the Bataks thus a common human consciousness. The indigenous groups sometimes even refers these superhuman agents as ‘grandfather’ (Apota) and ‘grandmother’ (Bayi’). We can draw from such instances that in Batak worldview, nature has its own consciousness and human status, thus ‘cultured’ beings. They neither distinguish their nature from culture, nor do they uphold a hierarchy of human over their environment. Instead, the Bataks perceive nature and culture as an integrated whole, fluid and inseparable; together, humans co-inhabit the forest with animals, plants, and superhuman agents in a harmonious and egalitarian manner. Foreign concept of land and natural resources as property at earth and sky such that none is superior or inferior to each other. The Bataks told us that during the sword dances the two dancers could pretentiously fight against each other for the sake of entertainment, but the tip of the swords should never collide as this symbolizes aggression, which in turn angers the bees and cause difficulties in honey harvest. Under the same token, in face of a degraded forest due to deforestation or exhaustion of resources, the Bataks do not blame the external factors like land-grabbing exploitive macro-businesses, pollution or climate change, but the problems emerged in social dynamics which infuriated the superhuman agents protecting the forest. Batak worldview centers upon peace and harmony, within oneself, with fellow human beings, and with the nature; they respect and love the environment like a child loves his mother. Such humble mindset and intimate relationship with the nature have fostered a sustainable practice of forestry resources utilization. It is not that the Bataks do not modify their nature at all - they clear and burn plots of forest for swidden cultivation and they also extract forestry resources like bamboo, rattan and pandan leaves on a daily basis – but they develop in a moderate manner to fulfill what is ‘really necessary’ for them to survive, not tripping over the delicate balance into the void of desire thus maintaining a healthy relationship with their surroundings and achieving homeostasis.

Recent international efforts have acknowledged indigenous people’s sustainable subsistence strategy and worldview would contribute to curbing deforestation and mitigating the effects of global warming and pollution. For instance, the UN-REDD+ (Reduced Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation) and the World Bank ProFor, as part of their efforts towards combating deforestation and exhaustion of forestry resources, are fighting for collective tenure rights for indigenous people’s traditional territory. World Bank ProFor presented the case regarding benefit sharing and customary land rights in forest areas for Indonesian indigenous people, suggesting that by recognizing customary tenure rights of indigenous communities, they would become proactive agents in forest and biodiversity preservation, which in turn enables regulated utilization of forest as well as respect for traditional culture and practices. Indigenous Indonesian people, who have become indispensable partners in the country’s sustainable management of resources, are also empowered in the process. Further, the New Zealand government granted the Whanganui River legal personhood in 2017, which reflects respect and acknowledgement towards the worldview of Maori aborigines. The Maori perceive the river as a person and their ancestor, and they make sense of the world through an extended relationship network in which all life forms are descendent from Earth and sky such that none is superior or inferior to any other. One might not fancy their cosmology and myths, even regarding them as somewhat superstitious, but undeniably, Maori’s relational view of world, mutual familial obligations with the nature and value of reciprocity offers new orientations for personal relationship with nature.

This is not to say that urban dwellers should now convert to indigenous religious belief on tree fairies and mountain gods, or abandon all city life in entirety to live in the forest instead. Instead, this is a call for a re-examination of our relationship with nature. Previous generation’s mode of progression and development has proved itself to be detrimental to the planet; it is time to rethink about development and conservation. For decades or even centuries, indigenous communities have managed to self-sufficiently sustain their livelihood solely from environmental resources, their philosophy behind the dynamics between human and nature might be able to enlighten us with new paradigms to cope with our common future battles against impending and challenging environmental disaster. In retrospect, we should also reconsider the concept of ‘development’ when engaging with indigenous communities. The relationship between the developer and developer should no longer be a unidirectional one, one that merely offers and receives aid. Concerted efforts in the international arena have revealed a shift in mindset regarding development: the ‘developed’ societies might gain insight or two with regards to environmental protection and development from the ‘developing’ societies. Working with the Batak people of Palawan, I feel like there are still so much about life and relationship with nature that we can learn from them, with utmost sincerity and respect.
Our Maoyon source expeditionary team on Palawan has arrived at a point high on the north ridge of Striped Peak near the source of the river, but there are no trails where we had hoped to find them. Our food and torches are cached somewhere below on the main trail. As the light starts to fade and I begin to worry, Jimelle takes charge and leads us down the merest hint of a trail heading west along the ridge back to the main trail. We are relieved to arrive at our waiting gear, then continue quickly along the main trail back to the Almaciga collectors camp, arriving just as the light disappears entirely. Too tired to set my hammock, I try to sleep on the uneven bare poles of the make-shift platform, shifting my body all night so that all of my bones seem to be equally bruised by morning.

When Joceline and I went to buy supplies, I stocked our expedition larder with plenty of rice, tinned meat and dried fish, but light on fruits and vegetables. My experience working with forest people in northern Laos had led me to think that the missing groceries would be found by the local team members on the trail. I am surprised that, here, the locals never pick any leaves or shoots for our dinners. In Laos, I am used to three and four-day treks where the dishes with every meal are made up largely of forest plants collected on the way. Even so, we have enough provisions for another three days. Captain Arnel, however, informs us that he needs to get back to Sagang to prepare for boat racing in Puerto Princesa on Dec. 8. These is nothing for it but to start back today, but we still have time for one more side trip on the way.

We start at 6:51 from Camp 2, heading back along the good trail to the divide. There we leave the heavy things and turn left, heading northwest. We follow a poor trail, no doubt made by Almaciga collectors, that snakes along the ridge crest through climbing bamboo and rattan. It winds across the slope from one huge Agathis tree to another. Each has been tapped, and deep scars cut through the thick bark ooze white almaciga resin, sticky and fragrant. One tree has been tapped too deeply, and white shelves of fungus sprout from its wounded sides. More and more of these ancient trees are reportedly succumbing to over-zealous tapping by collectors, many of them outsiders who are just eager to get quick cash to buy a boat or a bride and have no interest in the future of the trees or the livelihoods of the other local Batak collectors.

When I judge that we are close enough, we descend steeply into the gorge of a large stream, one of the largest tributaries of the Maoyon. A sudden rain storm drenches the soil and turns the clay into slippery grease. We slide down the slope clinging to the poles of saplings and, when those were not at hand, any twig of vegetation that can momentarily slow descent. We are met by waves of leeches. They creep up our shins inch-worm fashion to find a good spot in which to sink their circular mouths full of cutting teeth. I often feel one, then look down to find 4 or 5 more climbing up by socks or nestled below the zipper at my knee. The rear suction cup and front mouth cling stubbornly to my hand when I pull them off, making it hard to flick them into the surrounding woods. While struggling to rid myself of one tenacious leech, I miss a step, the wet clay gives way, and I slide down the slope grasping at vines and shrubs as I slide, only to find that one of hand holds is a stout rattan stem whose rapier thorns have torn a large hole at the base of my palm. One thorn is embedded deeply under the skin and will only come out days later after a long soaking in hot water.

We reach the rushing stream at the bottom of the gorge and stop there for lunch. I wander up the stream alone, past tree ferns and buttressed forest giants, walking in the stream on the white sand below its clear waters, scrambling over piles of rough worn boulders that create cascades and mini falls, ducking below huge fronds of ferns and under the trunk of a large fallen tree that cross the stream, thoroughly enjoying the moment. The forest, for all
Moosenjoe watches the Palawan skyline go by.

Captain ‘Punoy’ Aldren wins the boat race.

Boarding the boat home.

Moosenjoe to compete with the noise of this larger bird high in the sky.

over the Palawan coast. The bird’s calls end; perhaps it is reluctant flies overhead. It must be one of the fighter planes riding shotgun about 20 seconds. I turn on my phone to record the call just as a jet of an owl, a single hollow note, very loud, repeated at intervals of It takes me a few seconds before I realize that it is in fact the call from the rocks above.

Above the stream’s source, the canyon meets a steep wall of green vegetation. Rather than descend down the waterfalls over which we climbed up, we traverse the slope to an adjacent streamlet to the south and follow it down, joining the main tributary just above the site where we had our lunch. From there, we ascend and return by the same route we used to arrive, following the footsteps and cut stems where Jimelle and Pogoe used their big bolo knives. When we arrive at an abandoned Almaciga collectors camp, there is still enough daylight to set my hammock. I listen to the calls of a large pigeon booming in the twilight. We have a hearty dinner of rice, tinned corned tuna and fried Spam. I slip into my hammock, then all is silent.

Without warning, someone suddenly shouts out, “Wei!” I wonder if one of the team is lost in the woods or was startled by a visitor to the camp. His shout is repeated, and then again a few seconds later. It takes me a few seconds before I realize that it is in fact the call of an owl, a single hollow note, very loud, repeated at intervals of about 20 seconds. I turn on my phone to record the call just as a jet flies overhead. It must be one of the fighter planes riding shotgun over the Palawan coast. The bird’s calls end; perhaps it is reluctant to compete with the noise of this larger bird high in the sky.

In the morning, just before 6:00 AM, the cicada alarm clock starts up, a nearly deafening chorus of “KooRAIIII koorai koorai koorai koorai....” At 8:10 as we are packing up after breakfast, I hear the sound of what sounds like Palawan Hornbills to the south. We start off soon after, descending steeply. My right knee is shooting me painful complaints whenever I bend it more than 90 degrees. The Captain is also leaning on a walking stick. Soon, however, we are on more level ground and the pace picks up. After we cross the Carunay River for the first time, we pass a large yellow back hoe that has been excavating next to the path. I hear the sounds of chain saws and the slow crash as a large tree falls. The men mumble the name of the family of the provincial governor. In a few more minutes, we pass the last of the tall forest trees, the sounds of Karaoke bass throb from the distance ahead. We soon reach Panamin village, where Jimelle’s home is located. We have lunch there and distribute the remaining trail mix to the children and the canned goods to Jimelle and Moosenjoe. It is time to say goodbye to our General Ramos, as the rest of us pile into a single motorcycle tri-shaw, five of us and all the gear in one vehicle. We roar towards a flock of goats, a monitor lizard, and then a troop of macaques on the road, scattering them into the coconut plantations on each side.

Captain Punoy’s crew meet us at the harbour with their parti-coloured boat. On the boat ride back to Sagang, the entire panorama of peaks is laid out to our left. There is Striped Peak, Cleopatra’s Needle and St. Paul’s Dome. Moosenjoe stares at the peaks and I wonder what goes through his mind as he watches these landmarks of the ancestral domain for the Batak people march by.

We arrive in Sabang in time to watch the Captain’s crew preparing his boats for the races in Puerto Princesa, polishing the bottom of the flat-bottomed boat. After a day of rest and laundry, we set out early from the CERS Maoyon base at 8:15, listening to the racing results on a live radio broadcast and arriving just as our Captain Panoy wins the semifinals with the Sabang team’s 7.5 horse power flat bottom boat, the Princess Diana. We stay to watch him win the semifinals for 7 horse power mini-banka boat racing in the Underdog and return just as he is receiving the award for Best Overall Performance - first prize is 25,000 Pesos and a banka boat engine. So returning early from the expedition was worth it. We can always climb back explore the source of the Maoyon again another day.

Back at the Maoyon Base, I sleep again in a hammock high up in the tree house built in a large mango tree. During the night, I hear the hoots of a Spotted Wood Owl, Strix seloputo, from the mangrove forest. Each of its single hollow notes is answered by an identical hoot from another bird far across the river. The two sounds move gradually together until they join in space, and then there is a burst of rapid “hoo-hoo-hoo” notes as the two birds call together. In the morning at 5:30, the entire performance is repeated, as the two birds once again find each other in the darkness and sing a short duet. Is it a pair preparing to huddle together for a good day’s sleep?
I have just turned 70, and my exploration has reached five decades. It seems proper to say I began my real exploration in 1969, when I left home for America and college.

Curiosity notwithstanding, throughout my upbringing for the first two decades of my life, I could only explore around my immediate vicinity of Hong Kong. It was when I left home that I could physically explore beyond the place of my childhood. And that, I did.

Looking back on fifty years, I reminisce some of the highlights, both in years, months and days. The rainbow of colors and memories are too rich to recount in detail. Through pictures however, I felt such recall could be captured to a degree of time past, and be shared with a few friends.

That culmination of pictures became this first of a series of five books “Life as an Explorer”, a very limited edition of only 500 copies, with merely 200 available for the market. Each book would cover a decade of my exploration work. The book has 425 images, and at a few intervals included Chinese poems I wrote in the 1970s and early 1980s.

The early years of work, including those for the National Geographic, are rarely seen. They are included within pages of the book. Here I have chosen a dozen or so images for sharing. Film in those days was a rare commodity, in limited supply.

Selfie was unheard of in those days. Pictures of myself was almost nil. I recalled on my first trip to China in 1974. In 28 days of travel, I did not have one picture taken of myself. In my first ten years of exploration, I probably have only a dozen or so pictures taken of myself. It seems proper to include some of them here, to reflect on my younger days while in the field.
CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT:
Mother with three babies in Guizhou.
Gymnast practising at school, Shanghai.
Tibetan school kids of northern Sichuan.
Tibetan school kids on yaks.
Gymnasts practising, Shanghai.
School kids on truck to school, Hunan.
Day care school.
Production at pottery factory.
TOP TO BOTTOM:
Monks at Labrang monastery, 1982.
Dragon boat race in Guizhou, 1983.
Oroqen family in Inner Mongolia, 1983.

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT:
My first roommate was Warren Ward, a history graduate student from Kenosha, a small city between Chicago and Milwaukee. I went home with him on a weekend to visit his father who was a judge. It was a nice home, a house, with a double garage and a yard, a far cry from the apartment I was accustomed to in the cramped spaces of Hong Kong. It was with Warren that I began polishing up my English, from that of my Irish Jesuit training to an imitation of a midwestern American accent.

My street language was learned from a fellow student, Joe Angeles. “Sh*t” and the F word became part of my newly acquired vocabulary. With Joe, a Mexican American, I went to stay near downtown Milwaukee. For the first time, I learned what living in an attic was like. It was during Thanksgiving, and I found out that that is a big deal in the USA.

Another good friend, Steve Dorner, was in the wrestling team at school. He stayed at our same dorm and frequently hung around us Asian students, finding us extraordinary. His curiosity quickly turned to our mahjong game. He became addicted and insisted on playing with us anytime, day or night, despite losing at every game. I went home with Steve to Green Bay where his family owned a dairy farm. Learning to get up at 4am in the morning to milk the cows was an experiential and existential exercise.

In subsequent years, I went back many times to visit my university in the western part of Wisconsin State, not far from St Paul-Minneapolis, including twice to receive honors, once for a Distinguished Alumnus Award and later for an Honorary Doctorate. But I did not have many opportunities to revisit Milwaukee and Green Bay in the eastern part of the State.
When the tsunami hit Japan’s northeast coast on March 11, 2011, the trailer with this Harley was taken to sea, together with millions of tons of other debris which moved along the ocean slowly with its current. Kept afloat with its foam insulated walls, the trailer crossed the Pacific in 13 months until it was found in Canada. Yokoyama decided to donate his bike for it to be enshrined in the museum in memorial to the nearly 20,000 who lost their lives in the devastating tsunami.

Despite it being a Monday, over two dozen Harleys were parked outside in the lot. Some had come a long way from out of State to visit this museum, but we came the furthest, all the way from Hong Kong, though without sporting the headbands and tattoo. Before leaving the museum, I rode on a police Harley for my new portfolio shot.

The following day, we stayed in Green Bay at a close friend’s farm. I’ve known Martin since my National Geographic days. In 1984, when I went to China on a long expedition, Martin and his wife house-sat for me at my home in the Angeles National Forest. Later on, he joined us as our remote sensing specialist, using his NASA background to direct us to several of the river sources and becoming a key member of those expeditions. His training at Caltech and work at NASA’s Jet Propulsion Laboratory were critical in assisting me in much of my exploration work.

At Martin’s farm I had a short but memorable moment driving a tractor, but could not wait for the first practice weekend of the Green Bay Packers, a football team gradually making a come-back from the 1960s heyday of being the champions year after year. One of the highlights of this trip was the visit to the Marine Museum at nearby Manitowoc, adjacent to Green Bay. This is where, during WWII, 28 submarines were constructed, which served in both the Atlantic and Pacific theaters during the war. One retired specimen, USS Cobia, is kept here for visitors to view. It seems out of place that a shipyard so far inland, beside Lake Michigan, should be building submarines for delivery to and operations in distant oceans.

During my visit, I learned about the difficult conditions of operation inside a submarine in those days. Crammed into canvas bunks with hardly any headroom were over 70 crew members sharing around 50 beds in shifts. Some swing-out canvas bunks were strung above the torpedoes and even in between the torpedoes. The heat at over 90°F could be unbearable, necessitating even the naval officers to wear only shorts with no top, yet even so sweat would flow into a puddle below. While submarine warfare was very effective during WWII, claiming 55% of the total in enemy ships sank, the casualties was also very high. One out of five submariners would not live to return from the War. I have also learned that a torpedo cost around US$15,000, the equivalent of five houses in those days. Each firing was carefully calculated, as there were only up to twelve torpedoes for each of these submarines, firing from both bow and stern. Another interesting fact was that smoking was allowed, despite the limited space and closeted air. And back in those days, practically all naval officers smoked. On leaving the submarine, I noticed a broom put upside down above the tower. I asked why and got the explanation that this was a tradition to signify that the submarine was returning to base, having swept the enemy’s ships, sinking all of them in one single battle.

As a finale to my visit to Wisconsin, I stopped at the Oshkosh Air Show. This is also known as the Experimental Aircraft Air Show.
Association Airventure Air Show. I flew in once for this show many years ago and have been eager to return. This year, over 12,000 airplanes of all sorts flew into Oshkosh over the week-long festival of aviation. These included many experimental aircraft and home-made planes. Of particular interest to me, however, were the old War Birds, especially airplanes that flew during WWII. At least twelve DC-3s or C-47s, the later being the cargo version of the former, flew in during that week.

In early years of the gathering in the 1950s, the air show had fewer than 150 visitors with just a handful of airplanes. In 1969, the year I came to Wisconsin, the air show finally moved to Oshkosh and quickly became the largest non-commercial air show in America, and the world. During the week, the control tower here becomes the busiest one in the world. Even the Paris Airport Control Tower paid a visit here to observe how the landing and take-off are done visually and with simple radio commands.

As for me, I need to rush back to Chicago where my flight will soon be taking off for Hong Kong. This visit to Wisconsin brought back many warm memories from almost half a century ago, and I promised myself that I would make time to visit again. Perhaps I will come again in the fall for the foliage, but definitely not during the long and bitter snowy winter, which I barely survived for four years. Not all of my memories are warm ones, but those from the first three months in Wisconsin certainly were.

A TOKEN OF MY FRIENDSHIP AND GRATITUDE FOR YOUR 70TH BIRTHDAY

By Katia Buffetrill
Zhongdian, Yunnan

I first heard the name of Wong How Man through a common friend, Stéphane Gros, himself a researcher, colleague and friend at the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique in Paris. Knowing that my research on pilgrimages around sacred mountains was going to lead me to make the pilgrimage around Kawakarpo Mountain in 2003, he put me in contact with How Man. In fact, that year was a water-sheep year, considered to be the most auspicious one for the Kawakarpo pilgrimage, since it is said to be the mountain god’s birth year and the sixtieth year in the Tibetan sexagenary calendrical system. I thus met How Man, a man of immense generosity and faithful in friendship at a very auspicious time. Not only did he open to me the doors of the CERS Center beside Napa Lake, close to the city of Gyalthang, but he also invited me to participate in the program he had conceived for the pilgrims journeying to Kawakarpo mountain in that very special year. CERS first took care in repairing the wooden bridge across the Mekong, and built a tea house and a clinic next to the bridge, a compulsory passage for all pilgrims. With the help of a team of young Tibetans and Chinese, we were in a perfect situation not only to offer tea and first aid to the pilgrims but also to count the pilgrims (daily from 6AM to 8PM) and to ask a series of questions that had been chosen by How Man and the team.

It was for me a tremendous help since it is always nearly impossible to determine how many people are doing a pilgrimage in a given year. We calculated a total of 67,152 people arriving between June and October 2003. My curiosity was not yet satisfied and I wanted to go deeper in my research, so I came back in 2004, then in 2005. Again, I was able to benefit not only from the
charm of the facilities of the CERS Center but also to meet once more with How Man. I even attended a conference he gave, which allowed me to know better the multiple programs in which he himself and CERS were engaged. That was impressive. One of the programs that I found particularly exciting was the reintroduction of pure-bred mastiffs in Tibet. Ten of those beautiful dogs were living in the Center at that time.

How Man’s talent for finding particularly sublime sites is awesome and all the houses he has built, even the most simple, are beautiful and pleasant to live in. The Napa Lake Center is one example, but I especially remember the nights spent in the tea house by the bridge, rocked by the roar of the Mekong below. Then, there was the center he founded near Dechen, which became the kennel for the dogs and from where you have one of the best views of the Kawakarpo range that you could ever dream about.

Another characteristic of How Man is his insatiable curiosity and his multiple interests. He is the initiator of various projects of renovation of Tibetan nunneries and temples, but this did not prevent him from being interested in Christian missionaries as well. The Missions étrangères and the priests of the Grand Saint-Bernard hospice were very active in the region between 1846 and 1946. In 2008, with film-maker Chris Dickinson, we went to the Saint-Bernard Mission in Martigny (Switzerland) in order to interview and film Father Savioz, the last living priest of the Saint Bernard Mission to Tibet. How Man had been in contact with him over many years and had even invited him several times to come back to Tibet, but it was only in 2003, when the priest was 84 years old, that this project could be realized. Thanks to How Man, Father Savioz could come back to Tibet one last time, to a place where he had spent many years and for which he felt great love.

From all his explorations and travels, How Man brought back many extraordinary photos that everyone can admire, among other places, on the walls of the Center at Napa Lake. These photos give an idea of the numerous and varied explorations he has led. This CERS Center is also a magical place for those who want to work or write. Nearby, a wooden house rises in the woods. Divided into two parts, one for writers and the other for the monks, it offers its inhabitants the perfect quietude to write or compose. I am one of the privileged few who have lived in this house, and the weeks that I spent there were only pure happiness.

According to the Tibetan tradition, the thamaturge Padmasambhava who introduced Tantric Buddhism to Tibet, hid spiritual treasures (terma) in the earth or in the minds of his disciples in order that they be rediscovered in due course by predestined beings called “discoverers of treasures” (tertön). With his books, newsletters, exhibits and lectures, How Man plays somehow the role of a tertön, offering to all interested people the results of his discoveries and often introducing fascinating places where he himself does not stay long, thus leaving for others the pleasure of continuing the research.

Dear How Man, in this year that sees you reaching your 70th year, I wish you Tsering (Long life)!
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The mission of the China Exploration and Research Society is to enrich the understanding of our cultural and natural heritage.

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