A NEWSLETTER TO INFORM AND ACKNOWLEDGE CERS' FRIENDS AND SUPPORTERS

CHINA EXPLORERS

CHINA EXPLORATION AND RESEARCH SOCIETY

VOLUME 25 NO. 2 SUMMER ISSUE 2023

3 The Sherpa & their community in China
7 Kharchu Gomba
10 Merak Sakteng Ama Jomo Yak Hair and Welcome Pinches
14 Bhutan East
18 TO TIBET FLASHPOINT BORDER ONCE MORE
22 Retracing the Pavie Expedition
26 At Home While At Sea
30 THE BATTLE OF LUSHUN
34 CERS in the Field
35 News / CERS in the Media and Lectures
36 Thank you / Current Patrons

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP:

Sherpa team with expedition loads.

Mart Ace 2 boat.

Nine-colored Bird.

Kesang is fed alcohol by the beautiful ladies of Sakteng.

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WONG HOW MAN

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TRACY MAN, Financial Controller
BERRY SIN, Logistics Director

Editor:
WILLIAM BLEISCH, PhD

Design and Printer:
TOPPAN MERRILL LIMITED
(852) 2973 8600

HOW TO REACH CERS:
Unit 7 & 8, 27/F, Tower B, SouthMark,
11 Yip Hing Street, Wong Chuk Hang, Hong Kong
phone (852) 2555 7776 fax (852) 2555 2661
e-mail: cers@cers.org.hk
Website: www.cers.org.hk

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President's Message

HM in winter gear

As the pandemic is over, things are gradually returning to normal. CERS has even accelerated our pace to catch up for lost time over the last three years. Our colleagues are all eager to jump start new projects as well as continue old ones.

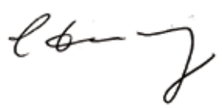
Recently I led an expedition to the foothills of the Himalayas, focusing on the border of Tibet with Bhutan and Nepal. This issue leads off with an article honoring the Sherpa, a Himalayan ethnic group that has a very distinguished legacy in mountaineering. Our team studied several small Sherpa communities on China's side within sight of villages on the Nepalese side of the border.

Following a trip to easternmost Bhutan, Ashi Kesang, a princess and friend of CERS contributed her thoughts and reflection on that journey. I also present my cursory observation and rather limited view of that remote part of Bhutan. It is followed by my account of a visit to that same border, but on the China side, a rarely visited and somewhat restricted region.

On another front, we bring our readers to the distant parts of northern Palawan for some island hopping as we explore new areas in this region where CERS has been operating for almost a decade now.

Dr Bleisch again offers our readers a fine historical piece on an expedition up the Mekong from over a century ago. It is complemented by another historical piece by KL Tam, a map collector/expert, taking us back in time also to over a century ago, to the Battle of Lu Shun, a very important and strategic coastal city of China. The Russo-Japanese War of 1905-06 is nicely condensed with commentary, as CERS recently acquired a Japanese war map of the battle, as well as a few extremely rare books on that historical incident that redefined two empires.

I hope you enjoy this issue and its diverse articles of choice.



Wong How Man
Founder/President CERS

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THE SHERPA AND THEIR COMMUNITY IN CHINA

by Wong How Mab
Zhenthang, Tibet

Sherpa is a Tibetan word, meaning people of the East, or from the east. Legend has it that they migrated long ago from the Kham area in the eastern part of the Tibetan plateau. That is today's western Sichuan and easternmost TAR, which is home to the Khampa, a most gallant subgroup among Tibetan people. They are famous as the stockiest, fiercest, most warrior-like, and bravest of the plateau. So it is not unfitting that the Sherpa, like the Khampa, are brave and persevering, though not in a martial sense.

The Sherpa, over time, have become a distinct group of Tibetan people residing mainly on the southern slopes of the Himalayas. They concentrate along the foothill border belt of today's Nepal with a population of around half a million. But a few little-known pockets of Sherpa villages and communities still inhabit north of the range, on the Tibetan side within China, where I am now.

The Sherpa's culture, history and religion are largely aligned with that of the Tibetan nomads on the plateau, though in lifestyle they have transitioned from being nomadic livestock herders to transhumance pastoralists, tending to high mountain yak and sheep, but also cultivating terraced fields at lower elevation with marginal and subsistence farming.

The Sherpa people, as an ethnic group, have gained the notice and recognition of the West, as well as the world over, within the last hundred years. They have become by far the most notable group in mountaineering history and a legacy of the Himalayas. It is no exaggeration to say that, without the Sherpa, modern mountaineering history would be nearly wiped out, if not completely so. The physically challenging endeavor of high-altitude climbing would never have become such a hotly pursued sport without the involvement and support of the Sherpa. ▶

TOP TO BOTTOM:
Lookout from Zhenthang town.
Climbing team with Sherpa in front.
Sherpa team with expedition loads.
Hillary climbing in front of Tenzing.

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP:

1953 Everest climbing team.
Tenzing on Everest summit.
Tenzing tying Dhamey's boots.
Tenzing & his mother.

The defining moment for the Sherpa was on May 29, 1953 when Tenzing Norgay became one of first two men to set foot on Everest, highest mountain in the world. He and Edmund Hillary, a beekeeper from New Zealand, made mountaineering history with this crowning achievement. The humble and modest Sherpa, who was quickly claimed by both Nepal and India as their native son, did not look at this as a conquest, but as a blessing from Qomolongma, the female goddess who is the source of the traditional name for Everest. She had shown pity on him, thus allowing him to reach the top. This is a sharp contrast to what his climbing mate Edmund Hillary cracked upon his descent to the South Col support camp; "We knocked the bastard off!" Hillary, later on in life, were to redeem his arrogance by devoting much of his life by returning his service to the Sherpa.

Tenzing's modesty would set the model for many male and female Sherpa mountaineers to follow, overcoming the utmost physical challenges with inward mental and spiritual balance. Sherpa achievements at global summits are too long to list, and it would make leading climbers of other nations pale in comparison. Not to mention the supply chain run by the Sherpa, who handle all the climbing logistics, shuttling supplies and equipment in long human caravans to multiple high camps throughout the Himalayas. Their activities include emergency evacuation of climbers from thin air back to the safety of basecamps, a life-threatening endeavor even for the best among climbers.

Some quotes regarding Tenzing, the best-known of all Sherpas, would be appropriate here. "There is a flame in Tenzing, a marvelously strong and pure flame that no storm of man or nature can extinguish. It is compounded of dream and desire, will and struggle, pride and humility; and in the end, with the deed done, the victory gained, it is the man's humility that stands out above all his other qualities. In his moment of triumph what he felt in his heart was gratitude to Everest. His prayer for his future life is that it may be worthy of Everest…." (James Ramsey Ullman, *Tiger of the Snows*)

I happen to know Tenzing's eldest son Norbu and youngest son Dhamey quotes his father; "You cannot be a good mountaineer, however great your ability, unless you are cheerful and have the spirit of comradeship. Friends are as important as achievement….teamwork is the one key to success, and selfishness only makes a man small. No man, on a mountain or elsewhere, gets more out of anything than he puts into it. Be Great, Make Others Great".

Dhamey sent me a photo of himself as a young boy of five, taken at around 1975, when he received his first pair of mountaineering boots from his father. The picture shows the kid on one knee while his father bends down to tie his laces. From a Sherpa son about his Sherpa father in his own words; "To me, the man behind the mask atop Everest was my Pala, the Sherpa and Tibetan word for father. I am the youngest

son of Tenzing and was born long after his Everest ascent. In many ways I feel fortunate to be born after Everest. I got to know the other side of Tenzing, a fantastic regular dad – funny at times, humble and one who gave us his complete affection." Today, Dhamey puts his time and effort not into climbing, but into working for the betterment, welfare and respect due the Sherpa people. As with his father, Tenzing Norgay not only broke the snow path to the summit of Everest, he also broke the stereotyped path for the entire Sherpa community, gaining them fame, recognition and respect.

With this background of the Sherpa, my team and I penetrated the Tibet/ Nepal border to Zhenthang, where six Sherpa villages exist hidden in a forest sanctuary of the Himalayas. In these villages there are around 400 households with a little over 2000 people, of which 99% are Sherpa. "Thang" in Tibetan is a place name, like Lithang, Bathang, Gyalthang (known as Shangri-la today) - all in the Kham area. So Zhenthang's name may have originated from its association with people from Kham as well. We headed to the furthest village of Xuezongma, one that has two hot springs nearby.

While visiting one of the hot springs, we ran into a father and daughter also heading there and gave them a ride. Norbu the father is 34 and the daughter Laba is 13. Together with Laba's four sisters, they move to high camp every summer to tend to their livestock. During the winter, they stay at their winter home. Since 2017, each Sherpa family has been assigned a new home built by the government, besides receiving Rmb 3000 per person as annual subsidy.

Before the pandemic, each year during the summer and autumn, the family would hire a few Sherpa workers from across the border in Nepal to come help in farm work. On top of providing meals and accommodations in their home, they would have to pay the workers Rmb 200 per day. Each time the workers would stay for five days, twice a year for a total of ten days. At Zhenthang, some Nepali Sherpa workers stayed behind and married into a local Sherpa family becoming localized. ▶

TOP TO BOTTOM:

Zhenthang township.
Sherpa young mother with baby.
Sherpa houses at Xuezongma.
Nanji with his drum & hunting spear

TOP TO BOTTOM:

Sherpa woman with headdress,
Sherpa man with baby basket
Sherpa baby basket collected
Sherpa home-brewed liquor
Route to Zhenthang at border point 4

Nanji is 66 years old. Compared to other Sherpa, he is widely traveled and has been throughout different regions of the plateau, including Amdo to the northeast, Kham to the east, and of course Lhasa. With a pig tail hanging down his back, beaded necklace and felt hat, he looks more Tibetan than the usual Sherpa. Indeed Sherpa are of Tibetan stock. Even Tenzing Norgay, the mountaineering hero, admitted late in life that he was born and grew up on the Tibet side of the border valley.

Nanji is a very handy person, showing us a wooden drum with yak hide that he made. He uses it to perform religious ceremonies for the villagers, like a local shaman. When there are disputes within the village, he takes the role of “Ah Ya” and becomes the arbitrator as well as the judge. Recently, he received a contract to transport cement, bricks and mortar from the road to the famous Nine Eyes Hot Spring an hour away. The local government is eager to turn that into a tourist site. On each trip, he could carry 30 to 35 kilos of material at Rmb two Yuan per kilo. Each day he can haul a load twice, netting a monthly income of between 3000 to 4500 Rmb, sufficient to feed his family of seven.

Another work for income is the collecting of cordyceps and the making of “Ji Zhua Gu” liquor from a local grain with seed-heads shaped a little like chicken feet. Between the months of May to July, the entire family goes to high country to collect cordyceps, the medicinal fungus-infected worm. Though this region is not best known for cordyceps, each piece can still fetch between Rmb 10 and 18 Yuan. On average, each month they can net about 1000 pieces, making a good addition to their other farming income. During the leisure months, the wife Lamo also weaves some bamboo baskets for sale to supplement their income. The baby-carrying basket is quite unique, being strapped over the forehead with a chord, with the basket set in a sideways fashion on the back. We collected a number of woven products including one baby carrier for the CERS collection.

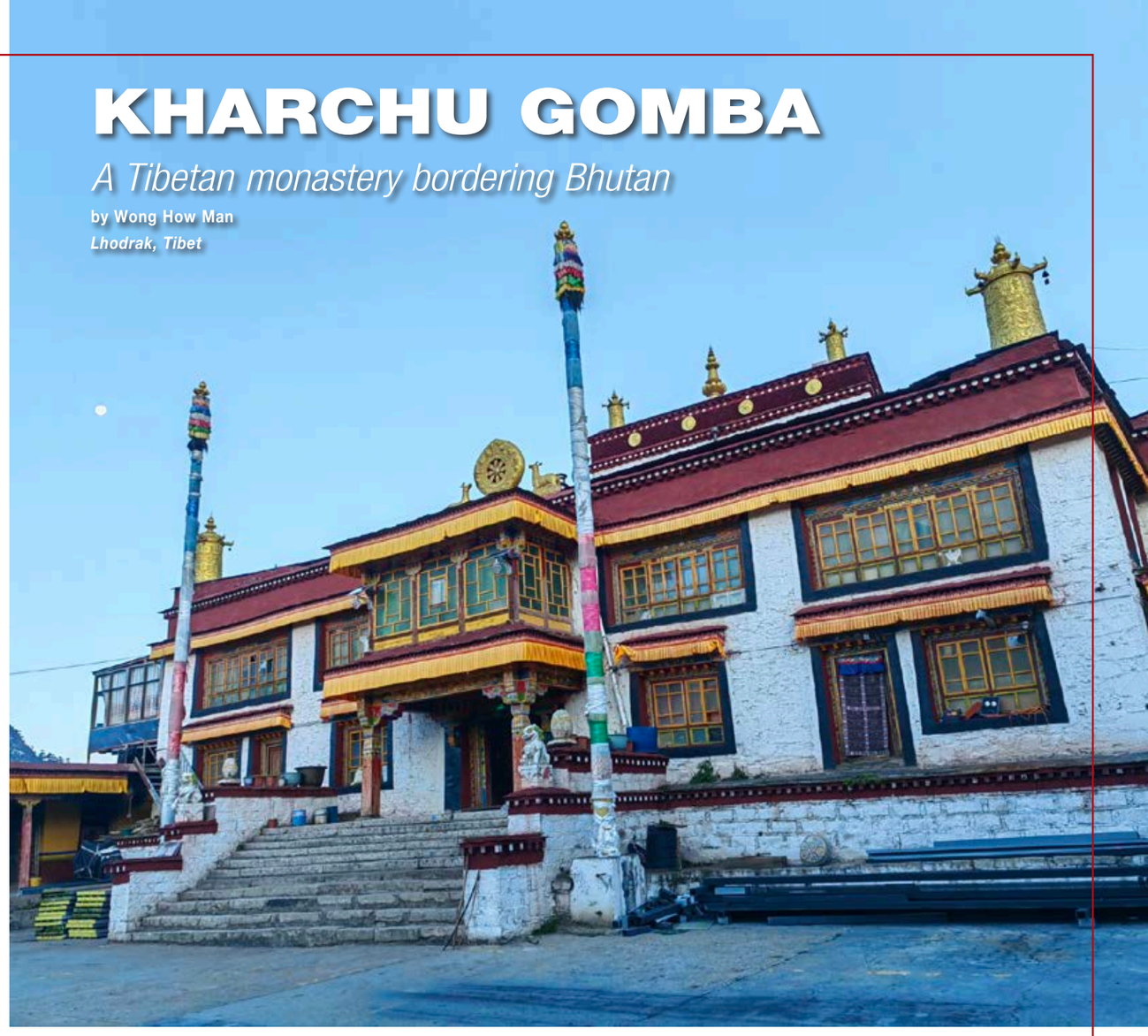
The special grain liquor is said to become more mellow as it ages. We had the opportunity to try some, served inside a bamboo tube with a straw through which to suck it. It is said that the locals compare the vintage liquor to the amniotic fluid of a pregnant woman. It is a reflection of the early worship of a woman’s reproductive power, remnant of the respect for the female during the early matrilineal period in Tibetan history.

Our visit to the Sherpa villages of China may have been short, but it filled a gap among my almost fifty years of work on minorities of China. For now, the Sherpa are not recognized as a separate entity within China’s minority nationalities but are considered a subgroup of the Tibetans. Sherpa status and renown however have grown far beyond these hidden mountains and valleys of the Himalayas, and their achievements have landed them in the vocabulary of the world with worthy admiration. No wonder Dhamey is so proud of his father Tenzing Norgay. The world should be, too.

KHARCHU GOMBA

A Tibetan monastery bordering Bhutan

by Wong How Man
Lhodrak, Tibet



Kharchu Gomba is an important Nyingma (Red Sect) monastery founded in 1570, over 450 years ago, at an altitude of over 4000 meters above sea level. The mountain on which it sits boasts over a hundred meditation caves, and Guru Rinpoche who brought Buddhism from India into Tibet is said to have meditated here for seven years during the 7th century.

This is the closest monastery to the Bhutan border. Before the pandemic, there were regular exchanges of trade and pilgrims visiting. During the summer the Bhutanese would cross by the high herding pasture pass to come here, and in winter they would follow a river that flows down from across the border into Tibet through a deep valley. Traditional merchandise were grain, electrical appliances, red salt, woven fabric, tea and wooden bowls. The last three were what Bhutanese across the border were famous for and used for exchange. ▶

TOP TO BOTTOM:

Kharchu Gombe.
Entrance to monastery.

TOP TO BOTTOM:

Snow peaks around monastery.
Himalayan Monal.
Himalayan Monal and Gorels.
Nine-colored Bird

The government recently built a paved road which ends at the monastery, not only for the convenience of pilgrims but also hoping to attract tourists. But the monastery attracts also something far more unique and special. As soon as we park our cars, I see two dark, sharp-horned, mountain goats grazing peacefully along the guard rail of the road. These animals are known to be very alert and shy, but here they seem totally at peace.

We stay the night at the monastery and are served a rather simple meal by the attending monks. There is still some construction going on in the courtyard, as it seems the monastery is gearing up to accommodate a sudden flood of visitors. Behind the monastery, the hill drops down to a flush wooded valley and there are occasional chortens and pagodas dotting the otherwise green overgrowth. Prayer flags mark a few trails where pilgrims go about their circumambulation of the nearby mountain.

The next morning, I want to pay a visit to the head monk. Before I enter the main premises, I come face to face with the most beautiful pheasant I have ever seen. Its head is like that of a peacock and the body sports a rainbow of colors, shining all the way to the tail. This is the rare Himalayan Monal (*Lophophorus impejanus*), Red-listed as globally Endangered and the national bird of Nepal. A rainbow has seven shades of color, but this pheasant is said to have nine, thus the local name of "Nine Colored Bird." Perhaps his silver and gold taints are considered the two additional colors.

This single bird is casually feeding on some barley grain that I suppose the monks have laid out by the entrance door. He - as the attractive colors are reserved for male birds - ignores my presence and continues to nip away leisurely.

Suddenly, a mother and child mountain goat also appear. I cannot tell if they are serow or goral or tahr, and only later find out that they are Himalayan Goral (*Naemorhedus goral*), a species that occurs in China only at a few spots. They too are coming by for their breakfast alongside the pheasant. The two beautiful species, one a bird the other a mammal, share the meal and the space quietly as if neighbors cohabiting a common home. The setting is so tranquil that I sit there for a long moment to just absorb the

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP:

Shampa with HM.
Shampa Tsumdrup.
Main assembly hall.
Kharchu Gomba by Bhutan border route map.
Route map of HM on both sides of border.

peace and serenity. Such moments are therapeutic beyond what any mind-healing gurus can offer.

One such guru is 43 year old Shampa Tsumdrup who lives just beyond the door inside the monastery. He is the head monk of Kharchu Monastery, where today there are 34 monks in total. His CV is quite impressive, including studies at some of the most important scholastic centers on the plateau. Coming from a livestock-tending family of nearby Lakhang town, he was influenced by Buddhist activities of the monastery from an early age and wanted to become a monk. His parents gave consent when he was twelve years old, so he entered Kharchu Monastery as a novice.

Shampa later studied under Buddhist masters at Samye Monastery, the oldest established monastery of Tibet, founded in the 8th Century. From there he went on to Baiyu Monastery for two additional years of study, before heading in 2006 to Beijing to join the Tibetan Buddhist Academy for two years. Upon graduating as a khenpo, the highest degree in Nyingma Buddhism, equivalent to a PhD in the West, Shampa returned to Kharchu Monastery to become its head. Recently, he published a book regarding the history of his home monastery and the adjacent meditation legacy.

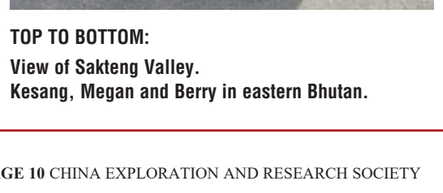
Shampa hosts us in his private chamber, almost as colorful as the Himalayan Monal. He is very soft spoken and humble, matching his kind face. As gifts, he gives us special tea picked at lower elevations of the mountain, some blessed pills for all ailments, the book he wrote in Tibetan, and for me a special tiny statue of a deity of his Nyingma Sect.

Before the new road was finished during the pandemic, the monastery is not known beyond its immediate vicinity and then mainly among Tibetan pilgrims. But the situation may soon change with today's internet age. It can be expected that the many independent tourists will soon be heading up to this remote corner of China next to Bhutan.

With this new influx of visitors, the monastery will likely receive more supplicant donations. But I hope at the same time, the lovely wildlife, like the "Nine-Colored Bird" and its neighbours the gorals, would also multiply and continue to thrive on this peaceful border.

MERAK & SAKTENG: AMA JOMO, YAK HAIR & WELCOME PINCHES

By Kesang Choden T.



TOP TO BOTTOM:

View of Sakteng Valley.
Kesang, Megan and Berry in eastern Bhutan.

As we drove along the West-East highway, from Thimphu to Bumthang, through the late afternoon and well into the night; we crossed paths with some unexpected traffic.

Our car halted twice. Once, for a pair of large grey vultures hopping across the highway, and next, for a pair of Himalayan Serow, a type of furry antelope, who were lazing about in the middle of the road. We were also startled by a flash of translucent bluish-purple hues that sped across the black tarred path in front of us. A beautiful male pheasant running after a dull brown female.

It was, we felt, a promising start to the long eighteen to twenty hours' drive to Eastern Bhutan; a place I had not been to, since I last drove there as a teenager with a freshly minted driving license.

Tashigang proved to be as hot as I remembered it. The roads were exceptionally wide and smooth, and the town was a little further along in economic and structural development than twenty years ago. The almost tropical atmosphere, intermingled with the cultural nuances of a laid-back attitude and the teasing humor of the Eastern Bhutanese, hit us full force when we stopped to buy a variety of local bananas for How Man. After a few expeditions with How Man, we had made a mental note that mangoes and bananas were among his favourites.

The toothless, smiling lady held up a large bunch of fat, lightly yellowed bananas. She spoke only Shingle, in the most well-known and widely-spoken

dialect - Sharchop (Eastern). We spoke none but negotiated as best we could. She, with some mischievous humor, charged us more than what it would cost even in the capital Thimphu. In addition, her neighbor seller, a kindly, almost toothless gentleman with a light whiff of alcohol wafting in the air around him, also persuaded us to buy his beans, again, at a price we would have never paid in the Thimphu vegetable markets! Nonetheless, we happily drove off, with our overpriced purchases, to meet How Man and the Hong Kong team at the hotel in Tashigang.

The next day, I had anonymously booked a homestay at Merak without much fanfare and without alerting anyone. However, not even two minutes after stepping out of the car, the village Mangmi (Vice Head) Tashi Dorji came running uphill, looking thoroughly panicked. Word of mouth has been the fastest and most reliable news service in Bhutan for many centuries; this proved true even today. Later, as the Mangmi guided us through the roughly hewn, dusty, meandering path, it dawned on me that the whole village knew who we were. I saw the shy smiles, and some stern looks, peeking over the cobbled stone walls that lined the pathway. I was pleasantly surprised to understand most of the excited whispers exchanged in their own dialect, which was a mix of Choekyi (Tibetan Dharma Script) and Tibetan (colloquial Lhasa dialect) with a smattering of Tshangla and Mon-kha (Tawang dialect).

The bone-chilling winds that mingled with the dusty darkness eventually drew us indoors to the small, yet hot wood stove at our homestay. The others turned in early for the night, but I fell asleep on the hard bench by the warm stove, listening well into the night to the history, both fact and fantastical, of the communities of Merak and Sakteng. ▶

TOP TO BOTTOM:

Three generations of Merak ladies outside their home.
How Man Wong with our Merak homestay host.
How Man Wong pinched and fed alcohol by the beautiful ladies of Sakteng.

The migration of the Merak and Sakteng communities from Tsona in Tibet[1] is generally agreed to have happened around the 14th Century. A local chieftain Yezang/Drezang Ponpo, or Dreba Yabu of Tsona, was a tyrannical ruler who made the populace suffer with his unreasonable demands. One of these demands was to cut the mountain top that was blocking the sun from reaching his palace. After many years and months of suffering, a lady of the community called Ama Jomo, believed to be an emanation of the guardian diety Relchigma[2], pretending to soothe the child she was carrying on her back, sang thus; "It is better to cut off a human's head than it is to try to cut a mountain's top."[3]

The community understood this message, which led to the assassination of the chieftain. Fearing repercussions for their crimes, they pleaded with Ama Jomo, and their spiritual teacher Lama Gyarepa, to resettle the community in a place where they would not be tried for their crimes.

The large community is said to have travelled through Tawang (now in Arunachal Pradesh, India), and finally settled in three places in Bhutan; Sakteng, Merak and Phongmey. To this day, they all worship Ama Jomo as a mountain deity. Her divine abode is a white snowy mountain peak visible from Merak, and her life force is a large lake directly below this peak.

Motorable roads and mobile phones were introduced as recently as a little over ten years ago. Locals have no cordyceps to collect or buckwheat and barley to harvest, unlike their Laya and Lingzhi counterparts in the western highlands. They have, instead, some trade with the Tawang people and with India, but their mainstay still remains a traditional way of life deeply connected with the highlands that speak of yaks, sheep and mountain deities.

Their traditional diet consists of a corn paste and dishes filled with fresh cheese, dried herbs, flowers and mushrooms from the mountains, mixed with a very small dash of strongly fermented cheese, a specialty of their region called Zoe-tay.

In Bhutanese culture we have a saying that, even if a guest doesn't eat a meal at one's home, the guest must not leave 'empty-mouthed.' While drinking a cup or two of milk tea or butter tea is a must in the western parts of Bhutan, one must be warned that very strong fermented rice or corn wine (*ara*) is an absolute must for serving in the eastern parts. In Merak and Sakteng, this is accompanied by song by the ladies of the locality, dressed to the nines in their colourful yak and sheep wool woven clothing.

TOP TO BOTTOM:

The Mangmi of Merak with his own flower embroidery.
Monk Sonam explaining Merak clothing to How Man Wong.

1 Tsona area is presumed to be Tsona Dzong (Cona City) under the present-day Shannan Prefecture, Tibetan Autonomous Region, China.

2 Also known as Ekadzati, a female guardian deity of the Buddhist Guardian Deity Pantheon.

3 "Olo, olo, Ri gyi Gu Towa, Mi Gyi Gu Topa Dra." A play on the word 'Gu' which means top, tip, head, beginning.

The ladies in Merak were either too shy to sing to us, or were told not to perform the usual custom when serving us alcohol. In retrospect, I was glad, as I was later informed by a friend of mine that she and her group were sung to, forced to drink alcohol and playfully kicked (quite hard) in the shins, to ensure they drank their fill of the customary three 'sips' and then some.

The Sakteng community, informed by the Merak Mangmi, was well prepared and received us with some fanfare. As I was wondering why the Gup Tshewang Tshering was so curious to know whether we would be spending the night at Sakteng, many well dressed and pretty ladies suddenly appeared with traditional flasks of alcohol in hand. The Gup sweetly explained that, as it was a day trip and not an overnight, they would perform the night festivities at lunch! Each of us was sung to, and generously offered *ara*. I took three sips as the Gup instructed, yet the ladies gently forced the rest of the alcohol down my throat, all the while pinching my ears, arms and thighs. When I protested that I had had my three sips, the Gup was amused; three 'sips' meant three full cups!

The best part was seeing How Man, looking like a little schoolboy with a very pleased smile plastered on his face as several colourful ladies surrounded and sang to him. This was followed by all the ladies personally placing the bowl of *ara* to his lips and forcing it down in quick successions, all the while pinching him on his thighs, arms and ears! Evidence of how hard they pinched us all came to light at breakfast the next day, when we found ourselves covered in blue and black marks.

The landscape of Sakteng was more forgiving than Merak, and perhaps this was why, as they told us, that the older members of the community settled in Sakteng, while the more sturdy and younger ones settled in the rugged terrain of Merak. Sakteng was an open green valley with small rolling hills, and though only a day's walk from Merak, their dialect was very different from what the Merak community spoke, a mixture of Mon-kha and a type of Tibetan dialect that I couldn't place.

Yak herding was also their mainstay, but they were more well known for their carpet weaving. Beautiful and unusual diamond patterns stood out against the black weave of yak hair, further enhanced by red and yellow dyed sheep's wool that encircled the borders.

I asked what they hoped for their communities in the future. They told me they wished for higher education, but also for the educated lot to return home, rather than be dazzled by the city lights. They wished for better roads, not to leave their communities, but for people to visit them. And that they wished for further trade, not to make more money, but to maintain their lifestyle, and sustain their way of life.

On our very long return journey down the winding roads snaking through the Himalayan mountains, I was left with 19-year-old Meghan Ma's wise words describing what she learnt on this expedition with us.

She shared that people from 'modern' countries should not judge these communities to be 'poor.' She agreed that they did not have an array of choices or modern amenities and luxuries, unlike Hong Kong or other 'developed' countries. Yet, as simple as their lives were, they were happy, and more importantly, they were content. In a modern world, that was something hard to come by, simplicity and contentment.

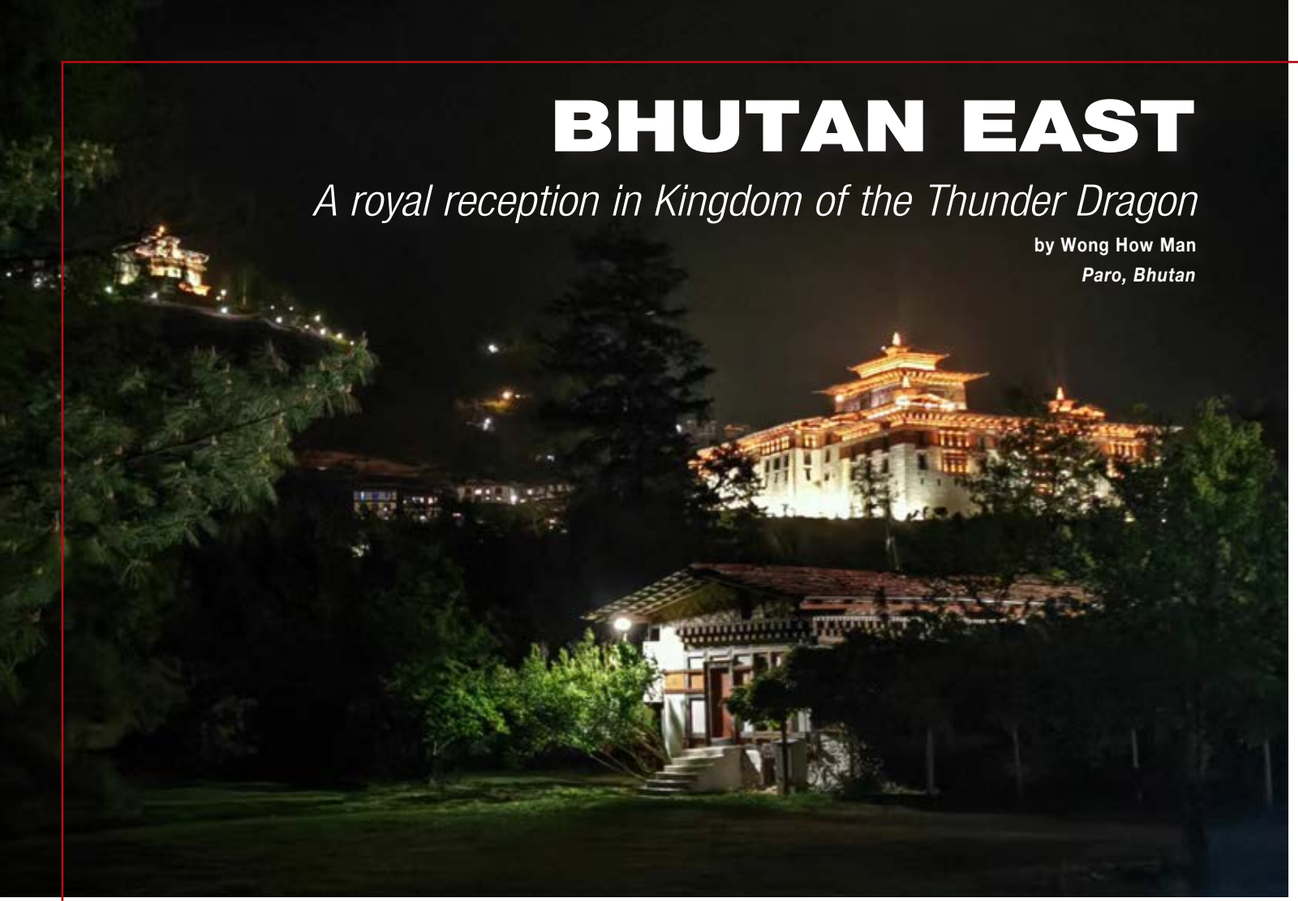
TOP TO BOTTOM:

Kesang is fed alcohol by the beautiful ladies of Sakteng.
Village alley in Sekteng.
Looking out a Bhutanese door.
Merak yak herder spinning yak yarn as he walks.

BHUTAN EAST

A royal reception in Kingdom of the Thunder Dragon

by Wong How Man
Paro, Bhutan



TOP TO BOTTOM:
Paro Dzong & palace.
Ashi Kesang at the wheel.
Tashigang.

The roads are rough and unpaved, not unlike my early exploration of Tibet some forty years ago. But it is understandable, as we are at the eastern end of Bhutan on the way to some of the most remote communities of this Himalayan kingdom. However, soon this bad road will be history, as the tar-topping machine can be seen paving sections of this last stretch of the road. The pace of change is slow but steady, like much else in this Druk kingdom, or the Land of the Dragon.

The Landcruiser I am in takes the turns and switch backs of the road with ease, kicking up a trail of dust in its wake. Behind the wheel are a pair of steady hands. These are no ordinary hands, but those of Ashi Kesang. I would love to be behind the wheel myself, but it is not to be. She loves driving and has taken on such roads since the age of thirteen, when she was given the keys by her mother for the first time and told to drive east.

Downshifting without a thought as we approached a curve, she pulls the car out of the corner while accelerating with ease. I can feel her full confidence in maneuvering this man-sized SUV through the most difficult mountain roads. My sexist notions of "man-sized car" and "woman driver" must not slip from my lips. Instead, Ashi, meaning princess, would occasionally snap; "Woman driver!" when she was slowed down by some lately liberated female driver while driving through the capital town of Thimphu. One small modifier – Ashi often drives in her *kira*, the traditional costume of a long skirt stretching far down beyond her knees to her ankles.

We are heading into Merak, a small community at the end of the road. As usual, I am curious about the furthest points of each country, call them frontier regions or fringe areas. (*An account of three border communities we visited is vividly written up by Ashi Kesang and posted separately*)

Ashi's quiet voice and gentle demeanor can be a camouflage for her and delusionary to others. But her mind is strong like the metal steel chains of the iron bridges built by Thangtong Gyalpo, the legendary 14th century master builder and sage of Tibet. At one point we stopped at Tachog Gomba, a monastery near the border of Tashigang and Yangtse, the two eastern Dzongs, or districts, and my focus on this trip. The small monastery is near a former site of one such bridge and protects relics in the form of huge iron chains encased behind glass on display.

Perhaps a note on Thangtong Gyalpo is appropriate here. A Da Vinci of the plateau, a renaissance man of Tibet, he came to Bhutan seven hundred years ago and successfully constructed ten iron suspension bridges as models for his later engineering feats throughout Tibet. In order to raise funds for building such bridges, he founded Tibetan opera with a traveling troupe of six sisters to raise money. On top of that he was a master architect with many important temples built under his watch. He is also revered as the medicinal deity for his knowledge of traditional healing methods. During the pandemic, his statues flooded the market in Lhasa. My connection to this deity is through a statue of him that Ashi's grandmother had chosen as a gift for me.

Ashi has inherited her grandmother's strong mind and valor in execution for preserving the traditional cultural and religious heritage of the kingdom. No sophisticated packaging and fancy words are needed - despite her western education, her track record speaks louder than words. We are proud to share the same *modus operandi*.

Her grandmother is none other than the Royal Grandmother Ashi Kesang Choden Wangchuck. The Ashi behind the wheel of my car, by chance or by design, carries exactly the same name as Her Majesty, now 94 years of age, who is very much my patron whenever I visit Bhutan. The benefits include, not least, that my humble body is allowed to take up temporary refuge inside some of the off-site palaces at Her Majesty's gracious discretion.

While staying at the Paro Palace, I managed to host our CERS directors on our board retreat for tea one afternoon. Her Majesty arranged for a morning breakfast at the Namseyling Palace for directors on the day of their arrival. The next day a sumptuous lunch was prepared at her Royal Palace after she gave a wonderful audience to all the directors present, and showered everyone with royal gifts. As before, I was given bottles of health supplement pills, a concentrate concoction made from Her Majesty's royal supply of Cordyceps, and two wooden crates of "Royal Jelly", or jam, made from fruit grown in her garden. I felt honored as well as humbled to be offered a red *khata* ceremonial scarf. Usually, a white one would be given as blessings and courtesy.

Her Majesty on this trip also provided me the use of a palace car, though with the flag covered, and an experienced driver during the entire two-weeks stay of my time in the kingdom. Now, in the east, that is our escort vehicle, which has taken two full days drive to get here. For some reason, with two cars fielded, I feel more safe and special sitting in a car driven by Ashi the princess.

Our trip out east is to fill my desire to have a brief look at Bhutan away from the tourist routes, and hopefully to develop some worthy projects in the future among the remotest corners of the kingdom. I always remind myself, a life-long geographer, that Bhutan is larger than Taiwan or Belgium, yet with a population of 1/30th and 1/15th that of the other two respectively. ▶

TOP TO BOTTOM:
Remains of iron bridge on display.
Relic bridge chains.
Temple near iron bridge.
Lunch at Royal Grandmother palace.
Her Majesty with CERS directors.

TOP TO BOTTOM:

Gifts to CERS directors.
First university of Bhutan.
Students of the college.
Rare books at library.
Audience chamber at Tashigang.

As labor or man power is obviously not its best asset, the kingdom has gone for brain prowess and happiness power. Bhutan developed what is now known the world over as its GNH, Gross National Happiness index, as opposed to the rest of the world's GDP index. Measuring each country's development based on a scale of per capita income by averaging the numbers seems delusionary and incomplete, if not archaic, as it takes no account of the social safety net nor infrastructure investment. Neither can economists account for where each country's GDP growth has gone. Toward a broad per capita distribution? Or totally lop-sided, toward a few individuals' top-end pockets. We perhaps need more socially equitable economists in this world.

What Bhutan has achieved with a tiny population, despite being a land-locked country sandwiched delicately between the two rising powerhouses of India and China, has been phenomenal and most worthy of respect. The next phase of growth, however, may be more challenging. The kingdom faces an exodus of brains and educated people to Australia after the pandemic, as opportunities overseas are becoming an attraction for the younger set.

CERS is a tiny entity with limited resources. So we have always focused on small and remote communities where we feel our small help can produce some substantial impact, as opposed to the big data and impact by scale so popular in the digital world today. Our partner communities are often off the map and neglected. Thus, my request to have a look at two small communities in eastern Bhutan, Merak and Sakteng, both within the region of Tashigang. We went also up northeast to briefly cover the region of Yangtse, bordering Tibet and India.

My flight from Thimphu the capital to Tashigang in the east in a brand new twin turboprop ATR 42 took 45 minutes. Landing on a strip high up on a ridge was exciting. The drive into town took around twenty minutes and we stopped to visit Sherubtse College, the first university in Bhutan. Set up in 1968, it is now under the administration of the Royal University of Bhutan in Thimphu. I find it amazing that Bhutan would set up its first university in a faraway Dzongkhag in order to lift the poorest part of the kingdom upward; very strategic and forward thinking indeed.

Two of the deans Dendup Tshering and Paljor Galay, of the school of Research and student affairs respectively walked me through campus, observing student in class or in small groups in the well-manicured green lawn. I made a visit to the library, peeked into classrooms and dormitories, then the canteen and kitchen, and ended by taking a simple lunch at the university café. Students did not have school uniforms but were all wearing traditional national costume.

The deans told me that the university used to have many Indian professors helping in teaching and development of curriculum, but now it is totally independent and run by Bhutanese. They also have a few foreign professors including two from the U.S. I hope in time, I can make a connection for the university with two other schools I am involved with, University of Hong Kong and Westlake University in Hangzhou China.

After lunch, we checked into a posh traditional hotel. I was delighted that I was assigned the huge room with reception chamber usually reserved for the King when he visited the eastern region. The refrigerator was stocked with some wonderful beverages. The chamber was highly decorated and overlooked the Dzong castle below at a distance. At night, the monumental edifice on the cliff side was lit up nicely, showing its full majesty.

The following day we visited Merak and stayed the night at a spartan yet clean home-stay house. The colorfully dressed women wore black yak caps that were unique, with five strings curling out like legs from the rim. Functionally these serve to drain rainwater and prevent it dripping into their faces. While being led through the village and its immediate surrounding, we were entertained with multiple stories as the village chief pointed to every shape of rock along the path to illustrate legends, deities, or devils, with all seriousness. I was also able to collect a traditional bow with arrows, with the bow collapsible into two parts for easy transport. A double-tube bamboo flute and weaved rug also are now within our collection of ethnic objects.

In the evening, six ladies dressed in their best and most colorful costumes showed up to offer us songs and ceremonial *ara*, a local fermented liquor. At each interval of a song, a bowl of this strong liquor would be poured into my mouth. I was force fed more or less, as at the same time, several hands would be onto various parts of my body - my arm, my waist, my thigh, and even my ears - pinching so hard that I would open my mouth to cry out "Ouch!" at which point the drink would be successfully administered. These three rounds of drink, I suppose, are meant to insure that the special guest will always remember his gracious hosts.

The next day we visited Sakteng, another small community, through even worse roads. Later that day, we drove up to Tashi Yangtse, the northeastern Dzong of Bhutan. As with all Dzong forts, it housed the monastic body and the government offices. I always admired the castle-like architecture and design of these buildings, let alone the effort of building them at the most precarious locations.

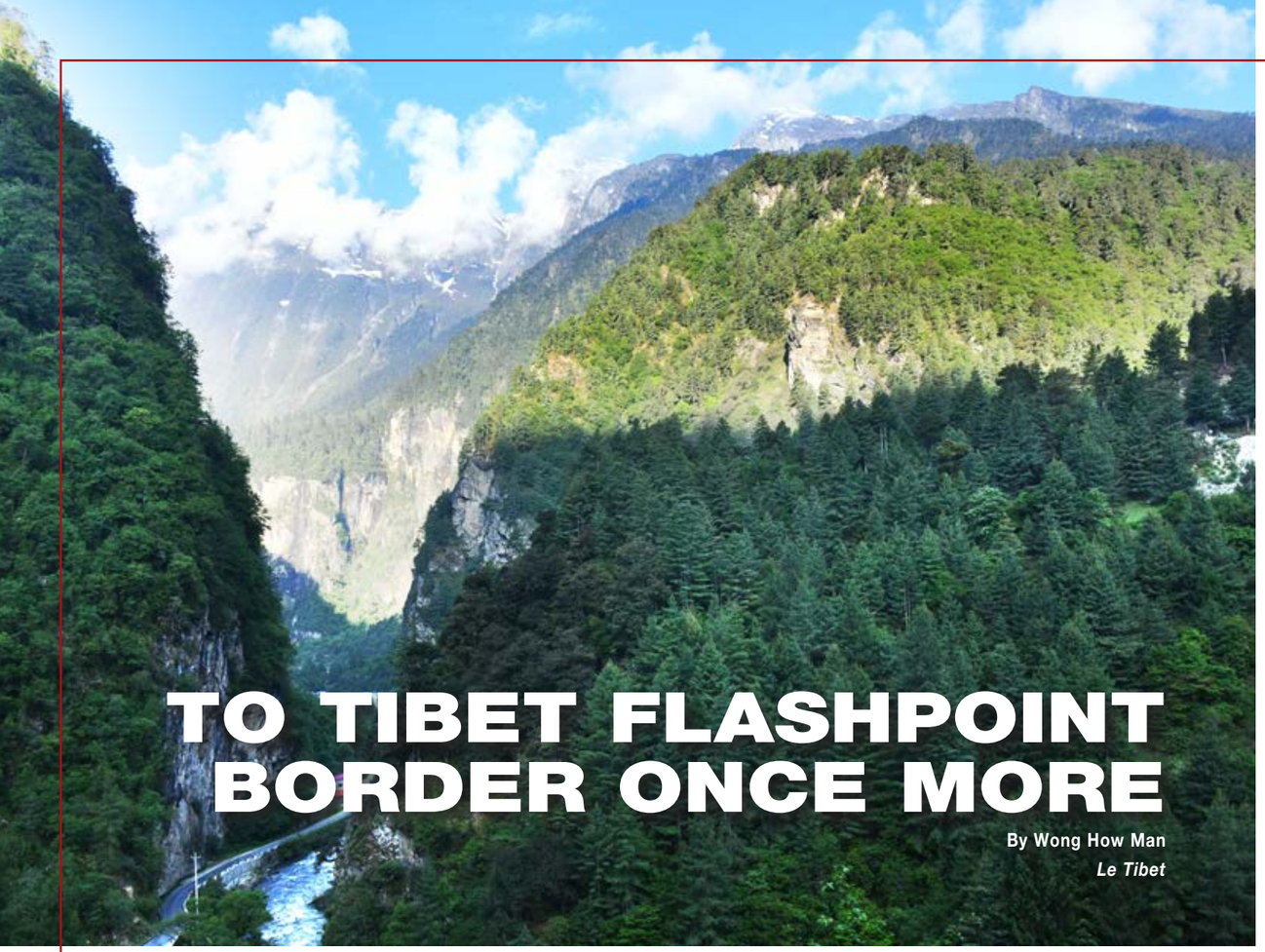
At two of the monasteries, we were shown the ancient relics and Thangka scroll paintings. There were two *tashigomang*, meter-tall, pagoda-shaped, portable religious ornaments that have become extremely rare in Bhutan and obsolete throughout Tibet. With Ashi Kesang, and with Sonam as our attending monk, it was decided that these two objects require immediate restoration as they were dilapidated and falling apart. It was arranged on site that soon they would be sent to the Restoration Center in Thimphu for work.

It is said that villagers of both Bhutan near Merak and Sakteng and those from Tawang of India, cross the border regularly either for trading or as pilgrims to sacred sites on both sides of the border. Tawang, being the birth place of the romantic and poetic 6th Dalai Lama, is considered very holy. However, during the pandemic, all cross-border traffic was suspended, and it has yet to reopen for pilgrims.

After four short days in the east, we began our arduous two-day drive back to Thimphu. We spent a night in Bumthang in a Swiss-built lodge and arrived in the capital the following day just in time for dinner. My thirst for seeing the east is quenched. But to be deserving of the graciousness bestowed on me by the Royal Grandmother, as well as by the ladies who serenaded me with toasts, would not be as easy. Perhaps building a connection to the university would be a first step in the right direction.

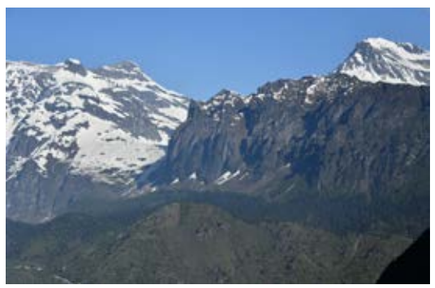
CLOCKWISE FROM TOP:

Preparing liquor for guests.
Singing to guest.
Weaver of Merak.
Tashigang Dzong fortress.
Fortress courtyard.
Chorten Kora in Tashi Yangtze.



TO TIBET FLASHPOINT BORDER ONCE MORE

By Wong How Man
Le Tibet



TOP TO BOTTOM:
Deep gorge of Lebugou.
Curvy road to border.
Snow range along road.

Lebugou is a gorge of the Namka River that flows from Tsona County in southern Tibet into India-controlled Tawang district. Nearby are our small villages on the China-controlled side of a disputed border, north of the controversial McMahon line. These are all Menpa villages, significant in that they have the same historical, cultural and religious heritage as those of the same ethnic people living south of the line. Le Village where I am is the one closest to the border.

The powerful 5th Dalai Lama set up the Tawang region as one of the tribute states from which Lhasa could collect tariff and as supplicant to the Tibetan court in the 1600s. The entire region was then called Menyu, as opposed to the other two "yu's" to the east, Zayu and Lhoyu. Inhabitants here were mainly Menpa, with some Lhopa and Tibetans. It was with such territorial context that the poetic and romantic 6th Dalai, born in Tawang, became reincarnation of the Great 5th.

The two areas of Merak and Sakteng within Trashigang Dzong, formerly part of Tawang, were previously considered undefined and disputed territories between China and Bhutan but were generously "given" to Bhutan by India, since India controlled the region upon exit of the former British colonial government. Now it is a de facto part of Bhutan. However, in 2020 just as Bhutan started to set up the Sakteng Wildlife Sanctuary, China made an unsettling objection, citing the area as still under dispute.

I had the great good fortune to visit the Bhutan side barely a month or so ago. Now I am in the Tibetan Autonomous Region just on the other side of the border near where three countries meet in apparent peace, hopefully with no storm looming. Recently, there have even been rumors circulating that China and Bhutan, after over twenty rounds of discussion and negotiations, have accepted that Merak and Sakteng are within Bhutan's national border, just as the maps are drawn today. This is said to be in return for Bhutan accepting to forego some hundreds of square kilometers of disputed territories to the north, somewhat near the village of Le where I am now. How an explorer is always caught up in frontier disputed areas, on both sides of the border, is anyone's guess.

Through diplomatic exchanges and negotiations, China has over the last few decades settled many territorial disputes with neighboring countries, usually conceding land for peace. Somehow with small countries, China could afford to be generous, amicable, and give grace; whereas with big power players, it would become far more forceful and assertive. Just as issues over the South China Sea and Taiwan are flaring up as international geopolitical contests, discussion between the two most populous countries in the world continue to evade resolution. Minor border skirmishes, if not contained with cool heads, may escalate to become real or rhetorical wars between these two giant neighbors. My last visit to Tsona in 1987 was during such a tense moment when troops were deployed on both sides of the China-India border.

We have just dropped down from the stratospheric altitude of over 5000 meters above sea level to forest under 3000 meters on the south slopes of the Himalayas here at the villages of Mamaxiang and Le, or Lexiang Village. It is less than 50 km to Sakteng and 40 km to Tashi Yangtse as a crow flies, or 30 km to Tawang. My border permit allows my team to visit places up to the frontiers and I wanted to pay respect at a small temple where Guru Rinpoche, founder of the Nyingma Sect of Tibetan Buddhism, had spent time in meditation, supposedly leaving an old hat behind. When Guru Rinpoche came from India to Tibet, he supposedly subdued the local evil witch, and her fossilized bones are now visible as a rock there. There are many other relic remains of Guru Rinpoche, illustrated by sign boards around the site.

The hike up to the tiny Xinmuja shrine temple takes about half an hour. I mixed in with a few small groups of Tibetan pilgrims from Lhasa, but we were careful to avoid the troop of wild monkeys, which tend to harass visitors since some tourists have the bad habit of feeding or teasing them. One lone senior monk, Awang Oser, acts as caretaker of the place. He is not too eager to be photographed, nor to entertain guests. Tsomo, my research assistant, is Tibetan and manages to charm him to unlock the shrine for our quick visit. A beautiful waterfall showers down next to the premises creating a perpetual rainbow as the sun shines its light over the sparkle of water. ▶

TOP TO BOTTOM:
Village of Mamaxiang.
Le Village closest to border.
Xinmuja Shrine.
Inside small shrine.

TOP TO BOTTOM:

Rainbow waterfall.
Campsite by Namka River
Display of border terrain.

We run into Quzhoung (43) who is taking her turn in sweeping the stone path towards and around the temple. Such rotation of volunteer work is done by members of Le Village. Together with husband Dorboji (47) she has three children. The eldest son has graduated from university and is working in a neighboring village as secretary, while the younger one is still in third year university. The adopted daughter is also a university grad, so the parents must feel very proud and contented. Such changes in a formerly deprived frontier region are not unique and are becoming more common place. Many Menpa here are involved in a community tea growing and processing cooperative. Its prime quality tea is in limited supply but sold throughout Tibet.

Today Le has 32 households with over 70 adults in the families. Since 2017, the government has executed a new policy to build houses and create opportunities for minimum prosperity among 628 marginal villages along Tibet's national border. Le is one such village community that benefited from the policy's implementation.

The policy focuses on providing clean water, electricity, road access, education in science and humanities, healthcare and hygiene improvements. For the newly constructed houses, the government invests 70% whereas the locals must put in 30%. They then rebuild on former village sites with villa-like family homes. Some of the smaller and remote families are also relocated into the new village. It is hoped that the sacred border temple will bring in pilgrim and tourist income for the villagers.

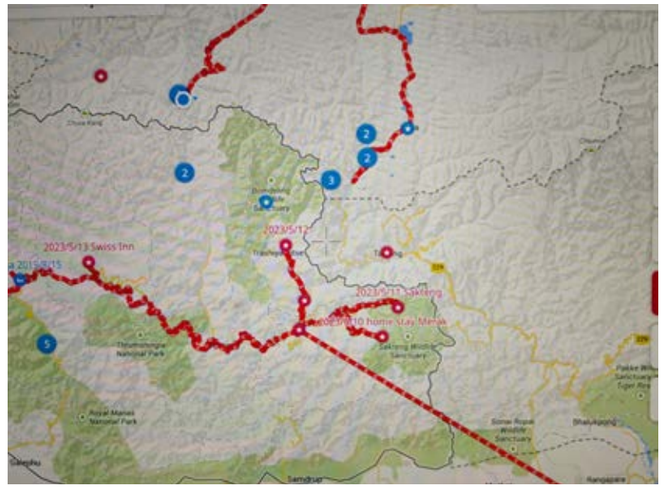
In the past, there was sporadic border trading among Menpa on both sides of the border, as well as limited numbers of pilgrims from Tawang region. Since the pandemic, however, such activities have come to a halt and have not been restored. Perhaps joint development of some conflict areas as special buffer zones can be an arbitrated solution for the future. After all, these neighbors are not going away, so they might as well learn to live with each other, despite historical, cultural, religious or political similarities or differences.

In between visits to the border region, we camped for two nights by the Namka Chu River cascading through the gorges, site of the field headquarters of General Zhang Guohua when he launched the major battle between India and China in 1962. In China, this is known as the Battle of Kegyenam, which lasted for nine days from October 15 to 24.

The PLA pushed through to the plain of Tawang in a decisive advance and annihilated the Indian forward army, before unilaterally calling a cease fire and retreating back to the former line of control. Apparently, their point was made on the battlefield. Since then, for some sixty years, the relationship of the two countries has been cool and never quite returned to the honeymoon years of the 1950s. Today, there is a small exhibit museum across the river from where we stayed, with a display and mock-up of camps illustrating the era of that battle.

The exchange of accusations never ended, with each country holding its own opinion of cause, effect and interpretation of the conflict. Perhaps one Western journalist turned scholar held a more neutral stance, though some may call his account revisionist. Neville Maxwell, an Australian and correspondent in India for the London Times at the time of the conflict, switched his angle after getting his hands on the Indian Army's internal secret papers, the Henderson-Brooks Report, and wrote the seminal book "India's China War." For decades now, he has been considered persona non-grata by the Indian government.

There will always be two sides to a coin, and each person, including this author, has his own biases and prejudices. But to be able to visit such a sensitive border in a time of peace, even be it a temporary peace, is a rare opportunity. I must thank the good fortune bestowed on me by Guru Rinpoche.

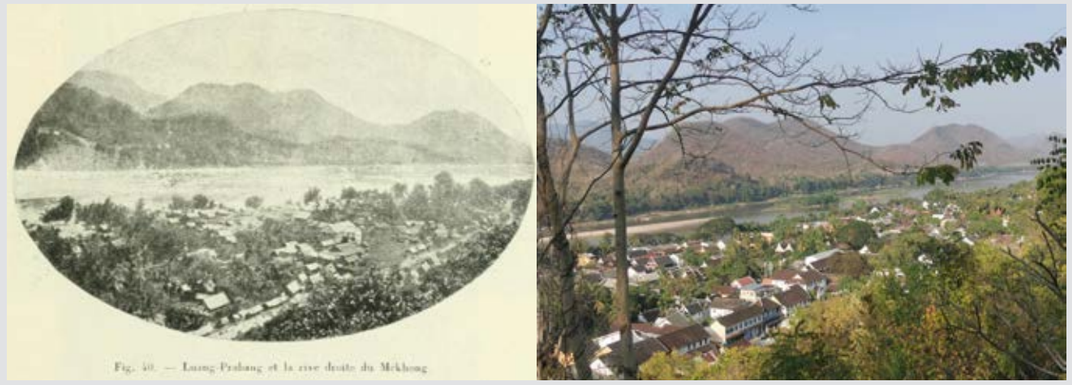


TOP TO BOTTOM:

Local tourists at exhibit site.
Map of 1962 battle on display.
Route of April trip in East Bhutan and current approach to border at 2 & 3.

RETRACING THE STEPS OF COLONIALIST-EXPLORERS: THE PAVIE MISSION OF 1864-65

By Dr William V. Bleisch
Luang Namtha



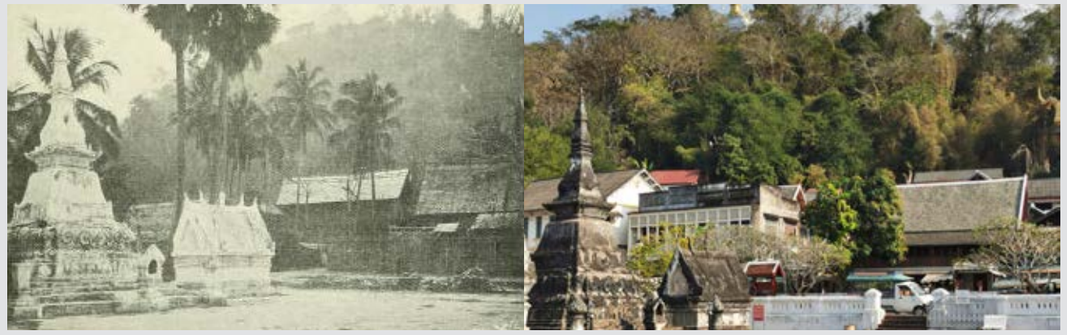
Paired images of Luang Prabang in 1894 and 2022

Nov. 29 15:27 There is an ominous rumble under the boat as we cross another rapids in the river, and then no power. The big boat slowly comes to a stop, and then just as slowly starts to drift backwards down the river in the strong current. We are drifting down stream into the rocks of the rapids we had just crossed, now with no power and no control. A boatman quickly strips and dives into the water to make a mad swim for the shore with a heavy line in his hand. He frantically searches among the rocks along the bank for a secure mooring even as the line, attached to the drifting boat, pulls him downstream. His determination finally pays off. More lines are soon fixed to the bank and the boat is drawn into shore. A pirogue setting nets nearby is flagged down and its husband and wife crew soon joins us to help. Our captain and crew soon pull the propeller out of the murky water from under the back of our boat. The cap is split, the propeller pin is shorn. but the twin blades look alright. By 16:00, we are back in the channel and traveling with full power. But we only arrive at Pak Beng, with its welcoming guesthouses and restaurants, at 18:47. The last 30 minutes of trip is in the dark and a bit nerve-wracking.

We are traveling up the Mekong River from Luang Prabang to Houay Xai, a two day trip in a large "slow boat" ferry. Luang Prabang was the historical capital of the Lan Xang kingdom, and then later of the independent kingdom of Luang Prabang. The traditional temples and palaces are well-preserved in the city; so much so that Luang Prabang Town was declared a World Heritage Cultural Site in December 1995. Today they are well protected, but in 1887, the rebel Black Flag Army destroyed the royal palace and numerous temples in Luang Prabang. They attacked because the outlaw leader Deo Van Tri hoped to liberate his brothers, who had been captured by Siamese forces. One notable exception to the general destruction was the beautiful temple Wat Xieng Thong, where Deo Van Tri had spent time studying as a novice monk in his youth. Wat Mai Souvannapoumaram was also spared, because the rebels used it as a headquarters. The Siamese army could not protect the city, and the aging king was rescued by a French force under the command of the explorer-diplomat Auguste Pavie (1847-1925). It was at this point that the king agreed to French protection, opening the door for the French to make Laos a protectorate and consolidate their control of all of Indochina.

The Black Flag rebels were an army made up largely of Zhuang refugees from Guangxi under the leadership of the Hakka Taiping rebel Liu Yongfu. They were a splinter group of the numerous rebel forces that had fled the civil war in Qing dynasty China and settled in northern Vietnam, where they lived off extortion and banditry until enlisted by the Vietnamese court to help fight the French colonialists. Later, they teamed up with the Black River Tai pirate forces of Deo Van Tri (1849-1908, a.k.a. Kham Um). In 1873, these joint forces attacked a French expeditionary force that had occupied Hanoi. They were repulsed from the French fort, but the commander of the French, the celebrated explorer and adventurer Lieutenant Francis Garnier, was killed in action. Nevertheless, Deo Van Tri soon fell out with the Vietnamese royal family and came to terms with the French. He even accompanied

View of the entrance to the royal palace in 1895 and in 2022.

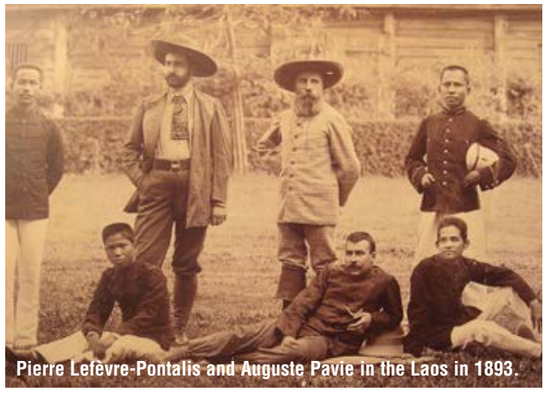


Mount Si Stupa from the interior of Wat Mai Souvannoupoumaram courtyard in 1894 and 2022.

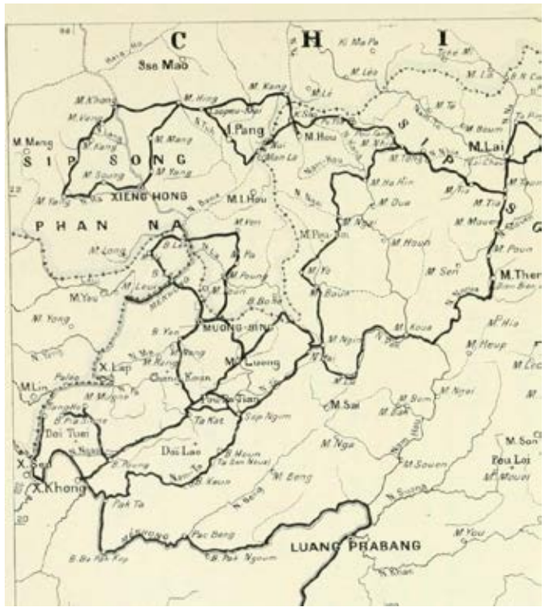
Pavie on several expeditions, including a mission to China to meet the Qing Emperor, and, in 1890, a descent of the Mekong from Luang Prabang on seven bamboo rafts, with near disastrous results. A young French explorer Pierre Lefevre-Pontalis (1864-1938) was also on that eventful river trip. After Pavie became France's Resident Minister in Bangkok, he enlisted the young man to assist and continue explorations.

One objective of their peregrinations was to explore the territory and map the borders in preparation for negotiations with representatives of the King of Siam, the Qing Emperor, and the British prime minister. The French, exercising gunboat diplomacy, settled a treaty with Siam in 1893 and then with China in 1895, giving France control of the left bank of the Mekong River from Chieng Sen down and of both banks of the Mekong below Chieng Khong. The French also exercised their "protection" of all of what are today Luang Namtha and Phongsali Provinces. The British, however, were threatening the Dai region of the 12 Districts (Sipsuong Panna in the Dai language, the origin of the Chinese name Xishuangbanna) from their bases in the Shan region of eastern Burma. Pavie's team rendezvoused with a British mapping team in Muong Sing near the Chinese border on 1895 January 1 for negotiations. Lefevre-Pontalis soon joined them, fresh from more explorations of the Namtha river basin. The French and British teams then set out to jointly map the borders between the territories of French Indochina, British Burma, Siam and China. Apparently, no representatives of the Qing Emperor were invited to take part. Perhaps the presence of British Gurkha troops and the expected arrival of the French gunboat Lagrandière at Chieng Sen made the British and French think it was unnecessary to invite them. ▶

Deo Van Tri (front left) and Black Flag rebels.



Pierre Lefèvre-Pontalis and Auguste Pavie in the Laos in 1893.



As fascinating, and infuriating, as the history was, my interest was in seeing the changes in the land that could be deciphered from the detailed accounts of these mappers and colonial adventurers by retracing their steps. Lefevre-Pontalis in particular left a detailed account of his travels throughout Indochina. In his account of his "Second Mission," On the Frontiers of Siam, China and Burma, he describes in detail the expedition he led through northern Laos from 2 June 1894 to 25 March 1895. He began by traveling up the Mekong River on this same route we are now following. He describes the brisk trade and busy markets along this stretch of the river, and he mentions that the village of Ban Lat Han, together with Pak Beng, was then one of the main transit points for caravans coming from the north to the left bank of the Mekong. I am curious to see if there is any sign of the caravan trade now.

I asked the CERS Lao team to help me to retrace the route. On 2022 October 29 at 8:36 in the morning, four of us set out on the first leg as passengers on one of the regular services that leave from the boat landing outside Luang Prabang heading upstream on the Mekong River.

The boat to which we have been assigned is not really that slow, traveling against the strong current at an average speed of 16.5 km/hr. The designation "slow" is only to separate it from the notorious "fast boats," small pirogues with huge long-tailed engines that travel at speeds so dangerous that the driver (but not the passengers) usually wears a motorcycle helmet. Our slower pace is not only safer but much more conducive to observation. We soon pass beneath a high railroad bridge recently built for the new high-speed train that will eventually connect Kunming and Vientiane. We pass hills with secondary forest, small vegetable gardens on both banks of the river, and large fish cages for raising paa kot river catfish. At 9:12, we pass a temple on an island not far from Pak Xeuang and the Northern Forestry College where Phonevilay lives when she is not on expedition with CERS. Soon after, we pass a large new excavation with a high bridge under construction, perhaps a spur line for mining or freight, and a reminder that the Sino-Lao joint venture railroad was not primarily built for passengers.

At 10:20, we reach Ban Lat Han, the village that I have been looking out for. The river is surprisingly wild on both banks at this point. Nothing of the village is visible from the river, but half a dozen large river boats are moored near the banks, together with a dozen small pirogues. Our Captain says these boats are owned by the villagers and travel up and down the river carrying cargo. Could this be a legacy of the caravan trade 130 years ago that once linked the river with the hill country of northern Laos and Jing Hong in China to the north?

Just upstream is another new railway bridge where the train line crosses the meandering Mekong a second time. The train began operating two years ago and the trip from Mouang Xai to Luang Prabang can now be made in under two hours. It will no doubt further cut into the freight traffic along the river and old roads.

Our boat is piloted by Captain Sisamut. The next morning in Pak Beng, we must change boats to continue upriver, but we see the captain again by the side of the road on our way to the quay, and we have the chance to chat with him briefly. He is 53 years old, based in Luang Prabang. He started working on the river in 1996 and learned from his brother on the boat. His father was a farmer, but he himself formerly worked as a doctor. He has four sons, and two of them are doctors, but one comes on weekends to assist him.

I ask him if he knows where the place "Don Thuan" is located. This was once the site of an important annual ritual, held each year at the time of the passage of the caravans. The King from Luang Prabang would organize a service of navigation here, and the mandarins that he designated would collect a toll.

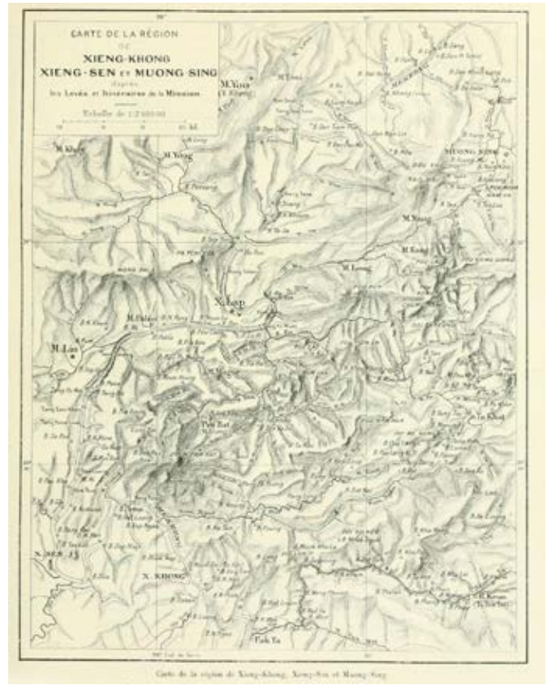
The Captain tells me that Don Thuan is just downstream from Pak Beng. Captain Somlit, an older man, is nearby listening to us intently. He joins us and adds; "In ancient times, a Wise Elder carried a lit candle made from 25 kilograms of wax up the river from Luang Prabang in a boat. Don Thuan was where the flame finally went out, marking it as a border." Remarkably, the same story is mentioned in Lefevre-Pontalis in his account of the 1894 Pavie Mission. 25 kilograms of wax was called one mune, so the unit of weight became also a unit of length along the river. He credits Chao Borikhane, one of the rulers of the Lan Xang kingdom, with the standardization.

Of course, in 1894, the trade boats on the Mekong would have been paddled up-river by hand. Captain Somlit adds that it used to take 25 kilograms of wax for one mune along the river, but now, with boats powered by diesel and gasoline engines, 8 kilograms would be enough.

We set off again from Pak Beng at 8:39 in a different boat and with a new captain. Blue skies peak out behind low wispy clouds. At 10:40, after a section of cone karst with white cliffs and caves and tall limestone forest on the right bank, we pass into a landscape of gently sloping hills where much of the land is cleared of forest, but no crops. Some places are growing the ancient staple berr phed; Job's Tears.

Our new captain, Captain Boon Ping, is 42 years old, has been doing this trip since 1995. He started as a crew member, then bought a fast boat, and then in 1995 bought this "slow" boat. He is from Ban Sanguy Village near Paktha, a riverside town still ahead of us. His wife and his son are working on the boat as well; his son is 27 years old, just as old as the boat.

Our trip up the river continues without incident. We are soon in site of Houay Xai, the capital of Bokeo Province. In 1894, there was a Agence Francaise across the river in Xiang Khong, in what is now Chieng Rai Province in Thailand, but was then within a 25-kilometer buffer zone under French control. I can see no sign of the historic building on the left bank as we pass, and Chieng Khong is now very much under Thai control, with numerous resorts and guesthouses lining the right bank. Houay Xai, once a small village with a French fort on the Lao side, is now a small Lao city and the capital of Bokeo Province. This is where we all must disembark. Upriver there is more trouble on the river. Not only are there even more dangerous rapids in the river, which blocked the French gunboats from going any higher, but now also lawless casino towns where criminal gangs have been operating with impunity. Like the explorers of 1895, we will continue our explorations along the jungle roads of the interior.



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT:

A portion of a French map of the routes taken by Lefevre-Pontalis showing Luang Prabang, Xieng Khong (Chiang Khong), Xieng Sen (Chiang Saen) and Muong-Sing and the northern border of Laos as determined in 1895. From Mission Pavie, Indo-Chine, 1879-1895 by Pierre Lefevre-Pontalis.

"Slow boats" and new railway bridge at Ban Lat Hane.

A French map of northern Laos showing the difficult topography.

Captain Boon Ping, his son and wife.

AT HOME WHILE AT SEA

Exploring Palawan north

By Wong How Man

El Nido, Palawan

TOP TO BOTTOM:
Pristine crystal sea.
Julius captaining our boat

As soon as we leave port, the flying fish dart off left and right into the distance as our bow cuts through an otherwise calm sea off Tiniguiban of El Nido. We are heading for Coron, an archipelago of islands off the northern tip of Palawan. It is yet another dream come true. Over the last eight or nine years, I have explored much of Palawan, from south to north and east to west. What remains is Coron, beyond the northern tip of the main island.

We had just boarded the outrigger boat during low tide at the predawn hour of 5:30, ferrying our loads of luggage, food supplies, and passengers two at a time on a tiny kayak, crossing back and forth for a hundred meters distance to our boat. This double-outrigger boat, Mart Ace 2, with Captain Julius and three as crew, will be our home for the following four days out at sea. My team is seven: my ADC Berry, Jocelyn our Palawan site manager, Tsomo my Tibetan RA, Lisa the assistant cook, and two Batak boys from our site to help as deck hands. Thus, there are 11 of us on the boat. As we set sail, the much-anticipated sunrise over the horizon is just around the corner.

Once on the open sea and watching the boat's bow rising and falling with the surf, my mind likewise goes through hikes and drops. I marvel at nature's immensity while feeling humbled by our tiny existential being. Having my tan-top on should allow me to go home with some compensation in bragging rights. Hopefully this tan will trump friends returning from Phuket or Bali; my south sea tan like the famous south sea pearls, cultivated around the pristine sea of Palawan.

To quench my thirst in the pristine crystal-clear water, we make multiple island hops on the very first day: Takling, Calibangbang, Cobra, Cala-Cala, Cagdanao and finally Balenben where we stop for the night. All these islands have pristine coral reefs where I make haste to jump in and snorkel. But soon my memory of each starts blurring one into the other. Yet I remember well the first stop at Takling when I dived in with my new snorkel. Bogs, the most active among the crew and son of the owner of our boat, jumped in to guide me along. At 21, he is attending college in hotel and tourism study at PPS, but has taken off a few days to come home and accompany us to sea.

As we were snorkeling close to shore, Bogs suddenly surfaced and called out to the boat for help. He saw an octopus on the bottom and was hastily asking for the spear gun to be brought over while he followed the fast-crawling multi-legged animal below. Julius jumped off with the gun and soon was at the scene. I watched helplessly as the duo dived in and out of the water, trying to corner this smart aleck before his jet of ink hid his whereabouts. It took about half a minute, then I saw Julius raise his steel dart with the octopus attached to its head. With its tentacles stretching up to a meter long, this would be barbecued fresh to supplement our dinner.

The first night we stop at Balenben, to be our base camp. There is a small Catholic church here serving the island's total of thirty households, with about 100 people. Nilo Sumayo is 48 and his wife Laylanie own the camp, along with his wife's four siblings. In 2014, the family invested and built small huts at the camp site on land belonging to Laylanie's mother. After three years of construction, the campsite opened in 2017, hosting guests from Europe, America and even China.

Before the pandemic, during peak season, they could host around thirty guests each night with a total of 13 rooms. The campsite is in business from October to June, making an average profit of 50,000 pesos every month. Their profit is shared evenly amongst the siblings. We take up three tiny A-frame thatched huts, barely large enough to set up a mosquito net over a sleeping pad. It costs 300 peso each for one night, while the others stay on the boat.

Nilo is from a neighboring area called Bray New Culaylayan. He started working there for a Japanese-owned oyster and pearl farming company in 2001. In 2005, he met his wife and they got married in 2006. Nilo and his wife have three children, two daughters and a son. Nilo has worked at the oyster and pearl farm for twenty-two years and is planning to retire soon when he reaches fifty years old. Oyster and pearl cultivation usually takes about sixteen to eighteen months before harvesting. They currently harvest the pearls four times a year. This Japanese company has a dozen such farms around Palawan.

The next day involves more island hopping; Bulawit, San Miguel, Demansing; until we arrive at Araw Beach of Culion Island, now truly a part of Coron. Here we set up tents on the beach and observe a most beautiful sunset as outrigger fishing boats sail out to sea for their night's catch during the squid season. In between, we run into a mega yacht, probably around 50 meters in length, at anchor at a wonderful beach. A few gentlemen with young ladies are seated under a specially set up cabana. They seem to have a few bodyguards within respectable distance of them. I, however, feel we are having a more care-free time with our outrigger yacht. ▶

TOP TO BOTTOM:
Full meal on boat.
HM with octopus shot.
No-eye-see 1000 perso/3 fish.
Super yacht & us.
White Stone Fish.

TOP TO BOTTOM:

Sailing into sunset.
Mart Ace 2 boat.
Island fish vender.
Sea Turtle.
All-purpose sports court.

Sally Cruz and her husband Raymond Cruz own a small convenience store and fish shop in Araw Beach. Sally is 40 years old, and her husband Raymond Cruz is 41. The couple have three teenage children. The young couple invested 10,000 pesos to open the convenience store and the fish shop. Every night, Raymond can catch around 9 kilos of squid and fish, earning an average income of 50,000 peso every month.

There is no government restriction on fishing in the Araw Beach area, so Raymond can go fishing whenever the weather is nice. When he catches fish or squid, he stores them in the ice box and then transports them to Manila to sell in the seafood market. Usually, a big fish (50cm or more) costs about 50 pesos per half-kilo, while the smaller fish (20cm) costs about 100 pesos, worth almost twice the larger catch. When the villagers nearby catch fish, they too would come to sell their fresh catch to Raymond. Usually, for a small fish between 20cm~25cm long he would pay about 100 pesos per fish.

Bogs, my young guide, comes from the larger district village of Linapacan. We call at its “port” while an antiquated wooden boat “Manila” is being loaded with foam boxes of seafood filled with ice. They will start the slow, thirty-hour journey to Manila shortly. Many other passengers are climbing in through the windows with their luggage. Looking at the age of this boat, I can only hope that the sea stays calm.

While I am still admiring the coral growing up to the pier with plenty of fish around our docked boat, Bogs rushes home and comes over with a transport motor tricycle. We board the side carriage, somewhat like a cage, which is usually used for livestock like pigs and chicken. Bogs drives us along the short coastal road, and within a couple kilometers, the cement road narrows to barely wide enough for our tricycle before ending where construction is still under way. In between, we stop to look at an enclave with limestone hill and sea cave. It was here, Bogs says, that some Japanese soldiers hid after the war ended.

Returning to town, we visit Bogs’s family and meet his parents. His father Razel Militar owns two tourist boats and his mother and sisters operate a village store attached to their home. Towards the other end of the village the road also comes to a dead end. Here, there are women fetching drinking water from a very historical well, situated amazingly near the waterfront. There is a long line-up of water containers, as each family waits their turn to get water from the well. Nearby, other women are washing their clothes, but carved above the well are huge letters prohibiting anyone from bathing or washing clothes in the well.

Most islands we stop at have few families. Larger ones may have a school and one or more churches. Generally these villages are clean and simple. But one stands out as exception, as its name announces. Bulok Bulok phonetically in Philippines means “Rotten Rotten”, and this small island village is Bulok Bulokan. The houses are indeed in rotten condition; many seem half-abandoned. The two newest structures are a very large, covered, government-built sports court and a small bamboo arena used as a staging area for cock fights.

At the time of our visit, the sports court is hosting multiple games, all at the same time. Four teams, two on each side, play on two ends of the basketball court. The middle ground is hosting a volleyball game, while a few younger kids are rolling rubber wheels around the court.

Rico is 54 and seated in the shade when I climb a dilapidated wooden ladder to get onto the jetty. He is using his knife to ply open cashews to get the nuts out for sale. Under the sun are more cashews being dried. I can tell from his slightly injured index fingers that his knife must be sharp. Likewise, his mind is sharp, as he tells the story behind the name Bulok Bulok.

Once this island and its surrounding sea had plenty of octopus. The locals would catch them and send them to distant markets for sale. But this was before the motorized age, so when they got to market, the octopus would all be rotten. Thus the island was given the name Bulok Bulok. Today, the octopus are no more, but the name has stuck. Before parting, Rico tells me that he has two pieces of waterfront land for sale in an island opposite Bulok Bulok. But given the distance and the current rotten state of Bulok Bulok, they would likely remain on the market for some time to come.

On the third day, before arriving at Bulok Bulokan, we had stopped by other islands belonging to Culion; Pasyak Island, Tambon, Ditaytayan. But that night we spent the night sleeping on the boat, and I took up the upper deck and hard floor with no mat. By the fourth day, I feel I am fully toasted by the sun, since I never bother to use any sunblock on my skin. After all, my entire body has been seasoned for decades by UV at the extreme altitude of the Tibetan plateau.

My last dive is at Asis Island. As I swam to shore, I find a bushy sea anemone by my feet. Momentarily, four little Nemo come out, as if playing hide and seek among the anemone. That obviously makes my day, as I too have found Nemo.

I leave the boat, which has been my home away from home for four days, feeling like it has been much longer. Enjoying sunrise and sunset each day, with a long stretch in between, it has been as if time has come to a halt. We travel on to El Nido to spend two relaxing days at my friend Vince Perez’s private villa on Helicopter Island.

The nearby limestone hills at a pristine lagoon are filled with edgy spine-like sculpture of nature. It reminds me of the ever-evolving Sagrada Familia Cathedral of Gaudi Barcelona, now into its 140 years of being built. A real shower will be a most welcomed finale to my short excursion to this south sea paradise. But the sweet memories will not be washed off for a long time to come.

TOP TO BOTTOM:

Helicopter Island.
Vince’s villa.
Cathedral spire by nature.

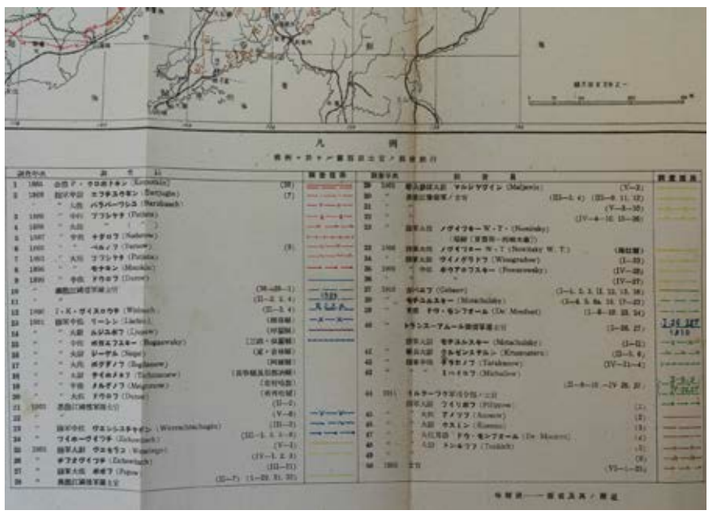
THE BATTLE OF LUSHUN-PORT ARTHUR 1904-05 AND ITS CONSEQUENCES

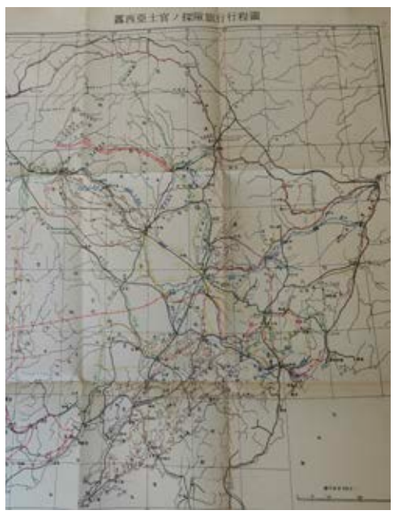
By K.L. Tam

In the spring of 1904, the vast boulevards of Saint Petersburg resonated with noisy military music as the solders sang with the local populace on their march out of the city to take part in a conflict with a country called Japan on the faraway eastern fringe of the Empire. In fact, most citizens in the capital were confused about where the soldiers were actually heading. Russia had annexed a large chunk of Chinese territories north of the Amur River in 1860, taking advantage of the collapse of the Chinese navy in the first modern naval engagement in East Asia. In that battle against Japan, the enemy used modern ships and battle gear that had only been invented during the first European industrial revolution. China subsequently ceded territory to Russia in thanks for Russia's effort in forcing Japan to give up Lushun and Dalian (then called Port Arthur), which were among the territories promised to Japan by China.

Both Russia and Japan wanted north-eastern China as their base for future expansion, but they soon realized their two countries' ambitions overlapped. Russia was planning to build a Trans-Siberian Railway to connect the European core of the nation with its newly acquired territories around the port of Vladivostok. As the port was not completely ice-free and had to be closed for about 5 months per year, Russia strongly desired their rail-line should also reach Lushun, which was a beautiful, deepwater, ice-free port. Russian naval ships docked in Lushun and pressured China to lease the Lushun-Dalian peninsula to Russia. Construction work began soon after to turn Lushun into a modern naval base. The Russians also dug into the surrounding hills to build defensive fortresses overlooking Lushun harbour.

In 1900, the Boxer Rebellion broke loose as Chinese tempers flared against foreigners. This invited the intrusion of soldiers from a league of foreign nations to descend on Peking. The resultant treaties basically transformed China into the status of a semi-colony. Taking the opportunity, Japan informed Russia that it intended to regain Lushun as per the earlier treaty that China had accepted. Russia refused, perhaps not realizing that for the Russian navy or soldiers to reinforce their forces in the east, the travel time would require several months.





map and details of Japanese expeditions in Manchuria.

map of Lushun Battle.

As the clouds of war started to gather, Japan took the initiative to strike first, attacking Russian warships in Lushun before a declaration of war. The less then efficient response from the Russian side appeared to foretell ill fortunes as the battles unfolded. The Russian battleships in the port were completely surrounded and were unable to leave. In desperation, they decided to move their defenses to the fortresses on the hills on Lushun. This map marks the position of the knolls where the Russian positions were fortified. The Russian navies brought all their equipment and provisions with them, enough to last for a long time, as their provisions were meant for long distance sailing back and forth from East Asia all the way to the Russia Baltic Sea or the Black Sea.

The Japanese then dispatched their ground troops to land ashore and started an 8-month siege of the Russian positions around the port of Lushun, as shown on the map. The right-hand top table shows the line of advance of Japanese position from August 1904, indicating that by December of that year, Japanese soldiers had taken Ichi-no-He Fort, as well as East Fort of Ban-Ryu-Zan to the northeast of Lushun City. In the central sector, the Russian position of Hachimaki Yama was also overrun on 22nd August 1904. With the right flank fallen, the Japanese soldiers made their final assault on Niryu-zan Fort (Two Dragon Hill Fort) on 29th December 1904. They finally surrounded it on 31st December 1904. Sho-Zu-Zan, the last fort held by the Russians, finally capitulated, allowing the Japanese to declare a total victory on 1st January 1905. Some accounts in history books estimated that the Russian losses were 31,306 casualties, with some 6,000 killed. The Japanese were estimated to have had 57,780 casualties, with some 14,000 killed. The biggest casualty was suffered by the Chinese civilians living in the villages around the hills at the time. The Japanese dug tunnels under ground to the villages where they took refuge until their next movement. The Russians in retaliation shelled the villages, and Japanese soldiers and local civilians alike were killed quite indiscriminately. Their casualties were estimated to be likely twice the Russian figure. ▶

Russo-Japanese sea battle.

The relieving fleet sent by the Russian Tsar only managed to arrive in East Asian seas in May 1905. When the Japanese learned of the movement of the Russian fleet, they immediately notified their agents in Fukien, China, to watch out for the passing of a large fleet of modern warships flying the Russian flag. They did, and as a result Admiral Togo's fleet was waiting for the arrival of their foes outside the port of Tsushima. This was a naval encounter pitting a small but militarizing emerging power against a major European nation that was then counted as the third largest naval power worldwide. Togo deployed his fleet in a non-traditional "T" formation that separated the Russian fleet into small segments allowing the Japanese to subdue their enemies one at a time. Togo only lost 3 torpedo boats in action while the Russian 36 strong fleet saw 22 ships sunk (including 7 battleships), six captured, and six taking refuge in neutral ports. Only three managed to escape to the safety of Vladivostok.

The immediate effect of this war was the instant escalation of the status of Japan as the first non-white contingent that had defeated a European power, both at sea and on land. Japan therefore after 1905 was viewed as an equal to the Europeans.

The Japanese were also very proud of their achievement. The Commander of the whole operation was Admiral Togo Heihachiro. His influence on his younger peers was very strong. Almost 40 years later, they had not forgotten his "brilliant" tricks in war. Indeed, they repeated his strategy by bombing Hawaii's Pearl Harbour before war was declared. This time Japan was less fortunate.

For the longer-term effects of the conflict, Japan took control of China's northeast provinces after the war and set up Manchukuo with a de-throned ex Chinese Emperor as head of a puppet regime that was bent on a conquest of China from this base. Again, in this the Japanese were not so lucky.

Russia's ignominious loss in the war against Japan in East Asia also got deep into the psyche of many senior Russian politicians. In August 1945, when Japan surrendered to the Allied forces, one distinctive reaction was from Russia's

Stalin, who declared that this was their revenge on Japan for what had happened in Lushun and off Tsushima in 1905. Stalin went ahead with what he had said he would do, sending troops to take all the southern islands of the Kurile Chain. Ever since then, Japan has kept complaining of the Russian occupation of the islands at the waning hours of WWII, and the controversy of the 4 Northern Islands remain a thorn in Japan's diplomatic relationship with Russia until today.

Once again, digging into a single map can lead us to threads that have changed the course of world history and influence it even today.

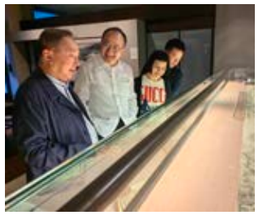
CERS book collection on subject.

CERS IN THE FIELD

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP:

Ashi Kesang with CERS intern Meagan Ma.
CERS team crossing Tibet into Xinjiang.
Patron Dominic & Zhang Fan at Crossbow Festival.
Team picnic near Bhutan border in Tibet.
Winter-like camper van dining during summer in Tibet.
HM ready to move mountains.
CERS team stuck in Tibet.
Diving and follow sea turtle.

NEWS NEWS NEWS



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP:

CERS board meeting in Bhutan.
Barry Lam hosting the Suen family at museum.
HKU office.
Lisu Crossbow Festival.
Birch bark canoe at CERS Center.
Birch bark canoe crated and delivered.
Liu Chak Wan & HM at MUST.

■ CERS directors conducted a board retreat in Bhutan early May, which included visit to the Namseyling Palace, Paro Palace and an audience with Her Majesty the Royal Grandmother of Bhutan.

■ Barry Lam, CERS former chairman, hosted visit to his private museum in Taipei for CERS patron Stephen Suen and CERS director Eliott Suen.

■ Two offices are put aside for CERS use for setting up of the Wong How Man Centre for Exploration at the University of Hong Kong.

■ After suspension of three years during the pandemic, CERS organized and held the 9th Lisu Crossbow Festival at Xiangguqing, a village where we have preserved 21 Lisu log houses. A very large crowd of archers and spectators attended this very successful event.

■ In August, a team of eleven from Westlake University of Hangzhou, mainly PhD candidates and post-doc scholars, came to visit CERS Zhongdian Center for a week-long visit. They are specialists in genomics and life sciences.

■ WHM made another visit to Macau University of Science & Technology and met with its Founder/Chairman Liu Chak Wan.

■ CERS successfully procured one of last two bark canoes from the Oroqen ethnic minority of Manchuria and with much difficulties had it crated and transported through transhipment to our Zhongdian Center. It is now mounted at the entrance to our main building.

CERS IN THE MEDIA AND LECTURES

● Dr Bleisch, CERS Science Director, gave a keynote speech in Haikou of Hainan during the First Meeting of Partners of the Global Gibbon Network. Presenting two talks: The status of gibbons in Lao PDR and An incentive program for gibbon-friendly tourism. Close to 120 domestic and foreign experts and scholars from ten countries and regions are represented to discuss creating a long-term conservation mechanism for gibbons.

● Panel on caving collaboration with Westlake University with two groups visiting and a lecture by Zhang Fan, CERS China Director, on CERS history and current activities.

● Gong Yining was senior producer after spending his early career as producer at Beijing Science and Educational Film Production, and later a full career with CCTV, retiring with Channel 1, Channel 10 and finally as senior producer with Channel 9 the documentary channel of Beijing Central TV. She has taken up the role of becoming advisor to CERS China media program, managing our huge archive of films for release within China's channels and internet.

● WHM expanded our Map and antiquity book collection by making new acquisition while visiting Tokyo.

● Lung Ying Tai uses HM's photos as cover for her books.

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP:

Dr Bleisch in Haikou, Zhang Fan lecture to WLU group & field trip, Lung Ying Tai & HM, Book & map collection, Producer Gong.

THANK YOU THANK YOU

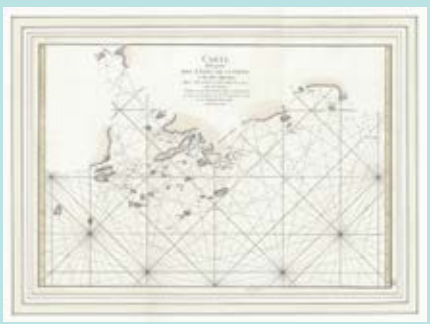
■ Her Majesty the Royal Grandmother Kesang Choden Wangchuck of Bhutan hosted a lunch for the CERS board at her palace and showered everyone with gifts.

■ We thank CERS Director Derrick Pang and Chun Wo Construction for helping us build a loft inside our office at the University of Hong Kong.

■ We thank Raymond Chui for choosing and installing three sets of chandeliers at our Shek O 1939 Exhibit house.

■ Rita Pang donated her 1775 navigational chart of the Pearl River Delta made by renowned hydrographer Alexander Dalrymple.

■ Several CERS patrons renewed their annual support to CERS. They are : Dr Joseph Chan, Vivien Chou, V.K. Hsu And Sons Foundation Limited, Lady Yuen McNeice Charitable Foundation, Martin Ma, Pang Family, Maggie & King Pang, Margot & Thomas Pritzer, Golkel Stifund, Bobby & Fifi Tsai.



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP:

Her Majesty the Royal Grandmother with CERS Directors, Loft & chandelier at HKU, Antiquity map chart, Chandelier at 1939 Exhibit House in Shek O.

CURRENT PATRONS

HONG KONG / OVERSEAS

- Dr Joseph Chan
- Eric Chen
- Choy So Yuk
- Terry Cao
- William E. Connor
- Vivien Chou
- Ester Goelkel
- William Fung
- Adrian Fu
- Andy Hei and Susanna Lo
- Victor Hsu
- V.K. Hsu And Sons Foundation Limited
- Hans Michael Jebsen
- Wendy Kwok
- Barry Lam
- Christabel & Ricky Lau
- Kenneth & Jean Lam
- Vic Lee
- Afonso Ma
- Martin Ma
- David Mong
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- Harry & Mae Pang
- King Pang & Magdalen Yum
- Thomas Pritzker
- The SahanDaywi Foundation
- Chote Sophonpanich
- Serge Pun
- Stephen Suen
- Bobby & Fifi Tsai
- Betty Tsui
- Conrad Wong
- Gilbert Wong
- Dora Wu
- Anna & Eric Yeung
- Francis & Rose Yuen
- Billy Yung

A subscription to this newsletter is US$100 for three issues.
All proceeds support CERS projects.
Please contact us directly if you are interested in signing up.
See the bottom of page two for contact details.

CERS' MISSION:

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