A NEWSLETTER TO INFORM AND ACKNOWLEDGE CERS' FRIENDS AND SUPPORTERS

CHINA EXPLORERS

CHINA EXPLORATION AND RESEARCH SOCIETY

VOLUME 27 NO. 1 SPRING ISSUE 2025

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CLOCKWISE FROM TOP:

CERS new bangka boat Palawan Explorer.

Fox engages photographer in Xinjiang.

Einstein at the Fujiya Hotel.

HKU professors sailing the Sulu Sea.

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MIRIAM LEE, Executive Director
YIDA LYU, Filmmaker/RA
TRACY MAN, Financial Controller
BERRY SIN, Logistics Director

Editor:
MIRIAM LEE

Design and Printer:
TOPPAN NEXUS 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

Today is the first day of Chinese New Year. But with the West's paranoia on anything China, it has now been renamed Lunar New Year to be politically correct. Renaming the Gulf of Mexico to the Gulf of America seems to echo such twists and turns, or South China Sea to becoming West Philippines Sea, likewise. To each his own, taking what is useful for that particular moment, be it for political, rhetorical, functional, factual or neo-historical reasons.

HM in a Soviet era submarine

But for geographers, if I should consider myself marginally as one, Siberia is a geographic name, regardless of what country or type of government it belongs. Similitudes were found in my four visits to Cuba to document and film an iconic Cantonese opera diva, who happened to be a Caucasian Cuban orphan adopted since a child by a Cantonese Chinese. Sanctioned country or not counts little in my book, as well as in my passport stamping. Some quarter million Chinese population before Cuba's revolution was reduced to a couple hundred by time of my visit some ten years ago. Such is both relevant and irrelevant to our choice of work. Irrelevant to us in that the exodus was due to political sanction and lack of economic returns for these overseas Chinese eager to make a decent living. Relevant in that it represents the last of a breed who upheld the traditional culture of us Cantonese in a distant land.

I hope this issue of our newsletter bears testimony to that notion, as several research professors of the University of Hong Kong joined us in Palawan in the Philippines, a political hot spot and a geographically beautiful spot. Our team of guest scientists is most diverse, four from the US, one from Finland, one from Romania, and one from Hong Kong. Some of their reflections are included in this issue of our newsletter, among other select pieces showcasing our work elsewhere. Please enjoy the reading, as CERS moves into the 39th year since our founding. And as far as my personal challenge goes for his new year: To bring out positive and happy nature and human stories from our region's conflict zones, disputed areas and non-defined territories.

Last but not least, the choice of photo on this page reflects the essence of our work, peeking through a submarine periscope (a Soviet era one) at the world above us, and at times using a microscope to perform forensic observations, with our own interpretation relevant to past, now and even future of the world around us.

Wong How Man
Founder/President CERS,
Chair Explorer HKU WHM Centre for Exploration

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FROM TUNG LO WAN TO PALAWAN

By Miriam Lee

"Your parents and grandparents have worked so hard to send you to a life on land, and now you are running away with us on the sea!" How Man taunted me several times during our fortnight-long work trip in Palawan. At least for seven generations, my ancestors had made Causeway Bay (Tung Lo Wan) their home, or more precisely, their floating home. Palawan is a unique and ecologically rich province in the Philippines, known for its stunning natural beauty and cultural diversity. The narrow elongated archipelago separates the South China Sea and the Sulu Sea; its diverse ecosystems range from lush tropical forests to vibrant coral reefs. The waters surrounding Palawan are rich in marine life, featuring coral reefs that support a variety of fish and other marine organisms, as well as coastal and island communities that for centuries thrived by fishing.

Since my first trip here last October, working on and around the island of Palawan has made me very much at home. Here at the estuary of the Maoyan River, CERS has established a site with accommodation and meeting spaces that can comfortably fit two dozen field staff and guest researchers. This winter undertaking in Palawan included a week-long reconnaissance with professors and scientists from the University of Hong Kong to scout for research opportunities from the forest to the sea. After visiting and spending a night with the indigenous Bataks, an Austro-Indonesian tribe of forest gatherers and hunters with ▶

TOP TO BOTTOM:
A crew member watching out the sea condition on the bow of the M/V Palawan Explorer.
CERS Palawan Centre at night, under the starry sky.

CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT:

Santo Niño on the boat.
Preparing to sail.
Braving the waves on the Sulu Sea.
Professors and researchers from HKU sailing out on M/V Palawan Explorer during sunset.

only a few hundred remaining, in the karst hills near the source of the Maoyan, we sailed on a multi-day sailing in the Sulu Sea.

The version 3.0 M/V Palawan Explorer was modelled after the traditional bangka with a smart outlook. Matching up to a sizeable local fishing vessel on the island, it had white outriggers on both sides, doubling that of the width of the hull to provide stability and balance to navigate the often turbulent waters. The white canvas canopies provide shelter against the scorching tropical sun. It boasts a very polished appearance as it glided through the estuarine channel from CERS Palawan Centre at the mouth of the Maoyan against the backdrop of lush verdant mangrove and coconut forests and limpid cerulean sky. The boat was made entirely of locally sourced marine wood and bamboo in a ship workshop in the village next to our centre. It was only launched in October 2024 as a replacement and upgrade of the one destroyed by Typhoon Odette in December 2021. A small CERS team led her maiden sail around Honda Bay. This time we wanted to try going further to Green Island Bay or beyond. Joceline, our Country Manager of the Philippines, was wary about the boat, which had yet to be blessed and voyaging this far, despite that she grew up in a coastal village here and knew every island, atoll and reef. Joceline placed a statue of Santo Niño, the god of Filipino seafarers, on the boat. I joked that we should put one that of Tin Hau for the balance of power.

I am very grateful for my parents and grandparents and the extended family for giving me a taste of what it would be like living on the sea. Through boat trips in long weekends and summer holiday, unconventional coaching on swimming and skin-diving, and most of all the stories shared over dinners on how they used to live, work, socialise and make sense of the sea and the environment, I came to know a fraction of what a floating life would mean. I am very intrigued by the ways boat-dwellers or islanders perceive, utilise and interpret the deep blue around them, and how the change in natural resources impacts their lives, and vice versa. These would in turn shape and construct new norms, taboos, social and cultural practices, as well as policies and regulations in modern times.

Following the construction of a breakwater off Kellett Island and East Point (where SOGO Department Store is today) in 1883, which created Hong Kong's first typhoon shelter in Victoria Harbour, Causeway Bay gradually morphed from a natural bay in the shape of a round bronze gong (cymbal), hence its name in Chinese "Tung Lo Wan", to the industrial and trade zone of Victoria City. While factories such as sugar refinery and power station, and shipyards and tramways emerged along and off Causeway Road, the indigenous floating community needed to adapt to the fast and disruptive pace of urbanisation. As the closest sea-wise community to the Central District and Admiralty, many of the fisherfolk of Causeway Bay found new job opportunities with merchant ship companies, the British Navy, and the Hong Kong Royal Yacht Club. Education became accessible for children, boys and girls alike, at the church schools in Wanchai and Happy Valley, whereas in the past all kinds of schooling and civil examinations were forbidden to these boat-dwellers who were for centuries institutionally and socially considered as outcasts. They were able to upgrade their floating abodes, re-fitting second-hand pleasure boats to suit the needs and penchants of different households. My grandparents bought an old Chinese cruise boat in the late 1960s and had it remodelled for my father and his five siblings; a decade later, they acquired another new boat — one of the lifeboats from a mega cruise ship that was dismantled in Hong Kong. Grandpa gave it a new top deck, fitted several sturdy stainless-steel poles to erect canvas canopies above the hull and the deck, added a flushing toilet, a pantry with gasoline stoves and a refrigerator, and even a bedroom with bunk beds. The design and appearance of the metamorphosed lifeboat was so peculiar that ▶

TOP TO BOTTOM:
My grandparents acquired a lifeboat and re-fit it as the family boat.
My uncle made a jury-rigged sailing boat and took his young cousins out for a sea adventure in Causeway Bay Typhoon Shelter.

CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT:

Me catching a starfish. Chocolate chip sea star. Two blue Linckias; one of them missing an arm. The much sought-after sea grapes, also known as green caviar. A profitable catch of talakitok, the local name for trevally. Maria-Faye and her husband Romer collecting shellfish on the sand island during low tide. Fishermen fishing in the sandbar early in the morning.

folks at Causeway Bay nicknamed it "monster", while my grandparents affectionately called it dao (bowl) as its rather round bow and stern made it look like a soup bowl from afar. My grandparents still kept this funky family boat and moored it in Hebe Haven after they were relocated on land. They would take me on the boat for overnight sailing trips in the warmer months to the pristine beaches and archipelagos around Sai Kung, during which I learnt a variety of skills of living on the sea. These skills became handy when I went on sea expeditions and of course, in Palawan, now.

One of the many jolly conversations at the family dinner table would be how ecologically diverse Causeway Bay and the northern coastline of Hong Kong Island once were. Despite being encroached and shrunken through the years with reclamation and urban developments, before the construction of the Cross Harbour Tunnel, the bay once teemed with fishes and other marine organisms with variegated underwater habitats. Great-aunt no. 8 told me about the funny incident of looking for someone's false teeth that were dropped into the bottom of the sea; the water was so clear that she could locate the lost item with her bare eyes and saw smelt-whitings circumambulating it. Great-uncle no. 6 could detail how the mist and currents in spring brought cuttlefishes into the bay. Grandma, who is good at angling, knew exactly where to look for different types of fish — seabass at the breakwater, garoupa at a few rock reefs, silver sea bream at sandy bottoms, and mottled spinefoot and spotted butterfish under the boats. My mom would account for the flying fish in Victoria Harbour in the summer months of June and July. Their recollections of marine life from earlier times served not just as entertaining tales during dinner gatherings. By systematically tracing the biodiversity of a place from oral history, we get to know the changes in ecological and environmental qualities over time, for instances, the intensity of such changes, and how these changes

impact local lives and hence their culture and traditions. By integrating oral history into ecological research, scientists can achieve a more holistic understanding of the interplay between human experiences and environmental changes, thereby enriching both historical narratives and contemporary ecological assessments.

The sea was choppy as M/V Palawan Explorer made its way from the lee of Fondeado Island northward to Johnson Island. “It’s amihen, the monsoon,” said Jocelyn while the boat navigated across the choppy sea. As we snorkelled around the island and its shimmering sandbar, we found lots of broken pieces of coral of various species. Ossified shells of giant clams, some weighing up to over 100kg, were used as anchors of smaller, slenderer outrigger boats. News reports had it that a few years ago a joint operation of the Palawan Council for Sustainable Development (PCSD) Enforcement team and the Philippine Coast Guard confiscated over 300 giant clams that were to be smuggled out of the island. These shells now laid randomly on the beach. Carlo Abunalis, son of the village chief of Johnson Island and head of the nature protection task force of the island, confirmed our hypothesis of over-fishing, and that bombing and cyanide poisoning were used to catch fish here, as seen from fragmented and dead corals around. He lamented, “Until recently, there had been incidents of illegal fishing using bombs and cyanide. We put warning buoys around the island to mark the protected areas. We welcome visitors to come and swim and snorkel in our beautiful protected areas, but not to catch fish or harm ocean life. Some people are, however, very bad, they would come to fish at night, and even pierce the buoys to eliminate the markings. This is very frustrating. In the past, the harvest around this area was so abundant that we, as kids, would show up at the beach to the fishing vessels with empty plastic bags. They would always give each of us a bagful for free. But now this is no more.”

Carlos continued with a fairytale-like story. “Those were the days where dugongs would swim and forage among the luxuriant seagrass at the back of the island. They were usually very skittish and elusive. But on the night of the full moon, they would come to the beach after midnight to roll on the soft sand under the glistening moonbeam.” ▶

TOP TO BOTTOM:
Healthy coral colonies near Señorita Island.
A seahorse.
HKU professors and researchers meeting villagers of Johnson Island.

Such romanticism was echoed in another story told by local fishermen. A few decades ago, there was a fisherman who owned several small fishing vessels. One day, his crew caught a mermaid in the net. This beautiful semi-human with glistening scaly tail sat in the net and wept. The fisherman felt sorry for the mermaid. He told the crew to let her go and not to talk about this. From then on, wherever this fisherman's fishing boats went, they always had a bountiful harvest, much more than other fishing boats even in the same waters.

Perhaps there is a moral lesson to these myths or actual encounters. Be they floating settlements, boat dwellers or islanders, they exhibit diverse cultural, economic, and environmental characteristics shaped by their geography, history, and interactions with surrounding regions that are very different from those of their counterparts on land. These vulnerable communities across the globe, whose livelihood depends largely on the mercy of the vast ocean, share the same challenges, or fate, of an eclipsing way of living and cultural heritage. Each island community has its unique identity and issues, necessitating tailored approaches to development, conservation, and cultural preservation.

Ultimately, the stories of boat people and island communities in Causeway Bay and Palawan serve as powerful testaments to the enduring spirit of exploration and enthusiasm for understanding their intricate marine environments. These narratives underscore the urgent need to safeguard these distinctive ways of life, while simultaneously cultivating a deeper appreciation for the ocean that sustains them.

KICKSTARTING NEW RESEARCH PARTNERSHIPS

from the Maoyon to the Sulu Sea

By David Baker

The HKU team on M/V Palawan Explorer.

In late 2019, I received an email from Matthew Evans, Dean of Science at HKU, inviting me to join him and several colleagues on a trip to Palawan. Our mission was to visit the CERS Center on the Maoyon River and explore the surrounding habitats, from ridge to reef. At the time, I knew little about CERS or the purpose of the visit, but such is the nature of academia. It seemed like a fantastic opportunity to deepen my understanding of the Philippines — a globally renowned biodiversity hotspot.

As a coral reef ecologist, the Philippines has always held a special allure. Its azure waters, white sandy islets, and vibrant coral reefs are a dream for fieldwork. Yet, few Western scientists get the chance to experience them firsthand. I had previously visited reefs in Cebu — Oslob, Moalboal, and Camotes—but the prospect of exploring the country's western frontier was equally enticing.

During that first visit, I met Bill Bleich, Jocelyn, Xavier, and the welcoming staff at the CERS Center. Together, we explored Honda Bay, leaving with vivid memories of pristine seagrass beds teeming with chocolate chip sea stars and reefs that, despite showing signs of overfishing and climate change, boasted far greater diversity and complexity than those in Hong Kong. What struck me most was the seamless transition from river to sea — mangroves giving way to seagrasses and then to reefs — a textbook example of habitat connectivity.

Mangroves and seagrasses are not only critical nurseries for juvenile fish but also "blue carbon ecosystems," now recognized as a nature-based solution to climate change through the process of decarbonization. In simple terms, if we protect and allow these ecosystems to thrive, they can offset about 1% of global greenhouse gas emissions. While this may seem modest, in the face of the climate crisis, every solution counts. Blue carbon has garnered significant attention from scientists, conservationists, and even financial sectors. Countries like Indonesia are already benefiting from "debt-for-nature" swaps, where loan repayments are forgiven in exchange for commitments to protect these vital carbon stores. ▶

TOP TO BOTTOM:
Seaweed mariculture in Honda Bay.
The catch of the day, from the fishing village near the mouth of the Maoyon River.

I spent my final days in Palawan with my family in El Nido, unaware of the looming global upheaval. News of a curious virus from Wuhan played faintly in the background, but I had no idea it would be years before I heard about CERS again.

That changed last year when an email from Ian Holliday, HKU's Vice-President of Teaching & Learning, landed in my inbox. He announced the establishment of the Wong How Man Centre for Exploration at HKU. I immediately wrote to Ian, who connected me with the Centre's founding Director, Prof. Derek Collins. A flurry of emails followed, culminating in a trip to the Zhongdian Centre in Shangri-La with other HKU colleagues and How Man himself. By then, I had fully grasped the CERS mission, forged friendships with How Man and Executive Director Miriam Lee, and met many of their talented staff. As we departed, conversations about a return to Palawan were already underway.

Now, as I write this, I am leaving Puerto Princesa after a five-day expedition with the CERS team — How Man, Miriam, Jocelyn, and Xavier among them. As Interim

Director of HKU's Swire Institute of Marine Science, I brought along several colleagues to introduce them to CERS and the site, hoping to spark ideas for research and experiential learning. Our group included Prof. Juha Merila, an evolutionary biologist; Prof. Ryan McKenzie, a geologist; Prof. Shelby McIlroy, a fellow coral reef ecologist; Dr. Ada Lee, a mangrove ecologist; and Dr. Jon Cybulski, a paleoecologist. Together, we represented a range of scientific interests spanning the "ridge to reef" continuum.

Despite arriving in darkness, there was a comforting familiarity in scaling the muddy riverbank to the awaiting batanga for the short cruise upriver to the center. I was surprised to find everything just as I remembered it, despite the challenges posed by a major typhoon years earlier. After a late (and delicious) dinner, we rested before preparing for a packed schedule of exploration.

We began by venturing up the Maoyon River, Palawan's largest, until the waters turned clear, revealing clam and crab remnants, small fish, and fine muds. The idyllic setting was alive with local children and adults ▶

TOP TO BOTTOM:
The M/V Palawan Explorer berthed at the CERS station on the Maoyon.
How Man and Ryan McKenzie showing off beautiful chocolate chip seastars in Honda Bay.

CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT:

Sailing on the M/V Palawan Explorer at sunset.
The HKU team on Johnson Island.
Meeting the village chief and his son on Johnson Island.

picnicking, foraging, and frolicking along the banks. The mild winter air was crisp under clear skies, and the vibrant riparian fringes invited us to explore on foot.

By afternoon, we were ready to depart on the M/V Palawan Explorer, slightly delayed by the launch of a Chinese satellite from Hainan. Rocket debris posed enough risk to marine vessels to warrant a temporary restriction on going to sea. We passed through the Maoyon delta and anchored in the sheltered lee of Fondeado Island for the night. With just enough sunlight left, we took a quick dip in Honda Bay, where corals were visible across the reef flat despite the fading light. I marveled at the culinary skills of the CERS crew, who prepared yet another exquisite meal despite the ship's close quarters.

At sunrise, we set off northward along Palawan's eastern coastline, reaching Johnson Island by midday — some 60 kilometers away. While the team snorkeled along the reef's edge, the CERS crew met with our island hosts. After exchanging pleasantries, we were warmly welcomed ashore. In the village center, I joined Dr. Mihai Tarce from HKU's Faculty of Dentistry to meet the village chief in

discussing a potential research project on the residents' oral health, offering dental care products and education in return. Behind us, a group of men sorted small dried fish, while delighted dogs scavenged at their feet.

An agreement was reached for a future dental visit, and the chief's son joined the conversation. This young man struck me as a visionary conservationist. In clear English, he recounted his childhood memories of the island's thriving reefs, abundant fish, turtles, and even dugongs. Despite his youth, he lamented the collapse of fisheries, the loss of corals, and the subsequent migration of most of the island's residents.

Today, Johnson Island is home to 143 households — about 700 residents — a far cry from its peak population of 4,000. He recalled a time when fish were so plentiful that children could bring plastic bags to fishermen, who would fill them with their catch for free. The island prospered then, but those days are long gone.

The small baitfish and herbivores drying in the sun told the story of the island's current fishery. Predatory fish were scarce, save for a school of barracuda and a few large grouper in the island's self-designated marine sanctuary. Remarkably, this sanctuary has been in place for 30 years, offering a glimmer of hope. Reports of abundant turtles and a small dugong population grazing on healthy seagrass meadows further underscored the island's resilience.

Johnson Island was a beacon of hope. Though the reefs showed signs of wear, staghorn corals hinted at resilience in the face of climate instability. The community's proactive conservation efforts, supported by a decades-old marine protected area, offered valuable lessons for sustainable ocean management.

We left Johnson Island and navigated back to Honda Bay by starlight, the crew's vigilance ensuring our safe return. Our final days were filled with excursions—exploring Honda Bay, the Hundred Caves, and coastal wetlands.

Now, my task is to synthesize my colleagues' research ideas with my own, charting a plan for future explorations. My ultimate goal? The Sulu Sea—Tubbataha awaits.

David Baker is Associate Professor and Interim Director of the Swire Institute of Marine Science, the University of Hong Kong.

TILL WE MEET THE SEA

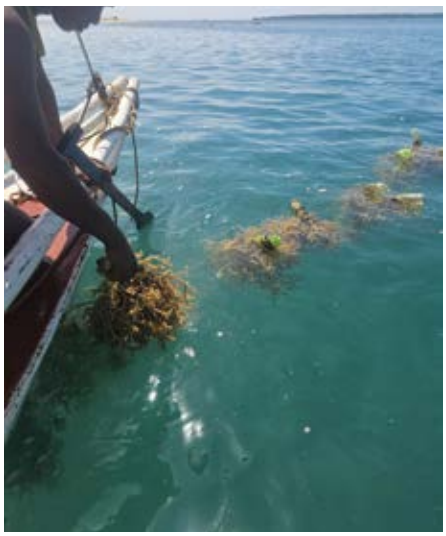
By Janice Wang

Logistics in the Philippines is never particularly straightforward. Miriam sent me the coordinates of the secret location of the 2nd to last bend of the Maoyan River. My choices to get there from Coron (the northernmost island of Palawan) would have been a 2-hour seaplane journey (4500 USD) or an overnight stop from Cebu (250 USD). Lucky that I didn't decide on the expensive seaplane, for had I chosen that, we would have landed on a seaweed farm in the bay, nowhere close to the site. Therefore, on 1st February 2025, How Man, Joceline and Miriam picked me up from the airport in typical CERS fashion, with a police escort (Joceline's cousin's husband).

The next few days would turn out to be a series of encounters with many people who love Joceline, who would run up with huge smiles, ruffle hair, laugh and hug. This extended love from the Batak villagers and the fisherfolk comes with what CERS has done for the people of the sea, speaks volumes for what a small amount of money with the correct team can do to conserve and protect, and act as a platform for a new way of exploration.

How Man's first stop was of course to ensure that there was enough food for dinner. The local market was packed with colour that should not be there, a 5-kilo trigger fish, blue parrot fish, moray eels; the more expensive tuna, one chunk thicker than my thigh. Fish range from 50 php a kilo to 900 php a kilo for our grade A garouper. With our dinner all procured, a smooth highway ride and a few pulls of the spluttering diesel engine on a skiff, we arrived at the secret CERS site by sunset. The kids had taken coconut shells to mark paths to the different sleeping areas, and I chose to sleep in the treehouse with air-con (luxury) and the best access to the occasional 1 bar of internet.

Sea day exploration of the bay right outside the mouth of the river included four coral sites with limited visibility because of the silt churned up by unseasonal winds. Climate change is real. The boatmen said before Typhoon Odette, the coral gardens were teeming with life and colour. We could see the devastation wrought by nature – swathes of dead coral, but within them – signs of new life – a lot of coral chatter and a small mound that survived. We found a big fan coral with a tiger cowrie the size of 2 fists just sitting on top of a sponge. A queen conch in the shallows. We passed by a seaweed freighter that had run aground in the storm, keeled onto its side, rusting away. This was where they used to trade the seaweed from the farms – and close to it, we found a few fishermen, wading with their small boats looking for urchins, scallops and harvesting from the sandbanks. 250 php for a bucket of urchin. The boatmen pulled up the seaweed to show me what the village was producing.



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT:

Banana canopy on bamboo raft. Fresh shell fish. Catch of day. Solar power. Diving catch. Trading at sea. Seaweed harvest.

Anilawan Village is made up of concrete shacks with tin roofs, clean and very basic. As we walked up to one of the huts, we heard a huge scream of recognition – and Joceline got a huge hug, found out the lady was one of her father's relatives, and it was also her seaweed farmer husband's birthday. They were making pansit and showed me a big coral fish they are going to roast. His giant seaweed harvest had already been sold to the Japanese for 65 php a dry kilo, so he said there was little to show us. But as we left them for their celebrations – happy screaming came into the bay – the fishermen had brought in a great haul. We watched as the whole village gathered to de-net, weigh, gut and prep trevally for sale - 150 php a kilo. They would sell it at 450 per kilo at the market. Yet another steal.

Land day exploration was a 40-min early morning walk to the village, where everyone we passed stopped to chit chat and was asked, "Have you seen Marlon?" We eventually found Marlon in the village, waiting to bring us to the village shaman. Every villager has a story – and Joceline knows them all, in deep detail. Who married whom, who is living through tragedy, whose child has been traumatised through near drowning in the typhoon, whose kid has witnessed paranormal activity. Her intricate knowledge is what creates trust and collaboration – and a willingness for the Batak to share experiences, like the bamboo raft which they transported down river (with me on it) so that the bamboo (at 60 php per pole – 80 poles) could be used on the CERS site.

Life on this island is subsistence, but yet the kids still have pressed white shirts whilst they walk an hour to school. As I write this – it is currently flooding, and these people will have to face climate changes that will devastate them. But as Joceline said to me even whilst recounting a village tragedy - "It's true. Life is hard, and we smile through."

Janice Wang is CEO of Alvanon and Director of CERS.

A DENTAL RESEARCH RECONNAISSANCE IN PALAWAN

By Mihai Tarce

To the average person, engaging with remote indigenous communities with little or no access to dental care and minimal concepts of oral hygiene may not seem very appealing. As a dental researcher, however, I find that things can quickly become interesting because such communities are (fortunately) quite difficult to find in today's world, and they can provide a glimpse into how oral diseases evolve untreated. It can be a once-in-a-lifetime research opportunity.

Just such an opportunity recently presented itself, when the Wong How Man Centre for Exploration (WHMCE), jointly established by the University of Hong Kong and the China Exploration and Research Society, generously extended an invitation to me to visit their centre on the island of Palawan in the Philippines. This resulted in a reconnaissance trip in late January to the centre and its surroundings, to better understand what is possible, both in terms of dental research, as well as student experiential learning trips. It also resulted in an unforgettable experience.

Arriving at the centre is itself an expedition by city dweller standards, as we travelled by plane from Hong Kong International Airport to Puerto Princesa, transferring in Manila, then took a pickup truck to reach the Maoyon river, and then finally reached the centre by boat. I now understand why the recommendation to bring a duffel bag instead of a suitcase was highlighted repeatedly in the detailed instructions we received. With all aspects of our journey planned well in advance, all that was left to do was to spend a quiet evening discussing the upcoming activities and enjoying the day's fresh catch.

Part 1: Jungle and the Batak tribe

We began a two-day journey into the jungle to visit several villages of the Batak tribe. The community is generally very weary of strangers, but because Dr. How Man Wong and his team have been working with them for years, it was possible for us to gain access and better understand their environment. After walking through the jungle for about 30 minutes, we arrived at the first village, Kayasan, situated along the Maoyon River.

The people there welcomed us, and because getting to the village requires crossing the Maoyon River, they had already built a bamboo raft for us. Once there, they prepared a hot meal which we shared on the shore, then started a bonfire and spent the night with us under the stars. Living in central Hong Kong for the past few years, I had begun to forget what a wonderful sight a clear night sky can offer. Because we would be taking the raft downriver to the next village the following day, our hosts decided to build two benches for us, just so we could travel more comfortably. Building the benches, which is something they never do for themselves, took longer than building the raft itself.

The following day, we rafted downriver for about two hours to the first road, where a car was waiting to take us to the next village. The natural landscape and wildlife we got to admire from the raft was breathtaking. After dropping us off, the villagers that accompanied us took the raft further downstream, as they would meet us back at the CERS centre later that evening. ▶

CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT:

Ulugan Bay and Rita Island seen from Buenavista, Palawan.
Fishing plays a central role in the villagers' lives.
It took almost a whole day to raft from the hills to CERS Palawan Centre at the mouth of the river.
A bench was added to the raft at the last minute.

A Batak tribe family.

Typhoon Odette hit the region hard back in December 2021. The locals and the government have since rebuilt, but the memory is still fresh in everyone's mind. Some broken down buildings remain and serve as a constant reminder. We ventured deeper into the jungle and visited two other Batak villages, Kalakwesen and Tagnaya. Here, again, the villagers were friendly and welcoming.

Part 2: Sulu Sea and Johnson Island

For the second part of the trip, we headed out into the Sulu Sea, narrowly avoiding a sailing ban which was scheduled for a space rocket launch from China, with expected debris to drop in the region. We then spent the night on the boat, so we could resume sailing at dawn.

The next morning, after three more hours of sailing, we arrived at Johnson Island – our last stop on this trip. This is a fishing community, and the differences to the jungle communities were striking. It concerned many aspects, such as daily activities, diet, smoking and drinking habits, as well as access to medical care. Surprisingly, even though they live on an island, with the nearest city (Roxas) being only a short boat trip away, they are in many ways more connected to civilization than the Batak. That's not to say that life is much easier here, as overfishing, warmer water temperatures and the recent typhoon have all had a significant impact.

The journey was coming to an end, and it was time to head back to the centre. The sea got a bit restless on the way back, but our captain clearly knew what he was doing and got us all back safe and sound, in total darkless with no navigation instruments.

It has been a privilege to get a glimpse into the lives of these remote communities. Such an experience would have been unthinkable without the trust gained over the years through the centre's hard work. The excellent logistics, ensuring we had everything we needed at every step of the trip, is also not something to be taken for granted. The potential for both research and student trips is vast. Looking back, it feels like a two-week trip, but my calendar assures me it all happened over four days. Four very memorable days.

Mihai Tarce is Clinical Assistant Professor of the School of Dentistry, the University of Hong Kong.

WONG HOW MAN CENTRE FOR EXPLORATION
THE UNIVERSITY OF HONG KONG

SUPPLEMENTAL REPORT

2025 Spring Issue

Exploring the Unknown

Now and Next

The WHMCE Distinguished Lecture Series was privileged to host the renowned primatologist and anthropologist Dr. Jane Goodall at HKU on 27 November 2024. In her presentation titled "Exploring the Unknown: The Passion to Understand and Inspire the World," she captured the essence of exploration that WHMCE seeks to instill in students, motivating young individuals to venture into the unknown. The event attracted more than 800 attendees, including students, faculty, and alumni of HKU, as well as schoolchildren and members of the general public.

Through her childhood recollections, the challenges she faced in the field, and her intriguing stories about her interactions with chimpanzees, Goodall highlighted the significance of nurturing a passion for the natural world. By sharing her personal experiences and discoveries, she motivated young individuals to cultivate their curiosity about wildlife and ecosystems. At a time when transcontinental travel was rare and challenging, her determination to explore the vast continent of Africa served as a powerful encouragement for students to embrace and appreciate every opportunity for fieldwork, exploration and volunteer positions in conservation.

Dr. Wong How Man's concluding comments reflected this spirit of curiosity and a desire to understand the world, emphasising the importance of critical thinking in exploring and sharing scientific knowledge. This drive for knowledge and determination to find answers inspires young people to embark on their own explorations.

A Dialogue of Exploration

Insights from George Yeo's Journey

Wong How Man

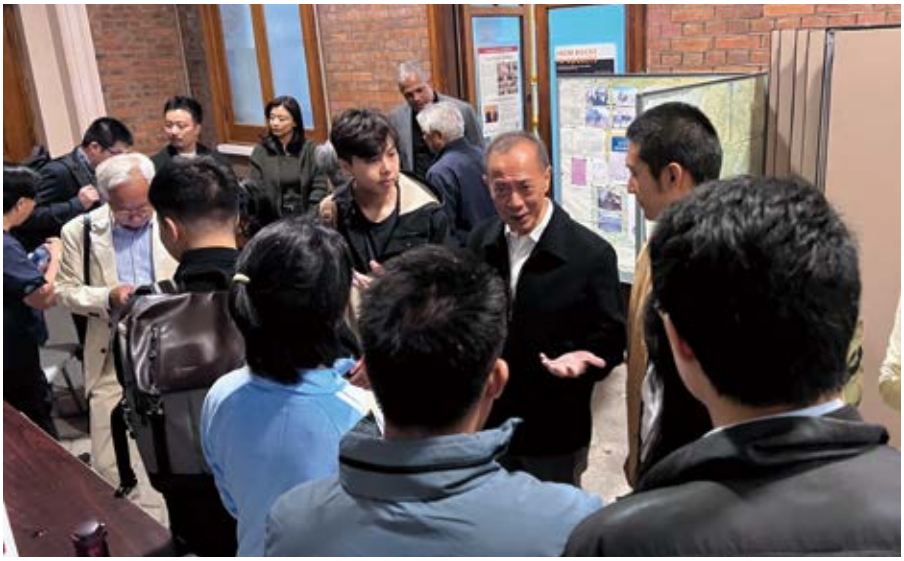
Faces Beyond Politics

Fountainside Chat with George Yeo

22 Nov 2024

Anyone can Google George's career with many pages of description and endless YouTube lectures and interviews on geopolitics. He is both a great orator as well as a prolific writer, as I have read his three-volume biography, with illustrations, about his illustrious life from childhood, education, military years, to peaking at several ministry portfolios in public service to his country of Singapore. These include top positions in information and the arts, health, trade and industry, to ultimately becoming the Minister of Foreign Affairs. His books also include candid recollections of his personal and family life, all the way up to recent years.

I am also one of his many followers online. My motivation in following George is not so much because of my rather limited and select interest in geography and politics (thus geopolitics), but my keen interest in seeing how his thinking process and analytical mind work. I have been fascinated by his knowledge of history, both western and oriental history, secular or religious. His easy draw on such knowledge in making analogy is a joy to listen to. His quick wit in responding to Q&A, at times very acute and provocative from the interviewer or the audience, is often simple, straight forward, direct, and often drawing laughter from his listeners. Because of his turbocharged mind in referencing history, current or past events of relevance, his answers often provide firepower of surprise, at times creating a boomerang effect to those who tried to corner him.



I invited George, who readily agreed, to join us at the HKU Wong How Man Centre for Exploration Fountainside Chat that I would moderate. I remembered several incidents that I encountered George, be it at a forum in Guilin, or asking in-kind support for equipment shipping when he chaired over Kerry Logistics, at his book signing surrounded by eager followers seeking his autograph, or at my home for dinner with freshly caught seafood from in front of my house. We, together with his wife Jennifer, went to a traditional Cantonese opera inside a bamboo scaffolding theatre, while dining at a street-stand folding table. Jennifer even let her fingers dance over a piano in my home as she told me that she has always wanted to become a concert pianist, but opted to study law as it is more practical.

But one occasion stood out in my memory when George and I completed a session of discussion in the kitchen of my library house in Shek O. Just as he was about to leave to get back into his waiting car, George picked up the glass he had used, walked around to the wash basin, cleaned his glass before taking leave. Such a small act of modesty speaks much of his character, which cannot be just assigned to his discipline of military training, rising to become Chief-of-staff of the Singapore Air Force.

I have informed George in advance that our chat at HKU will be more candid, casual and personal, with stories revealing some of the other personalities he had come across in different walks of life. It would be regarding spiritual and religious leaders, royalties, heads of governments, and his escapades with exploration spirit as an army officer and even with a Grand Master in Qigong. Indeed, for that hour and a half of conversation, George delivered superbly, entertaining a small group of professors, professionals, and proactive students eager to expand their knowledge and learn the modesty of someone as special as George Yeo.

October 2024

Excerpts of student reflections

HKU STUDENT TRIP TO PALAWAN

I Came with Wonders, Left with More

Lee Ka Ching Monica
Year 4, Medicine

The best thing is not something planned in the itinerary, but the unexpected things. I did not expect to stay in a treehouse; I did not expect to sleep outdoors without a tent or sleeping bag. I was taken aback when we stopped at a riverbank, which would be our rest stop that night. Twelve students and two teachers slept on large banana leaves as mattresses under a huge tarp. That was all we had. The bright moon was so shiny in the starless sky. Clouds were moving with winds, occasionally covering parts of the moon. It was like dilated small bowels on the abdominal X-ray of intestinal obstruction.

With this totally new experience, I started to wonder why the Bataks could sleep well and survive in the wild, primitive and harsh environment. Through a short but pleasurable rendezvous, I was intrigued to know more about the indigenous people in Palawan. Exploration is a mode of thought, a method of learning and a means of understanding. Being physically present in an area for a certain period triggered a mental process of raising questions and looking for answers. It enhanced the power of observation and awareness of the surroundings. It is time to let go of stereotypes and prejudice, let the new experience evoke an emotional response, and compare with my pre-existing knowledge. In short, a reflection.

A Comparison Between Batak Dance and Chinese Dance

Wu Sze Ching
Year 4, Speech-Language Pathology

This nine-day trip was undoubtedly one of the most memorable trips ever. unmixed heritage, is a once-in-a-lifetime experience. On the trip, we had the honor of watching a Batak dance performance. As a Chinese dancer myself, I could not help but pay extra attention to the Batak dance and contrasted the difference between it and Chinese dance. The most notable difference is their style. Batak dance demonstrates a style that is rustic, simple, and direct. The audience can easily understand the messages and symbolization from the dance moves. For instance, two Batak male dancers danced in opposition to one another and held swords, showing the competitiveness between males in the tribe. In some moves, they attacked simultaneously, whereas in some moves one of them defended. Switching roles was also frequent. Whereas female dancers usually danced in a circle, including dancers of diverse ages to symbolize unity and harmony.

Chinese dance is often said to have a reserved beauty. Although Chinese dance has become more expressive over time, sometimes a considerable amount of attention is still required to interpret the meaning behind the dance moves compared to the straightforward Batak dance. This is especially true for more classical dance pieces. In the interview with a Batak dancer, she stated that the dance movements were exactly the ones created by their ancestor a long time ago, not even a single dance move was modified, deleted from, or added to the dance. It impressed me a lot how intact the dance was preserved, and their persistence in cultural preservation commanded my respect.

EVENT RECAP

October 2024

Student trip to CERS Palawan Centre

November 2024

WHMCE Fountainside Chat with George Yeo

November 2024

WHMCE Distinguished Lecture Series with Dr Jane Goodall

January 2025

Student trip to CERS Shangrila Centre

NATURE IN FUTURE LESS RESERVE

By Wong How Man

Yes, we must have hope, faith and foresight regarding our future generations. Why need nature reserves when all our future children and grandchildren are fed, educated and learned at an early age about caring for our natural world? I can foresee that in time, what was necessarily set up as nature reserves in our generation can be gradually taken down, and be returned to unrestricted grounds for everyone, rather than a paradise for the select few who are one-time protectors of these areas.

I can testify to such slow, then gradual, and now more rapid development within the last five decades of work around many nature reserves and outside of it. On a large scale, I was made Chief Advisor of the Arjin Shan Nature Reserve in 1993, a protected area restricted of entry to just about anyone, with an area of 45,000 square kilometers, larger than Taiwan or Belgium, yet with only some thirty families living within it back in the early 1990s.

When we discovered the first ever known Tibetan Antelope calving ground at the reserve's westernmost extremity in 1998, there was a massacre, wholesale killing as poachers were rampant in gunning down pregnant females, decimating amass this protected species. Our huge and far-reaching international media campaign helped in making the purchase of its product, the high fashion ▶

TOP TO BOTTOM:
Using camels in Arjin Shan.
Bear attack.
Observing calving.

TOP TO BOTTOM:
Migrating Tibetan Antelope.
Newborn Tibetan Antelope.
Charging Wild Yak.

"must-have" shahtoosh, no longer socially acceptable, let alone illegal.

Our media coverage in the likes of CNN, BBC, CNBC, Discovery and National Geographic Channels probably did more in stopping such clandestine trading than the highly publicized policing efforts to such a huge area of the Tibetan plateau. When a lucrative market is there, illegal poaching will continue, as demonstrated by other endangered species trading worldwide.

By the time I last visited the calving ground in 2012, the population of migrating female antelope had multiplied to huge herds. And in 2023 when I did a transact in western Tibet during the migration season, I encountered close-up many herds of females. Even our drone above head received little notice from these herds, grazing while moving as if not bothered. In the past, since I first saw them in 1982, they would go into stampede even from half a kilometers away when we approached them.

Of course, the Tibetan Antelope is only one of many flagship species CERS has worked on over its four decades of existence. We have covered similar situations with the Black-necked Crane, the Wild Yak, Tibetan Wild Ass, Yunnan Snub-nosed Monkey, Musk deer and more. Our recent expedition to northern Tibet in June further testifies to my theory that wildlife is fast returning to its former numbers, at times in multiple times its former perilous population. Within a short camping stop in Dire, a remote village by the sacred

Clockwise from left:
Black-necked Crane by nest. Fox on road. Deer on road. Swan spa. Tibetan Wild Ass in North Tibet. Tibetan Gazelle.

Tangra Yumco, the deepest lake in Tibet, we encountered two Asiatic Bears coming so close to a nomad's camp that two mastiffs had to chase them off. Also a pair of Black-necked Crane hatching by their nest, casually groomed and fed as we watched on. Furthermore, Tibetan Wild Ass, Tibetan Gazelle, Antelope, fox, Blue Sheep were all roaming near the road, sometimes within sight that render a long camera lens useless. It is not unusual that some would cross the road in front of us.

Every winter around February, I would make my "pilgrimage" to Kushiro in eastern Hokkaido, to be among the Red-crowned Crane, Stellar Sea Eagle and White-tailed Eagle. Deer, elk (wapiti) and fox also roamed the bushes and open ground around the pasture land. Some would often come onto the road, like the fox and the deer, and we have to stop and wait for them to move, before continuing with our drive forward. This is another indication of man and wildlife living in close quarters. The swan, taking advantage of an open and natural hot spring I often go to, would be right by my side as I soaked myself in the snowbound spring once belonging to the indigenous Ainu people.

Recently, the University of Hong Kong Wong How Man Centre for Exploration has the honor of hosting ▶

conservation icon Jane Goodall to speak at the university. Seeing that the auditorium of over 800 is filled with young students, and over 200 on the waiting list, is a joy. Furthermore, knowing that such generation, known to be with TikTok attention span and instant gratification, would sit through an hour of talk mesmerized by someone who speaks slowly with a hypnotizing voice is very compelling. A good story, especially a real-life story, is always welcome. Goodall's breakthrough work on one species, the chimpanzee, is bringing us all closer to the natural world, despite the fact that the students are from one of the most cosmopolitan cities in the world. Jane, at 90, is still an enigma for our younger generation. That evening, I came across a family of a dozen wild boars right outside my studio home. Nature is indeed among us.

Finally, on the other balance of age, and to further reinforce my newfound belief is someone whom I can proudly consider as my protégé. Chu Wen Wen, a young woman of thirty, started reading my books (I have authored over 30) as assigned by her father to begin learning English at the age of eight. As many of my books published in Taiwan are bilingual, students can use them to learn Chinese or English, if they so prefer. Some five years ago, Wen Wen founded her own non-profit organization in northern Xinjiang to begin a conservation project for the Asiatic Beaver. Though outside of the nature reserve designated to protect this species, she has made huge inroads into expanding the beaver population to a new record. Her efforts not only complemented the work of the reserve, but expanded it much further along the same river system.

Today, her work has expanded to a wildlife rescue Center covering many species of injured wildlife, be it bear, fox, palas cat, deer, antelope, eagles, birds, and of course her beloved beaver. She has millions of young followers and supporters online, and was chosen to represent China's youth born in the 1990s, speaking at the United Nations in New York earlier this year to present her case. Recently while along with me in Hangzhou at Westlake University, she received the great news that she has won the coveted Paulson's Prize, competing against behemoth old NGOs and government agencies.

Rather than inspiring her in my own writing, now she has inspired me to start a new project at the northern frontiers of Hong Kong. Nam Sang Wai is almost adjacent to the world-famous Mai Po Reserve, a Ramsar wetland site to protect migrating birds that spend their winter at this border region of Hong Kong with Shenzhen in China. My hope is to follow Chu Wen Wen's footsteps, so that we too

can eventually make a case that we can protect wildlife just as well, if not better, by uncovering more and more areas for our citizens, especially younger generations, to appreciate nature and wildlife living among us. Early winter sightings of the endangered Black-faced Spoonbill in action among hundreds of other seabirds has been very promising. Next is to get them used to our non-intrusive presence, without "blinds" which should gradually become obsolete I believe. Such a façade is like the camouflaged camera lenses, more for show than for function.

But as usual, CERS makes no promise, only delivery, and at times even delivery in stealth. As long as I can quietly observe our future generation enjoying nature freely, I would feel fully gratified. As for our nature reserves, let us hope they would take the cue and gradually remove the borders, allowing everyone to visit at will, if even incrementally. Let us also hope that my prophesy would become a reality, leading others to follow, Amen.

CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT:

Jane Goodall at HKU. Camouflage no more.
Spoonbill at Nam Sang Wai. 1964 image over today satellite.
Chu Wen Wen working on Beaver. Eagle & Wen eyeing each other.
Speaking at UN. Boars near my studio.

INTERNATIONAL WEDDING IN NEPAL:

A Cultural Fusion of Love, Peace, and Resolution

By Narayan Prasad Koju

Flying across Nepal to China, I happened to meet a young, handsome Chinese man with a broad smile on his face, with a very friendly approach, and a welcoming voice. He was ready to talk to me. It was a very fortuitous meeting with him on the flight, moreover, he was glowing because he had just got married before he took off for his hometown along with his family — but without his beautiful bride. I was surprised to see the groom extremely happy even without his bride after the wedding. He could not bring his newly wed wife because of her nationality. They were citizens of two countries divided by a political boundary and the political laws of their country. In a world divided by politics, borders, and historical tensions, it resulted in divided people too, but political divisions could not divide people forever, and for all. There is a love too that unites. Politics is powerless over private life, yet politics can impact their life. The love remains a convincing power capable of bridging gaps and uniting people across cultures and nations.

The young man's wedding ceremony was held in Kathmandu. What a choice! An Indian bride and a Chinese groom had knotted their life together in Nepal, where they celebrated in both Indian and Chinese culture among their friends and family members.

The Chinese groom went on to explain his grand nuptial event in Kathmandu. I was surprised how Nepal became a favourable venue for those lovely couples and families to express their life vital event. Their choice of Nepal for wedding venue was a testimony to Kathmandu being a powerful symbol of cultural harmony, international peace, and the possibilities of transcultural cooperation. This union, held in the serene land of Nepal, emphasised its unique role as a neutral ground and a safe land for both the Indian and the Chinese. Beyond its geographical significance, Nepal's rich cultural tapestry and welcoming spirit set the perfect stage for this milestone event.

Nepal: A Land of Peace and Neutrality

Nepal, sandwiched between India and China, has long been a symbol of peace and a neutral zone within the geopolitical complexities. For centuries, this Himalayan nation has acted as a cultural bridge, nurturing exchanges between the civilisations of the Indian subcontinent and China. Nepal's history as a neutral state not only emphasises its diplomatic importance but also highlights its role as a harbour for unity and dialogue. The recent wedding establishes how this neutrality can be harnessed for fostering personal and cultural connections.

As India and China contend with political rivalries and territorial disputes, Nepal offers a safe zone where citizens of these nations can connect beyond the barriers of their governments. This peace-promoting aspect of Nepal is vital, positioning it as a land where nations can confront differences constructively and work toward sustainability and coexistence.

A Unique Fusion: The Wedding of Ms. Deksha Singh and Mr. Wang Boyang

Ms. Deksha Singh, an Indian and Mr. Wang Boyang, a Chinese, are both IT professionals. They met and fell in love while studying in Germany, they decided to get married. The Chinese groom tried to visit his Indian family in India, but the new regulation of India did not allow them to travel there because India prohibited Chinese individual tourist visas. The two families could neither visit India nor China because China has also banned individual tourist visas for Indian citizens.

Their love stood firm and unshaken by their country's law. The couple represented a globalised generation unfazed by the boundaries that often divide their homelands. Yet, planning their wedding posed a significant challenge, as heightened restrictions made hosting the ceremony in either India or China infeasible.

Then, Nepal emerged as the ideal location — a place where their love could be celebrated without the interference of political trouble. With its open border and visa-free access for Indian citizens and visa-on-arrival policy for Chinese nationals, Nepal offered not only logistical ease but also a meaningful setting for a cross-cultural union. Kathmandu, a city rich in spiritual and cultural heritage, became the canvas for their fusion of traditions.

The Ceremony: Blending Indian and Chinese Traditions

The wedding was an exciting amalgamation of Indian, Chinese, and Nepali customs held near the sacred Pashupatinath Temple, a UNESCO World Heritage Site. The Hindu rituals — a hallmark of Indian weddings — were observed with enthusiastic participation from both families. The Chinese groom, Wang, embraced Indian traditions wholeheartedly by putting on a sherwani and riding a horse to the ceremony as per North Indian customs. This gesture not only highlighted his respect for Indian culture but also underscored the adaptability and openness of cross-cultural unions.

The bride, Deksha, ornamented in a traditional Indian red sari, represented her cultural roots, while her groom's family added a distinct touch by participating in the festivities in Indian attire. Moments like the Haldi ceremony, where turmeric paste is applied for good luck, were enriched by the involvement of both families, symbolising the blending of traditions. They also did the Mehndi party. A mehndi party is a pre-wedding celebration in Hindu and Sikh culture; during this event, the bride has a red-orange mehndi dye applied to her palms, the back of her hands, and her feet. The family and friends of the bride beautify her with this orange, plant-based dye to decorate her as the bride. During Mehndi, He also wrote his better half's name in his hand. ▶

CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT:

Nepali wedding ceremony. Indian bride and Chinese groom with their close family members. Indian wedding reception. Indian in-laws gave the blessing to their Chinese son-in-law. Bride and groom in Western wedding fashion. Mehndi party.

LEFT TO RIGHT:

Merry couple in Chinese wedding attire with the Himalayas in the backdrop. Meeting the groom on the plane.

After all rituals, it was time for the photo session. Chinese and Indian families took many group photos in Indian as well as Chinese dresses. The newly married couple went to a hill station Chandragiri in the Kathmandu Valley to capture these precious memories. They had wonderful photos in Indian and Chinese wedding dresses with the Himalayas and blue skies of Kathmandu in the backdrop. Both were looking bright and happy. Mr. Wang emphasized that luckily that day the sky of Kathmandu was blue and the Himalayas were witness to the wedding.

Nepal as a Land of Cultural Fusion

Nepal's role in this wedding transcends its logistical convenience. Known as a melting pot of cultures, Nepal has historically been a meeting point for various civilisations. Its temples, stupas, and diverse communities reflect a rich heritage where Hinduism, Buddhism, and other traditions coexist in harmony. This unique identity made Nepal the perfect venue for a union celebrating diversity and unity. In this case, Nepal's neutrality and inclusivity also positioned it as a potential peace land for confronting countries. Weddings like this one—which bring together individuals from rival nations can inspire broader reconciliation and understanding, promoting sustainability and coexistence on a global scale.

Transboundary Marriages: A Path to Global Harmony

Transnational unions like that of Deksha and Wang offer a new narrative for future generations, emphasising collaboration over conflict. These marriages are not only personal milestones but also cultural and political symbols. They remind us of the importance of transcultural and transboundary relationships in fostering mutual respect and reducing racial and ethnic tensions.

By embracing their differences, the couple has set an example of how love and understanding can bridge historical divides. Such unions have the potential to dialogue and create pathways for peace, proving that cultural fusion is essential for human progress and resolving conflicts.

In the broader context, this wedding signifies a new milestone for Indian and Chinese relations. Despite political hostilities, events like these demonstrate the potential for individual relationships to inspire greater understanding between nations. Transboundary marriages, with their emphasis on multiculturalism and shared humanity, challenge stereotypes and pave the way for a more harmonious future. As Wang and Deksha embark on their journey together, their story serves as a beacon of hope. Their wedding symbolises a fresh start — a generation ready to omit the bitterness of the past and build bridges for a sustainable, peaceful future.

Nepal's natural beauty, spiritual depth, and cultural openness make it a unique space for transcultural unions. In choosing Nepal, Deksha and Wang not only found a practical solution to their logistical challenges but also set an example of how neutral grounds can facilitate harmony. The country's role as a mediator—whether for international diplomacy or personal unions—remains invaluable. This wedding is a miniature of Nepal's broader potential as a land of peace and reconciliation. By hosting events that celebrate cultural fusion, Nepal continues to reinforce its identity as a place where diversity is cherished, and differences are celebrated.

Though they did a cultural marriage in Nepal following Hindu ritual, the married couple were not able to register their marriages in Nepal. Thus, Mr. Wang planned to register his marriage in Denmark after they returned to Europe.

As the couple begins their life together, their story inspires a global audience to look beyond borders and embrace the richness of diversity. Their union in Nepal is a witness to the power of love, the importance of cultural exchange, and the possibility of peace through understanding. It is a hopeful reminder that even in a divided world, unity and compassion can prevail. May their marriage be a lasting exemplary love story to transcend barriers and an enduring symbol of the peace and harmony that Nepal so beautifully represents.

Narayan Koju is Assistant Professor and Director of M.Sc. in Natural Resources Management, Nepal Engineering College, Pokhara University in Nepal. He has been researching human-wildlife interaction, climate change, and trans-boundary marriage in the Himalayas with the support of CERS.

FIRST RESORT IN JAPAN CIRCA 1878

Still leading in many ways

By Wong How Man

CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT:
Einstein at hotel. Charlie Chaplin in 1932. Helen Keller. Double pages in-between. Title page of book . My copy of We Japanese.

Einstein stayed here. Charlie Chaplin played tennis in its court and left a drawing of Mount Fuji on a piece of paper. Archduke Franz Ferdinand von Habsburg of Austria whose death triggered the First World War was a guest. Chiang Kai-shek stayed while visiting his wife Sung Mei-ling's mother in Japan. John Lennon also came with Yoko and her mother, together with his son Sean. Yes, also Helen Keller, the most admirable blind and deaf author, and a civil and women rights-advocate. The list goes on and on, including successive Emperors and princes of Japan.

But my rendezvous with the Fujiya Hotel in Hakone has a rather fortuitous beginning. I am a frequent visitor to Tokyo's used book district of Jimbocho where the neighborhood hosts maybe 150 bookshops, selling just about anything printed from past to present. My haul of books, old maps and photo albums, have gone home with me as overweight luggage. While each item may be special for me, like maps and photos I have used to embellish my writing interest, one book stands out special among other historic publications.

It is bound thick with strings on its edge, like old classic books of the past. But the strings are worn and partly torn, making it precarious to go through the six hundred double-sided pages within. Each two pages have two inside folded empty pages, such that the ink printed would not penetrate through the thin paper. On its fabric front page is printed the title "We Japanese" in English, not sideways as proper English writing dictates, but top to bottom in alphabetical line-up as classical Japanese would have it. Thumbing through it gave me the desire that I must visit this iconic hotel.

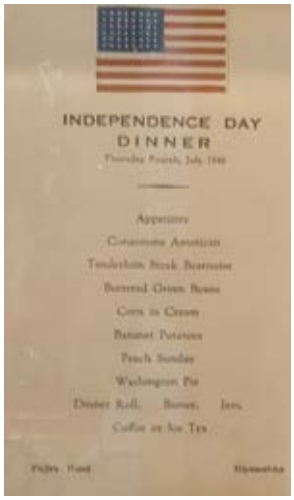
My copy is unique and rare, with three editions bound as one, from 1934, 1937 and 1949, with each additional edition having expanded contents supplemental to the ▶

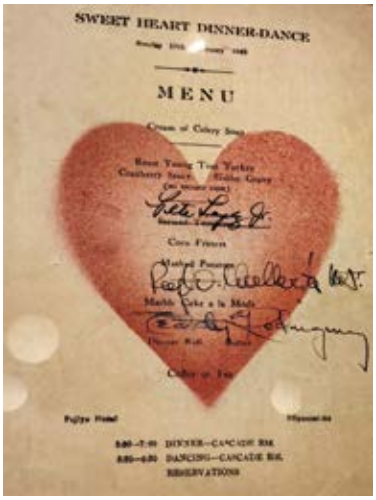
TOP TO BOTTOM:
Wedding ceremony chapel.
Entrance to Fujiya Hotel.
First indoor pool in hotel.

last edition. The owner/manager of the hotel during that era was Kenkichi Yamaguchi, a third-generation successor of the founding owner. He wrote prefaces to all three editions, being included at the front of the book. It offers me a chance to read the changes in attitude and fortitude of a Japanese from the pre-war epoch years, to the war years of supremacy, and subsequently losing the war and being humbled under occupation, when the hotel was secured by the US government until 1956.

After reading select parts of the book, I feel an urge to visit the hotel in person, despite having visited Hakone many years ago to take in the breathtaking view of Mount Fuji. An easy train ride from central Tokyo got me there in less than two hours, connecting to a local bus took me to within twenty meters the steps leading up to the Fujiya Hotel. The same red ornamental bridge that likely bears the footprints of many dignitaries and celebrities is there to welcome me while the doorman gave a nice bow with his hand showing the entrance into the hotel lobby. As the restaurant would not open until 11:30, I opted to visit the museum first.

Today, integrated resorts are coming up all over the world, into jungles and even beyond the Arctic Circle. But few if any can boast to be over a hundred years old. The Fujiya Hotel in Hakone was founded in 1878 and is closing in on 150 years old. The Fujiya comes with many surprising amenities, not just an indoor pool said to be Japan's first





LEFT TO RIGHT:
Independence Day menu. Printing press room. Sweet Heart Dance menu.

one, but a museum describing its long history, with its structures now registered as a tangible cultural property, and designated as historical buildings.

Destination weddings at resorts have been in vogue for a couple decades, but the Fujiya comes with a well-adorned chapel for wedding ceremonies, with a grand piano in the foyer, and inside seating for up to 150 guests. Not that I was ready for a wedding, but that chance purchase of the book prompted my visit and the effort seemed not wasted. Mounted on both walls of a corridor leading to the museum gives a fascinating story of its founders, as well as the inner making of the Fujiya, from the front office, guest facilities, and restaurants, to the kitchen and even the laundry and ironing room.

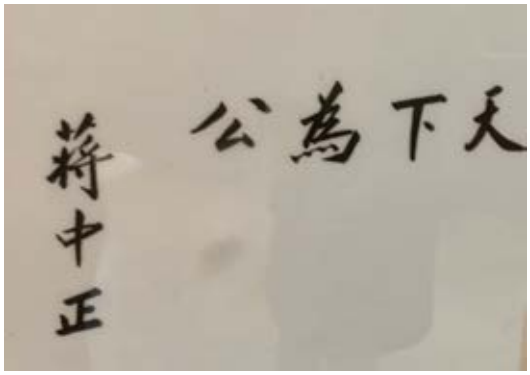
What caught my attention was some relics of the hotel's in-house printing press, with old-style type-face blocks printing the daily menu for the several restaurants, and rubber plates that produced the backside page with interesting information and caricatures about Japan. Many of these are extracted from the contents of the book that I had acquired.

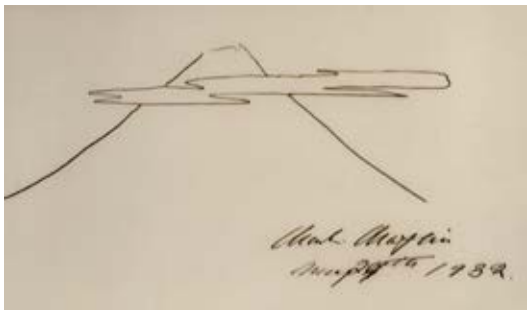
One of these special menus is framed and on display, on Thursday Fourth, July 1946 for America's Independence Day Dinner, almost a year after Japan's surrender in WWII and during the time of US occupation of Japan. Dessert included Peach Sundae and "Washington Pie", a rather patronizing selection. At the time, the US flag has only 48 rather than 50 stars to the thirteen bangles. There is also on display a menu from Sunday 15th February 1948, for the Sweet Heart Dinner-Dance with several celebrities autographing over it.

I have at times pondered upon the Japanese psych after the War. I believe in retrospect, they felt they had lost only to the US and considered Allied countries only won with collateral success. Without Pearl Harbor that triggered America into WWII, they probably could have consolidated much of their gain and became a real empire. It is not my imagination that when bowing in front of Americans, they bow lower, at least in their hearts, as Japanese respect strength and force.

But after the War, Japan in turn became a beneficiary as no military spending was allowed, prohibiting them from having a defense, let alone offence, budget. The rebuilding of the country and its economy was left to the Americans. It was at a time when the U.S. was still embracing its moral high-ground posture, despite dropping two atomic bombs on civilian cities demonstrating also that it has a limitless bottom line, when pushed. Japan, with its strong industrial base came back fast and strong economically, ultimately requiring America to again rein it in after the booming 1980s. The same was true with Germany. Today America cannot afford to win a war, let alone losing one. That's why after Korea, Vietnam, Iraq and Afghanistan, America feels no obligation in helping to rebuild any of these countries, calling it a truce, a draw or a retreat with honor, is rather face-saving.

If I am becoming too analytical, blame it on my fine education in America, especially through years as a journalism school major. But my Art double major curriculum soon took over with my interest turning to the Fujiya Hotel Museum. It has a library, though almost all books are in Japanese. The photographs of the most noted guests graced the wall with Chiang Kai-shek leaving behind four words of calligraphy with his signature during his visit in 1927. This was well before Japan plundered much of Manchuria in 1931 and entered Beijing, then Shanghai and beyond in 1937, leading to an all-out war with China. Obviously, the then hotel owner/manager ▶





CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT:
Chiang Kai-shek writing.
Appetizer.
Menu of day.
Charlie Chaplin's drawing.
John Lennon visit.

did not consider those battles in China as a war, as in his Preface he called those years as being "pre-war", probably considering December 1941 as the watershed when Japan took on the entire Asia and the American Pacific islands as the battlefield.

By now, it was almost 12:30 and I removed myself to the Restaurant Cascade that serves "simple" Western dishes, bypassing the more expensive eponymous French and ornamental Japanese restaurants. Some young Japanese, perhaps more cost conscious, are seated at the window lounge having tea with a tower of pastries in front.

As I entered this rather large restaurant, only four to five tables were taken. But before I finished my lunch, the place would be totally full, as a big bus brought in a Japanese tour group of men. It seems the Fujiya is a destination and the restaurant seems to be serving up a fixed menu of curry with rice and beer to everyone, maybe thirty or more in this group. My set lunch menu, however, was more substantial besides being more colorful than curry when served. Perhaps as an old tradition, the daily menu is printed with a chop and a date, turning over to a page of information about Japan. Today's description replicated one of the pages in my old book. I must read about the Japanese sandal footwear with drawings, be it appetizing or not.

While I would like to describe more of the customs and history included in this very fine old book, it must be left to readers to find their own copy through our friendly internet market. Most items described took up one page, or at most two to three pages, but rarely. However, the "Magic Silkworm", as credited to be discovered by a Chinese Empress, takes up six pages, the longest of all. Surprisingly, the Ainus indigenous people of northern Japan who has been official target for assimilation for over a century and only received special recognition in 2019, took up three pages. Likewise "The headhunters of Formosa" then still occupied by Japan until the end of the War in 1945 also took up two pages.

Among all the "oddities", actually such a title took up substantial pages in the book, one, though only taking up one page, stands out worthy of recounting – "International Mustache Club", with headquarters at the hotel. It was founded by Mr. H.S.K. Yamaguchi, the second Owner/ Managing Director of the Fujiya Hotel. One interesting qualification, "men or women with beards or whiskers are welcome to become members, besides those with mustaches". The club's vision is grand:

International Mustache Club.

"The object of the club is to do its bit in creating a feeling of good fellowship among its members, and to show that people of different nationalities are good fellows at heart, and that, after all, without distinction of race or creed or color, everyone desires to live in peace and harmony with the rest of mankind". Members, however, must submit an autographed photograph bearing "a mustache, whisker or beard, that is at least two inches in length. Should this be shaved off the membership becomes void." With that as entrance bar, Hitler, Japan's War-time ally, would not qualify as his mustache is an inch too short, whereas its enemy Stalin, like Einstein, could well become a member.

An added note in the book to end the paragraph, "In a communication received from the Bald-headed Men's Club of Japan, the sympathy and get-together spirit of the International Mustache Club were solicited, and despite the apparently antagonistic requirement for membership in these clubs, the latter gladly extended its good fellowship to the bald-headed men, even though the hirsute adornments of the members could not be well transferred to the bald domes of the former's members as contributions for their lack of hair." Thus explained on page 152 with twelve photos of mustached men, though without any woman.

I would have loved to spend a night at the Fujiya Hotel, but balked at the current low season price of some US500 per night. Directly across the street is the Fujiya Hostel, missing only one alphabet. It is posted online with 5.0 rating, at only a paltry US50. I will opt to stay there and enjoy all the amenities of the Fujiya Hotel, perhaps without the indoor pool. Sayonara.

On the same wall, I found Charlie Chaplin's 1932 minimalist Mt Fuji more tranquil. A pictorial chronology of the hotel told tales of important milestones of the Fujiya. Some old china and silver wares were on display, and a small room had films on a loop, including the lengthy restoration of the hotel to make it earthquake proof.

WORK EXPERIENCE PLACEMENT PROGRAMME AT CERS

By Angelina Liang, Karen Chung, Christy Yee, Winnie Shen

Our four-day work placement with the China Exploration Research Society (CERS) was both enlightening and transformative. The organisation's commitment to the exploration resonated deeply with us as we engaged in diverse activities that highlighted the significance of preserving cultural heritage while telling the stories embedded in historical artefacts.

From the onset, CERS instilled in us a profound appreciation for the value of courage and dedication in exploring the unknown. We were first introduced to the organisation through archival footage documenting their expeditions in remote regions of China, such as the Li Tribe in Hainan Province and the Ewenki of the Greater Khingan. Witnessing how CERS recorded the lifestyles and musical instruments of ethnic groups brought to light the invaluable stories that artefacts can tell. This initial glimpse into their work ignited our curiosity and set the tone for our hands-on explorations.

We took on several tasks involving the careful cataloging of various artefacts. We were fortunate enough to handle items from different ethnic groups, particularly of the Tibetan and Tajik. Among the artefacts, we documented goat wool belts, intricately designed flutes made from ▶

TOP TO BOTTOM:
Handling artefacts with care.
Photo-documenting artefacts.
Preparing Alyosha's birthday party.

Receiving certificates from Dr Wong How Man

eagle bone, and hats crafted from animal fur. Engaging with these items was not only a physical task of taking photographs and logging information through Google Forms, but it was also a deeper, personal experience of connection and understanding. Each artefact we encountered had its own unique story that reflected the cultural heritage of the people from whom it originated.

Through this immersive experience, we learned the importance of treating each artefact with respect and care. Every piece served as a reminder of our responsibility to safeguard cultural heritage for future generations. Understanding the history behind these items fostered a deep respect for the traditional methods used by the ethnic minorities and emphasised the value of crafting by hand with local materials. This hands-on work ignited a newfound appreciation for the rich tapestry of human experiences conveyed through artefacts.

In our exploration of these artefacts, we also delved into CERS's extensive photographic exhibits, analysing the images to extract their narratives. Each photograph captured moments of significance, from discovering river sources to traversing the historic Silk Road. As we wrote summaries of our findings, we uncovered captivating stories intertwined with the history of exploration. This exercise in narrative development enriched our understanding of how powerful storytelling in artefacts can shape our perception of history.

A particularly inspiring moment came during our meeting with Dr. Wong How Man, the founder of CERS. His wisdom and enthusiasm were contagious as he emphasised the importance of personal stories in historical research. While factual knowledge is readily available online, he reminded us that it is the human experiences and cultural narratives that truly resonate on a deeper level. This insight helped solidify our belief in the power of storytelling as a means to truly connect with and appreciate cultural heritage.

In addition to hands-on tasks, we had the delightful opportunity to participate in team activities, such as celebrating Alyosha's 1st birthday, and enjoying a farewell lunch on the rooftop. Although we had only spent four days at CERS Exhibit House in Shek O, we realised how much we have grown and learned. Our understanding of cultural heritage has deepened, sparking an interest in preserving these narratives for the future. This experience not only fostered our skills in organisation, time management, and research but also taught us the importance of engagement and collaboration within a community.

Our time with CERS has inspired us to view history not as a static account of the past, but as a vibrant field filled with rich stories waiting to be discovered and shared. The spirit of exploration that we experienced at CERS has instilled in us a commitment to advocate for and preserve the diverse cultural narratives that shape our world today. We are immensely grateful to CERS, Heep Yunn School, Dr Wong How Man, Ms Miriam Lee, Ms Natalie Lai and the CERS entire team for providing us with such a meaningful and enriching learning experience.

CERS IN THE FIELD

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP:
CERS team at Causeway Bay Typhoon Shelter. Nam Sang Wai site set up. Natalie & Yida finishing new film "50 Years in 15 Minutes". CERS staff and field crew arranging experiential learning activities in Palawan for HKU students — sailing on M/V Palawan Explorer, meeting the Batak tribe, riding bamboo rafts, caving led by villagers.

NEWS NEWS NEWS

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP:

Tea reception for Bhutan's royal family at the Helena May. Pool game between Ashi Kesang Choden Wangchuck and How Man. Launch of new wooden sampans in Tai O with Dora Wu, Cheung Man Yee and other friends of CERS. Alyosha's first birthday celebration. HKU students at Hundred Caves of Palawan. Helmets given by CERS to villagers of Hundred Caves. Inspection at Tsou Village in Alishan. Inspection of Li houses on Hainan.

- How Man hosted a tea reception for Bhutan's royal family, including HE Vairochana Rinpoche Ngawang Jigme Jigten Wangchuck, the Queenmother Her Majesty Ashi Dorji Wangmo Wangchuck and HRH Ashi Sonam Dechan Wangchuck at the Helena May Club. CERS director Gilbert Wong and patrons Francis Yuen and Rose Lee also attended the audience.

- Old Bhutanese friend of CERS Ashi Kesang Choden Wangchuck had a game of pool with HM at the Lusitano Club in HK where HM scratched on the 8th ball and lost.

- CERS presented gifts to Palawan Thousand Cave with helmets and headlights, a project our caving team helped developed for the local community.

- The government of Hainan began transformation of 21 traditional Li houses preserved by CERS since 2007, in anticipation of applying for UNESCO World Heritage recognition.

- Two new wooden hybrid sampans are launched in Tai O to complement four others in the fleet for educational use to young people in traditional sculling technique.

- A CERS team visited Amor at the Taiwan Alishan Tsou site to assess continued involvement in future stage of this culture conservation project.

- CERS visited Da Chen Islands off Zhejiang Province to understand changes since the Nationalist's massive retreat and evacuation of entire civilian and military personnel in 1955.

- Alyosha, CERS mascot of Wolf/Mastiff celebrated his one-year birthday in Hong Kong

CERS IN THE MEDIA AND LECTURES

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP:

Jane Goodall & full attendance. Zhang Fan in lecture. YPO lecture moderated by How Man. Lecture and film showing at Zetland Hall. Editing the manuscript of the book on Diqing.

- Jane Goodall gave a lecture to a full auditorium of students and guests presented by the HKU Wong How Man Centre for Exploration

- Zhang Fan gave a lecture in Yunnan.

- How Man moderated the YPO lecture on WWII landing at Normandie.

- How Man presented a lecture and documentation film commemorating WWII Hump Pilots at Zetland Hall of the Freemasons.

- Chu Wen, an associate of CERS in Xinjiang with a successful wildlife rescue center spoke at Westlake U, with CERS members in attendance.

- Diqing Prefecture government of Yunnan Province has prepared a 400-page book for publication covering HM's images taken of the region over a 25 years period between 1981 to 2006.

THANK YOU THANK YOU

■ Dominic Pang gifted a fully equipped outdoor trailer for CERS to set up an environmental monitoring and educational site in Nam Sang Wai marshes adjacent to Mai Po Wetland Reserve in Hong Kong.

■ Fo Guang Shan Buddhist Center donated a hand-written script by the venerable Monk Hsing Yun to the birth house of the 7th Dalai Lama in Litang Sichuan.

■ Several patrons renewed their support to CERS. They are Vivien Chou, Terence Chu, Christabel Lee, Martin Ma, Chote Sophonpanich, Stephen Suen, Billy Yung.

■ Janice Wang provides support to CERS staff in Myanmar and uniform for our Palawan crew.

■ The Vincent and Lily Woo Foundation made a donation for CERS new Northeast China Pavillion in Zhongdian.

■ Sonny & Fred Yau made customized backpacks for CERS.

■ Ester Stiftung continued their long years of support to CERS.

■ Shun Hing Education & Charity Fund continued its annual major support to CERS.

■ Vic Lee, a CERS Director continued his annual major support.

■ Billy Yung, Vice-Chairman of CERS, made a major donation for a passenger van for use in Palawan, plus additional general support funding.

TOP TO BOTTOM:

Nam Sang Wai site set up. How Man received the handwritten script by Monk Hsing Yun.

CURRENT PATRONS

HONG KONG / OVERSEAS

- Dr Joseph Chan
- Eric Chen
- Terence Chu
- William E. Connor
- Vivien Chou
- Ester Goelkel
- William Fung
- Adrian Fu
- Andy Hei and Susanna Lo
- V.K. Hsu And Sons Foundation Limited
- Hans Michael Jebsen
- Wendy Kwok
- Barry Lam
- Christabel & Ricky Lau
- Vic Lee
- Afonso Ma
- Martin Ma
- David Mong
- Pang Family
- King Pang & Magdalen Yum
- Thomas Pritzker
- Serge Pun
- Chote Sophonpanich
- Stephen Suen
- Betty Tsui
- Conrad Wong
- Gilbert Wong
- Dora Wu
- Anna & Eric Yeung
- Francis & Rose Yuen
- Billy Yung
- Jacqueline Zhang

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.