A NEWSLETTER TO INFORM AND ACKNOWLEDGE CERS' FRIENDS AND SUPPORTERS

CHINA EXPLORERS

CHINA EXPLORATION AND RESEARCH SOCIETY

VOLUME 28 NO.1 SPRING ISSUE 2026

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CLOCKWISE FROM TOP:

Her Majesty with family & us.

Camping on Bhutan plateau.

Sketches of Shangrila.

Sasha with reindeer.

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President's Message

2025 has come to a close, and 2026 just crossed the threshold. It seems illogical that I should travel to Taitung in Taiwan to be by the ocean, listening to the rhythmic sound of the waves and the idyllic view of surf, whereas my home in Hong Kong Tai Tam Bay offers much the same. But the vast sky and horizon bring about a certain boundless mental state as I look east toward the endless Pacific expanse.

HM serving HM

Yes, I have been twice here over ten years ago, and twice over to Green Island, barely visible over the distant ocean. Repeated trips may not be the norm for an explorer, yet commitments to return to places I once visited seem to run in my blood. First time may be for curiosity and inquisitiveness. Returning is to recapture a place, and often the people, not just a snapshot or a dream. Behind the hills in Alishan to the west is where we have supported, and now come to fruition, a project to safeguard the last remnants of the indigenous Tsou minority of the island.

Taiwan now, Japan next week, for a consecutive third time Christmas at the oldest Catholic Church in Tokyo, and Shanghai for New Year's Eve and the first day of 2026 is a microcosm of what is in my mind as an explorer, spanning time and space. By mid-January, my team and I would be in freezing Siberia, hopefully establishing further relationships with the 180-year-old Russian Geographical Society. By the end of January, we should be in Natuna, an Indonesian Island in the middle of the sea between Singapore, Malaysia, and the edge of the Nine-Dash Line that China considers its southern border.

Exploration is the essence of CERS, and our team of seasoned as well as young explorers are here to be on the frontline. 2026 will offer many discoveries, as well as projects we have committed to. This issue will bring you some examples of what we have recently accomplished. A projection of these select articles may drive our imagination of what is ahead in the future, hopefully for us as well as for our friends and supporters. Together we shall expect the unexpected. That is what exploration is all about.

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

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FROM PALACE TO NOMAD'S CAMP

High altitude, low altitude, right attitude

By Wong How Man

Kesang Dechen Ling, Namseyling Palace, Bhutan

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP:
Dungkar Dzong. Emblem & Name. Her Majesty's letter. Shrine in living room.

It is always nice to be on the high side, literally or figuratively, except if mountain sickness should hit when physically at high elevation. I believe, in life we should try to have that range, lofty at times and down to earth with feet on the ground as well. Half a month in Bhutan provided that contrast.

Touched down on a now familiar twist and turn landing procedure into Paro airport where the runway is narrower than the wing-tips of the AirbusA320. Ushered into the lounge by Colonel Dorji, ADC of Her Majesty the Royal Grandmother, we had tea while passport control was being taken care of. A palace car was waiting outside, and a pick-up truck for my 200kg of luggage, gifts and mainly household goods for moving into a new writing abode.

It was planned as a writing shed built inside orchard grounds of Namseyling Palace, residence of the late Ashi Rani, mother of Her Majesty. The house is offered to Her Majesty, yet always be available for my use. Thus she has called it as my "second home" during the inauguration with two-full-days of religious blessing of the house back in June. Her Majesty has chosen the location herself, deliberated for a long time before naming this new house ▶

CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT:

Kesang Dechen Ling (KDL).
Yo-Yo Ma playing.
Yo-Yo Ma with local artists.
5th King, Yo-Yo Ma & us
Ashi Sonam, How Man & Benji.
KDL at night.
Living room.

Kesang Dechen Ling (Happy Paradise Place) with her name as prefix, and bestowed upon this house an emblem that has long been in her mind.

But somehow this writing shed became a cottage, then a lodge and finally grew in size to a villa with a loft and a lower floor, with two kitchens and a total of four guestrooms. An ornamental shrine with presiding deities was already set up in the living room when I arrived. On the opposite wall hung a birthday gift from Ashi Kesang, of a very nice painting with a symbolic Bhutan map, featuring many places I had visited and animals I had seen, or hope to see like two types of mysterious Yeti.

Gifts from Her Majesty started arriving before I could unpack -- apples, persimmons, dragon fruit, jams and marmalade from the Royal Garden, a case of wine, books and a handwritten card of welcome. I am always conscientious that Her Majesty's graciousness and showering of gifts are out of proportion and far exceeding the small contributions I have made to Bhutan. But I have since learned to accept her gifts without taking anything for granted. Quick set up and decorations provided adequate décor within two days to host a group of eleven guests from the HKU Museum. Everything was so rushed that I had no time to even test-drive the 1990 Jeep Cherokee left for my use. It used to belong to the 4th King, then given to the 5th, with barely 11,000 km on the speedometer.

In the following evening, I joined a private performance by Yo-Yo Ma in the spectacular new Dungkar Dzong above Paro, attended by

diplomats, ministers and select guests. At the cocktail reception, I met again the 5th King. "You look the same every time I see you," said the King. Perhaps it is because I wear the same old Austrian jacket each time we met. "But your grandmother always say I look younger each time, so I must see her more often," I quipped in reply.

While fetched by everyone for photo ops, Yo-Yo managed to remind me about our discussion two years ago about some form of collaboration regarding ethnic music and culture in China. Wearing his disarming smile, Yo-Yo autographed the program with a generous two-word remark "My inspiration!" that took me to the clouds. Generous as always, he scripted on another program for Miriam in my group, "My fellow cello player. Enjoy." That took Miriam, also a cello player, with her childhood dream to the summit of Everest. For that formal evening, both Berry and Miriam wore the traditional Bhutanese dress and looked very much at home in this palace/ fortress/castle.

I have my own photo op with Ashi Sonam who visited us in Hong Kong last year with her now twelve-years-old Rinpoche son, introducing me to others as the Rinpoche's best friend. Rinpoche contributed the Foreword to my latest book. Ashi, with degrees from Stanford and Harvard Law, is well qualified to be president of the Bhutan School of Law.

I met Her Majesty on October 1st during a special nine-day religious ceremony at the ancient 7th Century Kyichu Lhakhang, built by Songtsen Gampo, the first unifying king of Tibet. A sumptuous buffet lunch was set up afterward in Her Majesty's Paro Palace. She again showered each of us in my party with gifts. "You've lost some weight Doctor, and looking younger," Her Majesty said with her soft whispering voice. I have been reminded by my old friend Ashi Kesang, Her Majesty's granddaughter, to speak slowly and softly. My own failing ears made me raise my voice louder than necessary.

Conversations always repeated itself, with Her Majesty huge memory bank about earlier acquaintances of hers, and explorers that stayed with her family home in Kalimpong decades ago when she was growing up, a most-amazing recounting by a lady of 95 years old. Her affinity for explorers of old was obvious, counting me as last of a species as she opened her hands wide facing up. I tended to concur, especially if we were to talk of the old-fashion die-hard ones still writing with a fountain pen and conduct research through books rather than surfing the internet. Autographing yet another new book to me, I offered my pale green fountain pen to her. "You have given me ▶

TOP TO BOTTOM:
Her Majesty with family & us.
Her Majesty & How Man.
Haa Valley.

three pens already, and we exchanged one," she recalled exactly while I had long lost count.

Lofty I must feel among royalties and celebrity icon of the music world. But bragging rights must abide to other realities too, descending from such pedestal and then ascend to a different height, that in altitude, with feet on the ground.

My original plan to explore west side of Bhutan, a nine-day trek to see the sacred mountain Jomolhari bordering Tibet, was a bit ambitious. I have been on the China side several times over the years, but never see it from the east. Social-climbing eroded my time, thus discounted my real climbing. Plan B to go south into the jungle for five days among wildlife was voted down by Ashi Kesang, my princess friend, who feared the rainy season may inundate us. Plan C, salvaging just a three-day excursion to high country to visit yak herders sound most feasible, despite watered-down. Water down literally, as weather report predicted rain for the following three days. By then, given my fast-changing plans, a 14-horse caravan was reduced to only six available horses, with only two tame enough for riding. Soldiers dispatched became part of our human draught carriers.

The drive in three cars with all our gear to the eastern valley of Haa took around three hours from Namseyling, with a couple stop for photos. This valley is an important community of where it all started to become Bhutan, thus playing host to a 7th Century old Buddhist monastery. We visited the old home of the prominent Dorji family, traditionally prime minister for the King of Bhutan. Her Majesty's father was a Dorji, and her elder brother Jigme Palden Dorji was prime minister for the 3rd King. He was assassinated in 1964 and the son Benji Dorji, now 82 and retired as Chief Justice of the kingdom prompted me to visit their family home. I took up his offer and had tea there, before retiring to Monk Sonam's comfortable home.

Following day, we started early. Drove through the valley and up a hill to where the road ends at Dranadingkha Lhakhang monastery. From here, at 3264 meters elevation, our soldiers packed the horses and our team departed into a trail at 9am. We hiked through pine and rhododendron forest, slowly picking our steps through some of the steep inclines with rocks and occasional mud. It was not a proper hiking trail, but one that has been used by herders and their yak. Soon the altitude began to have an effect on us low landers, and we made stops after every twenty or thirty steps in climb as the caravan of load-carrying horses passed us by long ago. I opted to ride on a horse once the passage became manageable.

Around 1pm, we arrived at a kiosk on a crest, just a temporary crest, as more hills were ahead of us. There we let the horses rest, likewise for my tiring legs while having our lunch. We had reached 3824 meters in around 4 hours of steady climb, that was almost 600 meters gain in altitude, not at all easy for someone my age, covering approximately 12 kilometers, but only 2.5 kilometers in a beeline. I marked our route on the iPad topographic map and quietly praised myself as I looked at the contours I have overcome and crossed in just half a day.

After lunch, we started off again, horses ahead of us. By now the going became steadier and the climb more gradual, perfect for getting on a horse, which I did. Another two and a half hours and 300 meters climb in elevation and we reached our final camp at just over 4100 meters. Four tents were set up for the night, with one extra large canopy for cooking and meals for dinner.

My team was tired out, especially the last two hours they were hiking in cold rain, partly frozen and all drenched. We have ill-prepared ourselves for the sudden weather change. I decided right then that, looking at the cloud-covered sky, we must descend in the morning, rather than continue our hike to an alpine lake. A bon fire was started as soldiers went around gathering firewood. It provided warmth during dinner and for the evening. I started thinking of the sumptuous buffet Her Majesty set out for us in Paro Palace two days ago, while our cook prepared a slow-cook dinner at high altitude with rarefied air. After dinner, my team, exhausted from the long-day hike, turned in early. Joceline, my Filipino chef from Hong Kong who doubled up as our Palawan project manager took painkillers to alleviate her accelerating headache, a side-effect of the high elevation. Heavy rain started middle of the night, accompanying us throughout to the morning.

I came up to such elevation in order to be with the yak herders, yet no traces of them were seen, except a few around our lunch kiosk meadow. But in the morning, we were rewarded with one consolation prize. As the fog lifted, a large herd of Blue Sheep started appearing on the hill to our right maybe 400 meters away. They were grazing, perhaps over thirty in number, gradually going lower and lower toward our camp, eventually reaching to barely 200 meters from us. Several large males, also known as Bharal, sported large side-protruding horns. The ewes, with much smaller horns, made up much of the rest of the herd, with a few year-old calves.

I recalled a friend, the preeminent wildlife biologist George Schaller's seminal study of high mountain ungulates, including the Blue Sheep in one of his early books Mountain Monarchs, about these big-horn sheep of the Himalayas with a Blue Sheep on the cover. My own pursuit to have a first look of these timid animals came after exploring the Tibetan plateau for over ten years, finally seeing them for the first time in 1996 in the Qilian Mountains. In the later years however, with wildlife protection well in place in China and throughout much of Asia, I saw them more often, even at close range throughout the Tibetan plateau and in the Arjin Mountains of Xinjiang. But this was the first time I encountered them in Bhutan, and at such close range. It comes ▶

TOP TO BOTTOM:

How Man on horse.
How Man at camp.
Blue Sheep herd.
Sonam & How Man at tea break.

TOP TO BOTTOM:

Blood Pheasant.
Himalayan Langurs.
Kalij Pheasant.
Bhutan map painting.

to show how animals and us humans are now friendly neighbors and can live happily together.

We started our descent of the mountain soon after breakfast, through occasional rain, and no shine. While the descent was easier on our breathing due to gradual lowering in altitude, it posted some discomfort for my knee resulted from fifty years of extensive field work. We managed to reach our starting point as the rain intensified. Back to Monk Sonam's home, everyone was exhausted and longing for a shower. I waited till the evening to take an authentic Bhutanese stone bath.

That night, a continuous thunderstorm hit the entire kingdom. We comforted ourselves that we decided to leave the mountain a day early. High country encountered snowstorm and was covered with a layer of white. At low elevation, Bhutan experienced flash flooding, landslides, and many roads were closed throughout the country. We left Haa early morning, hoping to make our way back to Paro safely. Her Majesty was rightfully worried about our situation with her ADC calling our team several times, making sure we could get through the mountain. Rain stopped by mid-morning, and we got back to Paro after a three-hour drive.

Along the way, we stopped at Chele La (pass) for teabreak at a make-shift debilitated truck which I thought can become a future CERS improvement project. We were lucky to see a few Blood Pheasants and a flock of beautiful Kalij Pheasants. Near a nunnery beyond the Chele La (pass), I stopped to take a few pictures of the cliff-hanging nunnery where I had twice visited. Upon leaving, I chanced upon two Himalayan Langurs on a pine tree within 50 meters from my path. Such encounters always brighten my day, despite facing some brutal weather.

We made it back to my "second home" at Namseyling Palace in time for celebration the following day of the Mid-Autumn Festival. On that day, we hosted my Bhutanese friends over for dinner, also to celebrate Bhutan's establishment of diplomatic relations with the Philippines. Our Filipino team member Joceline was on hand to make a toast of champagne with mooncake we brought from Hong Kong to share with our Bhutanese friends under a perfect full moon. The next day, Her Majesty offered yet another royal lunch for me in her Paro Palace, with a full buffet under a garden tent. More gifts were bestowed on me and my team members.

Indeed, we have been at high and low altitude, both figurative and literal. But with the right attitude, we can embrace the upside fortune, as well as overcome any downside fortitude. Bhutan is the perfect place to induce a positive attitude, with its creation and focus on GNH, Gross National Happiness. Should anyone have an attitude problem, come to Bhutan, for a natural fix-it.

WALKING ON THE CLOUDS

Journey Through Bhutan's Wild Frontiers

By Miriam Lee

Getting the horses ready.

"When I was young, I often went fly-fishing in the Paro River — just a stone's throw from my office. In ten minutes, I could catch a dozen mountain trout! I was really good at it," recalled Dasho Benji with a jovial glint in his eye, reminiscing about his years as a High Court Judge and later as Bhutan's first Chief Justice during the 1970s and 1980s. Curiously, his most cherished memories were not forged within the solemn chambers of justice, but along the banks of rivers and amidst the quietude of nature. "When people saw me on the street, they were always polite and respectful, bowing as they passed. But behind my back, they called me 'the Fisherman Judge.' Aha!" he laughed.

We were seated in the lounge of Ugyen Pelri Palace, awaiting Her Majesty, the Royal Grandmother of Bhutan, who had graciously invited us to a prayer session at the 1,400-year-old Kyichu Lhakhang, followed by lunch. As the conversation meandered, Benji spoke with unabashed pride of his discoveries in Bhutan's rivers and streams. "I even had a catfish and a snail named after me," he said, his voice tinged with delight. It was clear that his true passion lay not in jurisprudence, but in the wild — in the highland ecosystems where flowers bloom and takins roam.

That passion would later define his legacy. Benji devoted the latter part of his career to environmental stewardship, championing the conservation of Bhutan's black-necked crane population and the protection of its rich biodiversity. He founded the country's first non-governmental organisation, the Royal Society for the Protection of Nature, and authored The Middle Path, Bhutan's inaugural National Environmental Strategy. Today, he is widely regarded as the "Godfather of Conservation" — a title befitting a man whose heart has always belonged to the rivers, mountains, and living heritage of his homeland.

It may have been Benji's deep reverence for nature — or perhaps his fond recollection of his ancestral home in Haa, western Bhutan — that stirred our interest in making an excursion to the highlands. Renowned for its pristine alpine forests, crystalline rivers, and majestic peaks, the Haa region is equally rich in cultural heritage, with ancient temples, seasonal festivals, and enduring traditions of highland farming. Yet beyond its scenic and cultural allure, Haa holds strategic significance in Bhutan's geopolitical landscape. Bordering Tibet and lying adjacent to the contested Doklam plateau,the district plays a vital role in Bhutan-India defence cooperation ▶

and hosts the Indian Military Training Team (IMTRAT). Its location renders it a critical buffer zone in the delicate tri-junction of India, China, and Bhutan — a terrain that naturally piques our interest in regions shaped by conflict and ambiguity.

Upon sensing our curiosity, Ashi Kesang promptly enlisted Monk Sonam, head of the Zhung Dratshang Preservation & Antiquities Conservation Centre (ZDPACC), to help coordinate plans. Sonam, a native of Haa whose family has raised yaks in its wild mountains for generations, embraced the idea with enthusiasm. Within days, he and Namgay, the project manager who led the construction of Kesang Dechen Ling and a number of other projects of Her Majesty, had arranged the logistics, and we found ourselves preparing for an impromptu journey into one of Bhutan's most storied and strategically layered landscapes.

Yet to say we were prepared would have been generous. While I had full confidence in Sonam, Namgay and their crew — their reputation for meticulous planning was well earned — my instincts suggested that this journey would be anything but straightforward. In truth, it felt more like one of How Man's spontaneous whims: a leisurely horseback excursion into the highlands, conceived more in spirit than in logistics.

Complications began before we even left Hong Kong, under the looming shadow of Super Typhoon Ragasa. On

the morning of departure, I was advised to relinquish my hiking boots and horse-riding gaiters — not for lack of need, but to make room in our baggage allowance for an improbable assortment of household items destined for Kesang Dechen Ling, the newly established residence within the palace grounds of Namseling. And so, I embarked on a three-week expedition to Bhutan with just 15 kilograms of personal essentials.

Fortunately, not everything was sacrificed. I had held onto my minus-twenty-degree sleeping bag, an H2No weatherproof jacket, and a pair of waterproof boots — not designed for rugged terrain, but suitable enough for snowy sidewalks in Europe or ceremonial visits to monasteries and palaces. They would have to suffice. In hindsight, it was a fitting prelude to a journey shaped as much by improvisation as by intention.

Upon arriving at Sonam's family house in Haa at over 2800m, as preparations began that evening, the sky darkened and rain began to fall, drumming steadily on the rooftops. It was a gentle but ominous prelude to the days ahead, and a reminder that in the mountains, weather is both companion and gatekeeper. ▶

CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT:

Benji & How Man at Ugyen Pelri Palace.
The mighty Wang Chhu, to which the Paro River flows.
Sonam's home in Haa.
Sonam's mother making the local delicacy — yak blood sausage.
In front of Benji's family house in Haa with the Indian colonel.
Bhutan-Indo relations.

CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT:
Pressing on in the rain.
Camping on the plateau.
Resting at Shomja.

The following morning, the rain persisted — at times a gentle drizzle, at others a steady downpour. Undeterred, we ascended by vehicle to over 3,200 metres, arriving at a monastery perched beside the trailhead. There, six sturdy mountain horses stood waiting, saddled and ready to bear the weight of our expedition: tents, camping gear, provisions, cooking utensils, and the personal effects of eleven travellers.

Our first destination was Shomja, a small mountain pass marked by a lone pavilion — a resting point for passing yak herders and pilgrims. To reach it, we would need to climb more than 600 vertical metres through untouched forest, following a natural terrain that offered little in the way of formal paths. The rain had rendered the raw tracks slick and unpredictable; where there were no muddy stretches, we navigated exposed tree roots, loose stones, damp soil, and tangled underbrush. There were no signs, no markers — only the intuition of highlanders who knew the land by heart.

Fifteen minutes into the ascent, How Man opted for the saddle, leaving me — in my polished city boots, better suited for palace courtyards than alpine trails — to hike alongside the remarkably fit Aide de Camps. The journey

had begun in earnest, and the mountain was already testing our resolve.

To my dismay, upon reaching Shomja — a modest pass we had hoped would offer respite — Sonam announced that we would need to press onward to the second camp, originally scheduled for the following day. The reason was simple yet unyielding: no nearby water source for the horses to drink, nor for us to cook or wash. After hastily gulping down half a bowl of rice and a splash of coconut water, we resumed our ascent. Sonam assured us it would take no more than 40 to 45 minutes. It became a three-hour uphill ordeal.

The trail, already slick from earlier rains, grew increasingly treacherous. Namgay, leading a pair of pack horses, lost sight of the path — a path that, in truth, barely existed. With no signage and only the vaguest traces of footfall, the route was known only to seasoned highlanders. Fortunately, the horses found their way through the valley, but the rain returned with renewed force. My feet throbbed with each step, and I stopped counting how many times Sonam called out, “Only ten minutes more.” The final kilometre was a test of endurance — exposed above the tree line, wind and rain lashing from all directions. I kept my head down, trudging forward, numb to the cold that stung my face and hands. Rainwater streamed from the edge of my hood. My thoughts dissolved into blankness; all I could focus on was reaching camp — near a yak grazing ground at an altitude of over 4100m.

Relief came in the form of a bright blue waterproof canvas — our makeshift kitchen — and a small cup of freshly brewed milk tea, warm and fragrant in my hands. As the wind and rain eased, our resourceful crew gathered firewood and juniper branches from just below the ridge to build a modest bonfire. Around it, we dried our soaked boots, socks, and caps, steam rising from the circle of weary trekkers. Under that storm-battered shelter, our ADC chef conjured five beautiful dishes and a mountain of rice. We added our humble contributions: canned spam, cream of corn, and bamboo shoots — a feast born of resilience, camaraderie, and the quiet triumph of reaching shelter in the wild.

The night was ink-dark — starless, moonless, and cloaked in thick rainclouds. By midnight, rain poured again and water crept into the tent, soaking the sleeping bag I had clung to for warmth. The air mattress, once a modest comfort, had begun to leak. As I lay there listening to the rhythm of rain on canvas, it became clear that our highland reconnaissance might need to be cut short. Though the terrain ahead held promise, our team was ill-equipped for such relentless weather.

By dawn, the much-anticipated sunrise was nowhere to be seen. The sky remained heavy with cloud, and the decision was made to strike camp and begin our descent after a hearty breakfast. In hindsight, it was a wise call. Just as we sat down to plates of sunny-side-up eggs and toast, a herd of blue sheep — nearly two dozen strong ▶

TOP TO BOTTOM:
Blooming alpine flowers in the rainstorm.

— emerged on the slope before us. Grazing with quiet ease, they showed no alarm at our presence. What might take wildlife researchers weeks or months to locate had, in this moment, revealed itself effortlessly. It was a fleeting gift from the mountains — unexpected, unearned, and unforgettable.

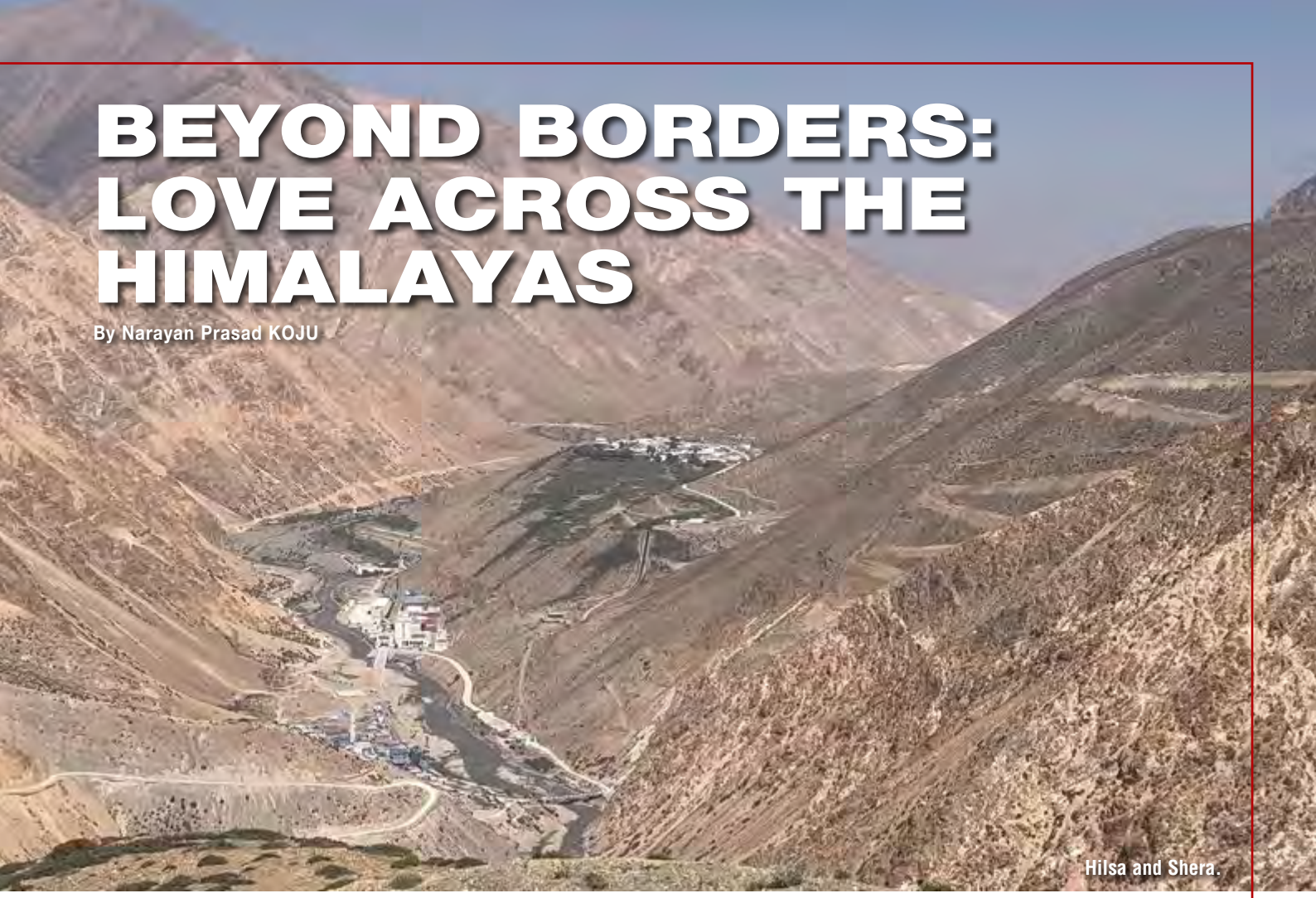
And so we began our descent, retracing the same route. My feet were encased once more in boots that had long since surrendered to discomfort. For the first stretch, the skies showed mercy, withholding rain and offering a rare moment of clarity. The highland landscape unfolded in stark beauty, its slopes adorned with autumnal blooms; bursts of colour defying the season's chill, thriving in the thin mountain air.

But as we approached Shomja once more, the rain returned with familiar insistence. Reluctantly, we pressed on. The trail, already softened by earlier showers, had now turned treacherous. Walking behind the caravan of horses was any hiker's nightmare in this kind of weather. What had been merely muddy was now swamp-like, churned into deep pools by the weight of hooves. Several times, my boots sank into the mire, the cold mud spilling over and seeping in. Tree roots and loose stones, once marginally navigable, now resembled miniature cascades, slick and treacherous. My weatherproof jacket and hiking pole became my only companions of comfort — one shielding me from the elements, the other steadying each uncertain step. The 20km descent was not merely a return, but a reckoning with the mountain's temperament — unforgiving, majestic, and humbling all at once.

Only later did we learn the scale of the storm that had swept across the country. Bhutan's latest bout of extreme weather had brought torrential rainfall and widespread flooding, particularly in the southern districts. Landslides and flash floods had triggered over 30 roadblocks, severing key routes and damaging public infrastructure. A well-defined low-pressure system had been the culprit, unleashing nearly 300 millimetres of rain in just 24 hours in some regions — a deluge that reminded us, once again, of nature's quiet authority over even the most carefully laid plans. In a world increasingly shaped by the pace of modern life and the volatility of climate extremes, even the most remote journeys remind us how fragile our rhythms are when nature reclaims the narrative. It's also a reckoning on how we deal with uncertainty — a pursuit shaped as much by resilience and humility as by curiosity, where the journey itself becomes a mirror to the shifting landscapes within and beyond.

BEYOND BORDERS: LOVE ACROSS THE HIMALAYAS

By Narayan Prasad KOJU



Hilsa and Shera.

The idea for this research emerged during my camera-trapping studies on snow leopards in the Lapchi Valley between 2019 and 2021. Through continuous interactions with local communities, we became aware of the complex and understudied phenomenon of transboundary marriages between Nepal and China. Discussions with contacts in different parts of Nepal's Nepal–China border further highlighted the need to examine this issue within an academic framework, intending to inform both community discussion and policy development.

The research on "Transboundary marriage, its opportunity and challenges" was supported by China Exploration and Research Society (CERS), and a formal study was conducted between 2024 and 2025. The study was based on focus group discussions, personal interviews, and key informant interviews with stakeholders from border villages in the Humla, Rasuwa, Dolakha, and Sankhuwasabha districts of Nepal.

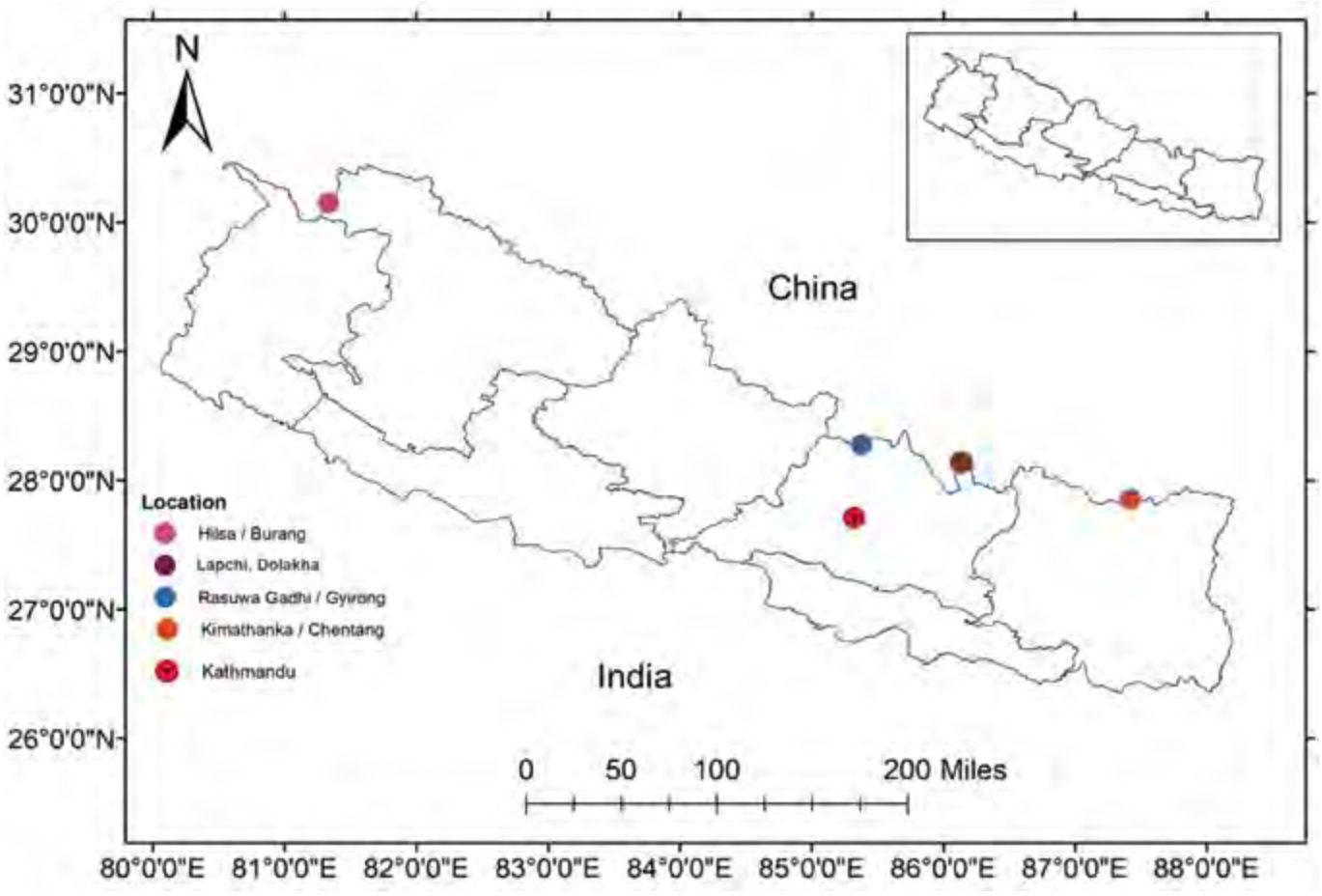
High in the Himalayas, where snow-fed rivers shape deep valleys and clouds brush sacred peaks, life has always flowed beyond borders. Long before treaties and walls defined Nepal and China, families shared food, festivals, and kinship. Among the strongest bonds was marriage. For centuries, unions between Nepal and Tibet were as natural as caravans carrying salt and wool across high mountain passes. Today, these marriages still speak of love, resilience, and cultural survival, but they are also facing unique challenges.

Humla: Crossing Rivers, Crossing Worlds

In Humla, Nepal's far-northwestern district, stories of marriage with Tibetan families remain intense. Women from Tibet's Ngari Prefecture crossed the Humla Karnali River (named as Jilongbra River in Tibet) to marry Nepali men, while Humli daughters joined households across the river.

One such story is that of Mr Karma Lama (pseudonym), a respected businessman from Hilsa, who married Pema (pseudonym) from Shera, Tibet. The two villages are barely two kilometers apart, separated only by the river. For decades, their family life flowed naturally: children attended schools, trade was navigated on both sides, and relatives visited freely.

Life in these high valleys was entangled. Villagers shared festivals, music, and seasonal herding routines. Weddings were more than unions; they were agreements between families, ways to secure grazing lands, strengthen trade relations, and ensure cultural continuity. But after the ▶



2015 earthquake and the COVID pandemic (2020-2023), borders were tightened. What had once been seamless became a tangle of permits and surveillance. Trips that once took minutes now required hours of paperwork. For Karma and Pema, marriage is now not just a bond of love but a reminder of how fragile lives can become when the state intervenes.

Lapchi Valley: When Borders Closed

In Lapchi Valley, a place known as the meditation retreat of the yogi "Milarepa", cross-border marriages were once woven into daily life. Villagers regularly travelled to Nyalam and Falak (Rongxia in Tibet) for pastoral work, sacred rituals, and family gatherings. Nyalam is approximately 15 km west, and Falak is roughly 20 km southeast of Lapchi village. Falak is only 10 km from Numnan, the summer village of the Lapchi people.

The last marriage of this kind occurred in 2014, when Natar (pseudonym), a young herder from Lapchi, married Dolma (pseudonym) from Nyalam. Since then, no new unions have been recorded. Dolma, who attended high school in Tibet, China, and speaks Mandarin fluently, left behind her parents and friends in Nyalam. For her, the closure of borders has meant a decade without seeing her childhood home. She intensely missed the food, the bustle of markets, and even the simple presence of vehicles, things absent in her life in Lapchi. Older women, like seventy-two-year-old Phuma (pseudonym), married into Lapchi more than fifty years ago, still dream of returning to their parental homes. Closing her eyes, Phuma tries to imagine, "What might my village and home look like now?" She added, "Sometimes I talk with my relatives there through WeChat (a Chinese social media platform), but even to use WeChat with my family, I have to walk for two days or wait several days to reach Kathmandu because Lapchi has no internet access."

Borders may now separate villages physically, but memories of shared festivals, the scent of market spices, and the laughter of childhood friends remain bright. These stories illustrate how political lines, once invisible, can sever even the most intimate human connections.

Kerung: Tradition Meets Bureaucracy

Kerung, accessible through the customs post at Timure in Rasuwa, was once a thriving corridor of trade, pilgrimage, and marriage. Cross-border unions blended Nepali and Tibetan traditions: khata scarves (also spelled khadag, khatag, khada, khata, etc. is a traditional ceremonial scarf), sagun offerings (ceremonial gifts), Buddhist blessings, and local songs marked weddings that united families and communities.

In these weddings, khata scarves, symbols of respect, goodwill, and blessings, were draped around brides and grooms. Sagun offerings of auspicious items and food connected families in both ritual and social terms. These ceremonies were not just private affairs; they were a performance of cultural identity, signaling harmony between Nepali and Tibetan communities.

Today, such marriages are rare and complicated. Between 2006 and 2024, only 28 foreign nationals applied for Nepali citizenship in Rasuwa, 17 of them Tibetan. Many unions remain unregistered, leaving women without citizenship and children stateless. One Tibetan refugee and his Nepali wife lost their livelihoods when authorities shut down their business. Their children, though born in Nepal, remain without legal recognition.

Who can imagine? Where once marriage was a bridge, it has now become a trap. Families face legal battles, social stigma, and bureaucratic hurdles that make cross-border unions risky. Yet, in whispered conversations, villagers recall a time when love was enough to overcome rivers, customs posts, and political boundaries.

Kimanthanka: Fading Customs

Kimanthanka, eastern Nepal, a village lies less than a kilometre from the Tibetan village Zhetang. Until recently, crossing the border was as simple as walking from one village to the next. Festivals, markets, and family visits on either side created opportunities for love and marriage.

Women like Chhering (pseudonym) married Nepali traders, carrying their belongings across rivers to begin new lives. Tsering (pseudonym) recalls how many Tibetan girls once sought Nepali husbands for food security and religious freedom in Nepal. Marriage was often a practical as well as romantic choice: daughters could inherit property, and women had a significant voice in selecting their spouses, contrasting with more rigid caste-based norms in Nepal.

But today, schools are nearly empty, families migrate, and bureaucratic hurdles like proving marital status in Tibet make marriages increasingly difficult. Pemba (pseudonym) noted that his mother, married from Tibet, passed away without Nepali citizenship, despite decades of residence. Centuries of shared existence now collide with modern administrative rules.

More Than Romance

Across the Himalayas, transboundary marriages were never just about love. They were strategies for survival, ▶

CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT:

Map of study area.
Lapchi village.
People of Lapchi Village.
People from Lapchi.
Border check point Rasuwagadhi-Kerung.

Kimanthanka and Zhentang.

guardians of culture, and living diplomacy. Weddings blended Tibetan khatas and Nepali sagun, Buddhist blessings and local songs. Funerals drew on both traditions, with monks and shamans working side by side.

These unions preserved language, rituals, and stories, ensuring cultural continuity even amid political disturbance. They were living reminders that the Himalayas were a shared space, where identities overlapped, and survival often depended on cooperation across borders.

Modern Challenges

The northern borders of Nepal are no longer permeable. Surveillance, permits, and geopolitical concerns make unions difficult. Legal invisibility haunts families; spouses without citizenship, children without rights are serious challenges of today. Social stigma, especially for unions involving refugees or poorer families, adds further strain.

Hence, the younger generation faces a dilemma. The cultural continuity and shared traditions made cross-border unions appealing in the past. But now bureaucratic and legal hurdles have made them less desirable. Many prefer legally recognized marriages within Nepal, even as economic and cultural opportunities in Tibet remain fascinating.

Quiet Diplomacy

Each transboundary marriage is a quiet form of diplomacy. In regions where governments debate sovereignty, ordinary people sustain relationships that affirm friendship and trust. “We were relatives before we were citizens,” one elder reflects. Villages may now be separated by walls and customs posts, but culturally, by blood and heart, they remain united.

These unions act as living bridges, preserving rituals and shared histories that could otherwise vanish. They show that diplomacy is not only conducted in offices but also in homes, kitchens, and fields where love, respect, and family ties cross borders every day.

Conclusion: Love Beyond Borders

Transboundary marriages silently oppose the idea that borders can divide people completely. They show that kinship, ritual, and respect for land suffer, even when politics shift. Supported and encouraged rather than restricted, these unions could strengthen Nepal–China ties and celebrate a shared Himalayan sociocultural heritage.

In the mountains, love has always travelled farther than political boundaries. Rivers, passes, and snow-covered peaks cannot contain the ties that bind families together. Across the Himalayas, these noiseless unions remind us that the heart often moves where maps cannot follow.

SKETCHES OF SHANGRILA

By Wong Chi-chuen (Stanley)

Wong Chi-chuen (Stanley) is a home-grown artist from Tai O, a fishing village of Hong Kong. At a young age, he loves making sketches of the stilt houses along the water canal of his home. This passion led on to his later years to becoming a student in art, including a stint at the China Academy of Art in Hangzhou. In all his travels, be it in Europe or around Asia, he would make quick sketches of places he visited. This portfolio of sketches were made when Chi-chuen visited CERS Zhongdian Center in Shangri-la Yunnan, including a trip to our Xiangguqing Snub-nosed Monkey site of the Lisu minority nationality living in log house.

– Wong How Man

Zhongdian Center.

CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT:
Xiangguqing Lisu site. Lisu log house. Snub-nosed Monkey. CERS Lisu site.

TOP TO BOTTOM:
House sketch. Zhongdian villa house.

WHISPERS OF THE TAIGA

Reindeer, Roots, and Reverence

By Miriam Lee

Alena ushered us into a tent fashioned from pine branches and cream-coloured canvas. Evening sunlight filtered through the fabric in soft golden shafts, illuminating the centrepiece of the dwelling — a rust-speckled iron oven, its fire flickering gently, chasing away the damp chill that clung to our jackets. We removed our muddy boots and stepped onto a carpet of fresh larch twigs — aromatic, earthy and clean. She gestured for us to sit on the reindeer pelt reserved for honoured guests behind a modest coffee table, on which she began to lay out the family's cherished reindeer delicacies. There were fried patties, pan-seared liver, boiled stomach slices, raw kidney, a steaming bowl of bone broth that seemed to hum with nourishment, and for dessert, a simple yet exquisite blend of reindeer milk with wild berry jam.

It was a royal treatment — not in grandeur, but in spirit. A kind of hospitality rooted in the land and the quiet dignity of a people who have lived in harmony with the forest for generations. Deep in the heart of Siberia's vast and whispering taiga, where the frost clings to pine needles and the wind carries stories older than memory, the Evenki remain guardians of a way of life that feels both timeless and fragile. We were welcomed into a world few outsiders ever witness. ▶

TOP TO BOTTOM:

Sasha putting the harness on a reindeer.
Into the taiga.
A reindeer welcomed us head-on.

CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT:
Alena laid out a feast of reindeer delicacies in the tent.
Canvas salt pouch with reindeer hooves.
Personal hygiene station.
Contemporised tent.
A semi-permanent cabin.
Prized pelt of a bear freshly hunted this summer.
Gathering the herd.

Our journey began with a flight from Khabarovsk to Neryungri, a coal-mining town whose industrial pulse beats against a backdrop of climatic extremes. From there, we drove some 150km into the forested unknown — half of it on dirt roads that twisted and turned with no signage, only the subtle cues of a cluster of rocks marking a river crossing, or a shadow in the trees hinting at a bend. Leaving proved even more problematic a few days later. Overnight rains triggered a flash flood, washing away the only bridge over one of the streams. What had been a tenuous path became a reminder of the taiga's authority — unforgiving, unbothered by human plans.

The generous spread of reindeer dishes before me stirred a fond recollection of Lapland, and of the Sami people whose lives I had documented across the northern reaches of Scandinavia. There, too, reindeer formed the backbone of sustenance and tradition, though the atmosphere was less ceremonial, more utilitarian and modernised. I had subsisted on boiled potatoes, biscuits, and the occasional spoonful of cloudberry jam — simple fare that mirrored the stark beauty of the tundra.

Here in this Evenki tent, the culinary offerings were richer, yet I found myself once again on the margins of the feast. A peculiar allergy prevents me from consuming most red meats, rendering the array of reindeer delicacies, even wild fowl, off-limits. I had come prepared to abstain, resigned to a diet of bread, fruit, and a couple of cans of sardines tucked away in my pack. In a gesture of reciprocity, I retrieved a tub of blueberries and raspberries I had purchased a couple of days ago from a green grocery in Neryungri. I offered them to Alena, hoping to contribute something to the table. She glanced at the container and shook her head with a slight disdain. "I had too many berries already," she said, almost dismissively. "Picked fresh in the forest by ourselves."

Her words, though curt, carried a subtle pride — a reminder that here, sustenance is not bought but gathered, hunted, and prepared with reverence. The forest provides, and the Evenki take only what is needed. My market berries, sterile and packaged, were out of place in this ecosystem of reciprocity and respect. In that moment, I understood: this was not just a meal, but a manifestation of a worldview. Where food is not merely consumed, but honoured. Where guests are welcomed not with extravagance, but with authenticity.

The next morning, other folks in this secluded settlement came to greet us, too — eleven souls bound by kinship

and tradition, living in a pact with the land. At the helm was Grandma Yule, 67, a stoic matriarch whose weathered hands still orchestrated the rhythms of reindeer herding. Alongside her son and her nephew — both named Yuri —and her granddaughter Anna, they tended to a herd of nearly 400 reindeer in the taiga.

Alena, the younger granddaughter, straddled two worlds. A primary school teacher in Iyengra, a modest town 50km away, she returned in summer to her root in the forest. Her nephew Sergei, just 12 and hoping to become a policeman, brought with him two schoolmates — Alexander, affectionately called Sasha, and Lyova. Sasha spoke with quiet conviction of becoming a reindeer herder himself, while Lyova leaned toward a mechanic. Their presence added a youthful energy to the camp, a sign that tradition still flickers in the hearts of the young, even as modernity beckons.

Reindeer herding in Yule's clan follows nature's rhythm — intense in spring with fragile newborns, vulnerable in summer to disease, and relatively calm through autumn and winter. But unlike Scandinavian herders, they do not raise reindeer for sale or slaughter. The herd is kept for cultural continuity, a spiritual bond with the land. Traditionally nomadic, their camp once shifted with seasonal forage of lichen and moss in winter, and mushrooms and berries in summer. Now, mobility has slowed; they relocate only every few years, allowing for semi-permanent structures like a wooden kitchen and sleeping quarters, replacing birch-bark tents. Nearby, ageing cars and a satellite dish hint at modernity's encroachment. These changes aren't a surrender, but a negotiation — preserving tradition while adapting to a changing world.

Yet this is no untouched Eden — the forest bears scars of change. Yule's clan, like many indigenous communities, faces a gradual drift from tradition as younger generations seek education and work beyond the taiga. Roads now slice through the landscape, built not by planners but gold miners with license to extract. Initially, herders and miners coexisted uneasily, exchanging help and supplies. But a new company ended that fragile balance. Mercury polluted rivers, and deep pits claimed reindeer lives. As the forest is carved away, so too is the culture rooted within it. The struggle persists: quiet resilience of the herders versus the machinery of extraction. For now, industry dominates. In the glow of a pine-branch fire, in the laughter of children chasing reindeer, the Evenki spirit survives — worn, but not broken. ▶

CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT:

Approaching Bomnak by boat.
Energetic dance by Evenki teenagers.
Last remaining Evenki artefacts.
Alena's hand-sewn garments.
An Evenki culture poster in the village.
Debilitated wooden houses.

300km southeast of the taiga where Sasha and Grandma Yule live, another Alena carries the weight of her people's legacy in Bomnak — a remote village tucked into the folds of the vast Zeya Reservoir, dammed for hydroelectricity during the Soviet era. Her herd of 300 reindeer grazes far from the village, accessible only by a gruelling 9-hour ride on horseback over bumpy, unforgiving paths. Yet she remains a pillar of the Evenki community there, both a guardian of tradition and a witness to its unravelling.

Her story mirrors the silent heartbreak of many Evenki elders. During the Soviet era, reindeer herding — once presided by migration, instinct, and ancestral knowledge — was forcibly reorganised into agricultural collectives. The state promised structure, wages, and modernisation. What it delivered was alienation. When the Soviet Union dissolved, so did the collectives. They went bankrupt overnight. Herders, once paid for their labour, were left jobless and adrift. Alena recounted how many of her peers, stripped of purpose and income, fell into despair — alcohol and drugs became the escape when the forest could no longer provide.

Even today, the scars remain. Alena has fought hard to

send six Evenki children to university over the years — a feat that required more than just money. Teachers often dismissed Evenki students, frustrated by their frequent absences to help with herding or by their spirited resistance to rigid classroom norms. “They don’t sit still,” she said with a half-smile, “because they were raised to move with the land.”

Yet Alena herself is a master of stillness and craft. In her modest home, she continues to sew traditional Evenki garments — robes, coats, boots and carpets made from the hides and furs of reindeer, fox, moose, elk, and even seal. These are not museum pieces. They are worn proudly at weddings, festivals, and ceremonies, stitched with memory and meaning. She sells them occasionally to fellow Evenki, but more than commerce, it’s preservation. “If I stop,” she said, “who will remember how to make them?” We picked from her craftwork four fine items to complement the Evenki pavilion at CERS Shangrila Campus.

In the village hall of Bomnak, six Evenki teenagers danced with fierce precision to modern music and choreography for us. Their energy lit up the stage, yet outside, life felt quieter, traditions more fragile. I thought of Sasha, dreaming of becoming a reindeer herder. Would that path still exist when he’s older, or be lost to modern pressures and urban allure? Would elders like Alena still be there to teach him how to read the land, stitch moose-hide coats, and listen to the silence between trees? Indigenous knowledge is more than skill — it’s a worldview. It’s knowing when river ice will break, navigating by clouded stars, and speaking to animals without words. This wisdom lives not in textbooks, but in stories, songs, and the hands of those who remember. For tradition to endure, it must be lived.

So I left the taiga with a heavy question in my heart: not whether the Evenki traditions will survive, but whether we will learn to see their value before it’s too late. Because in their resilience, in their knowledge, in their quiet grace, lies a blueprint for a more rooted, more respectful way of being in the world.

RETURN TO ZHIJIN CAVE

By Zhang Fan

Prologue: Two decades ago, the author of this piece, Zhang Fan, participated in the selection for "China's Six Most Beautiful Tourist Caves" and penned an article titled "Dreamscape Zhijin Cave." While full of praise for the cave back then, he also carried away a tinge of regret. Now, returning to Zhijin Cave after twenty years, he reflects that while this timespan is but a blink for formations shaped over millions of years, leaving the scenery virtually untouched, the changes surrounding the cave tourism experience itself have been nothing short of monumental.

——Editor's Note from Chinese National Geography

In 2005, I wrote an article titled "Dreamscape Zhijin Cave" for Chinese National Geography as part of its "Beauty of China" special issue. When the subsequent national selection took place, Zhijin Cave was named "China's Most Beautiful Tourist Cave." Other winners included Furong Cave of Wulong (Chongqing), Huanglong Cave of Zhangjiajie (Hunan), Tenglong Cave of Lichuan (Hubei), Xueyu Cave of Fengdu (Chongqing), and Benxi Water Cave of Liaoning.

Twenty years later, commissioned once again by Chinese National Geography, I returned to Zhijin Cave for a twentieth anniversary revisit—by a coincidence both poetic and apt, my trip took place on Qixi, the traditional Chinese festival of lovers — an exquisite accident of timing, as if the calendar itself had arranged a tryst with memory.

The drive from Kunming, Yunnan to Zhijin County, Guizhou spans 480 kilometers. Today it takes barely five hours, the expressway running straight to the scenic area's gates. Along the highway, streams of cars flow steadily—most of them private—perhaps families just ending their summer travels, children dozing in back seats as vacation light fades.

I could not help thinking back twenty years. The journey from Guiyang, the provincial capital, to Zhijin Cave—barely 130 kilometers—then took four hours on winding mountain roads. How much the land has changed; how swiftly the country has moved forward. In two decades, China's infrastructure has rewritten geography itself, turning what was once remote into the reachable. Caves like Zhijin or Furong, once hidden deep in the mountains,

can now be visited by anyone with a car and curiosity. At the same time, China's growing prosperity has transformed the way its people travel: the old model of group tours and idling buses is giving way to the freedom of the open road.

Viewing the changes across China through a twenty-year lens reveals a transformed land. Yet, for caves formed over millions upon millions of years, the landscapes themselves are virtually unchanged. The real transformation has occurred in the experience of cave tourism, and it is vast.

Since the "Beauty of China" special edition was published, visitor numbers to Zhijin Cave have skyrocketed by an astonishing 25 times over twenty years.

I arrived at Zhijin Cave in the afternoon. After connecting with Mr. He Xumu, Deputy General Manager of the Zhijin Cave Tourism Development Co., Ltd., responsible for the cave's management, his first question was whether I'd like to take a night tour. Feeling somewhat weary from the long drive, I politely declined his kind offer, while quipping with a smile, "Does cave tourism really have day and night shifts?" Manager He explained that due to the overwhelming number of daytime visitors during the summer break, Zhijin Cave had launched night tours.

"Caves are places one should visit at least once in a lifetime; otherwise, you might never grasp just how marvelous our planet is. If you wish to choose just one cave to fill this gap, as an 'underground worker'—a professional cave explorer—I earnestly recommend you not miss China's most beautiful tourist cave, Zhijin Cave." Recalling my strong advocacy for cave tourism and my specific recommendation of Zhijin Cave in my article twenty years ago and seeing the cave's current "packed to the rafters" status, I felt a genuine sense of shared pride and satisfaction.

I looked up the figures carefully. According to the 2006 Bulletin of National Economic and Social Development of Zhijin County, Bijie City, the cave received 78,150 visitors in 2005—the same year Chinese National Geography published its "Beauty of China" special issue, which crowned Zhijin Cave the foremost among China's six most beautiful tourist caves. In 2006, the number rose sharply to 105,000, an increase of 34.36%. By 2024, data from the Zhijin Cave Tourism Development Co., Ltd. show 1.98 million visitors in a year—an astonishing twenty five fold increase in two decades. Other winners from that 2005 selection have followed similar routes of success. Staff from Xueyu Cave shared with me their own record: 48,513 visitors in 2005, 67,811 in 2006, and 205,115 in 2024.

One can fairly say that twenty years ago, "Beauty of China" prevented these once niche landscapes from being left behind in the great surge of national tourism. It implanted in the public imagination the idea that caves, just like mountains, lakes, snow peaks, and grasslands, are irreplaceable scenes of nature—places that one must see at least once ▶

in a lifetime. It let the people of China, and perhaps the world, recognize where the country's most magnificent caves lie, and how abundant and beautiful its underground treasures truly are.

While the concept of "Dong Tian Fu Di" (grotto-heavens and blessed lands) is a deep-seated cultural trope for the Chinese, as recorded in ancient inscriptions still preserved on many cave walls. Yet modern cave tourism in China emerged only in the 1980s: Benxi Water Cave opened in 1983, Huanglong Cave in 1984, Zhijin and Tenglong in 1985, Furong later in 1994, and the youngest, Xueyu, in 2004. It was also in the 1980s that two colleagues and I were sent by the state to Bulgaria to study cave exploration and research.

By 2005, when the first nationwide selection of "China's Most Beautiful Tourist Caves" took place, my fellow experts and I recognized a serious issue. Cave tourism in China was expanding rapidly but lacked advanced methods; the gap with international standards was wide. Many caves had suffered "developmental damage"—in which development itself became destruction.

Therefore, we argued that any evaluation of show caves should give high weight to design, protection, and sustainability—how advanced the management philosophy was, how rational the planning of roads and lighting, and how well the natural texture was preserved. Through the ranking, we hoped to call for a more scientific and responsible approach to cave tourism.

Although Zhijin Cave tops the list, as the editorial comment at the time pointed out: "The beauty of Zhijin Cave is beyond all doubt, and its place above nearly four hundred tourist caves in China is wholly deserved. The only regret is that it was discovered too early; the design concepts of that era were immature—its lighting gaudy, its brilliance overwhelming the cave itself." This is something I, too, have always found deeply regrettable.

But upon entering the cave this time, I was delightfully surprised. The once gaudy, multicolored illumination was gone. Instead, the cavern's sense of space and the original appearance of the sedimentary landscapes were revealed under subtle, natural-toned lighting. I remembered the former star attraction, the "Conqueror's Helmet" stalagmite, once lit predominantly in harsh reds and greens, accentuated by a riot of colored lights. Now, it was bathed in a cool background glow, with a golden light precisely highlighting the massive formation, allowing its shape and texture to be fully appreciated.

Manager He explained that Zhijin Cave initiated its first major lighting overhaul in 2013, adopting low-interference, high-color-rendering LED sources. The design focused on minimizing artificial light intervention and damage. By 2023, this was upgraded to an "intelligent lighting ecosystem" to further reduce the environmental impact. He noted that cave lighting can cause plants and algae to grow on speleothems, not only marring the scenery but also generating CO2 during growth. This combines with moisture to form carbonic acid, which corrodes the limestone surfaces, causing irreversible damage.

Similar changes have occurred in other tourist caves. Furong Cave introduced cold-light source illumination and misting humidification devices during a 2017 upgrade. Xueyu Cave, prioritizing low and medium-intensity lighting while minimizing colored lights, also implemented a phased power supply system, cutting electricity when no tourists are present during the off-season to minimize potential light pollution.

My guide in Zhijin this time was Miss Ding, a young woman who graduated two years ago from the tourism program at Guizhou Normal University. At the entrance, she distributed wireless headsets and helped visitors tune them. Then, walking through the cave, she explained each chamber's origin and form, using a laser pointer to trace the subtle curves of formations as she spoke about deposition processes. I noticed that at many key formations, small QR codes had been added to the information boards. A quick scan opened extended notes on geology and hydrology.

Two decades ago, guides carried megaphones, reciting fairy tales while pointing at speleothems: "That's the Queen Mother's Dressing Table! That's Zhu Bajie(Pigsy) Carrying His Bride!" Now, the storytelling has matured. Scientific precision and aesthetic insight have become the main body of interpretation. This shift—from legends to science—marks one of the most remarkable evolutions in Chinese cave tourism and mirrors the elevation of public consciousness itself.

Tour operators' changes reflect both dedication and adaptation. Today's visitors, better educated and more literate in science and art, are no longer satisfied with just seeing the sights and checking a box. They seek understanding, context, and knowledge—the deeper beauty behind the forms.

Driving back to Kunming, I couldn't help comparing these achievements with those of Postojna Cave in Slovenia. Since 1995, my institute—the Yunnan Institute of Geography—has collaborated closely with Slovenia's Karst Research Institute, one of the world's leading centers for karst science. We visit each other yearly, and each time in Slovenia, we also revisit Postojna, the shining model of the world's show caves. In the late 1990s, the institute began interdisciplinary studies at Postojna—covering hydrogeology, cave biology, water chemistry, and more. Such academic grounding has allowed the cave's management—lighting, pathways, interpretation—to maintain a world class balance between preservation and experience. A cave developed for over 200 years remains Slovenia's most popular tourist destination for international visitors.

Developed in 1818, Postojna is one of Europe's earliest show caves, meaning it has been selling tickets for over two centuries. Its tickets are not cheap, yet the cave never exceeds capacity. Opening hours vary with the seasons. Only one group enters each hour, both to protect the cave and to ensure the best visitor experience. Our Xueyu Cave has recently adopted a similar principle, setting a daily maximum of 6,500 visitors.

While waiting to enter, visitors explore the Postojna Cave Museum, where they learn about speleogenesis, archaeology, the history of exploration, and the cave's ecological system—and even observe living specimens of the olm, Slovenia's national treasure. Postojna employs dynamic lighting, illuminating scenes only when needed, then letting darkness reclaim the space, which reveals the cave's purest essence: darkness and the unknown. Imagine the moment when every light goes out; only darkness remains, and suddenly, from tens of meters away, a single drop of water falls through the vast silence. That sound, small yet infinite, evokes the most exquisite beauty a cave can offer. At every interval, trained staff stand ready to answer questions; many possess professional knowledge of speleology and can discuss academic matters with you. During the summer season, geology and geography students volunteer as assistants.

Because of all this, Postojna has become the global exemplar of show cave management—admired and emulated worldwide. In conversations with Mr. He of Zhijin, I often suggested that he should visit Slovenia and study Postojna's methods in depth. And when I compare the two, I feel both humility and hope.

Though China's history of cave tourism is only forty years old, I feel our most beautiful caves—Zhijin, Furong, Xueyu—are already moving confidently in the right direction. The path ahead is long, yet its destination shines clearly.

39TH ANNIVERSARY DINNER

CERS celebrated its 39th anniversary by hosting a dinner at the University of Hong Kong with over a hundred guests. Dr William Fung gave a welcoming address, followed by Professor Zhang Xiang, President of HKU, delivering a speech, reaffirming the collaboration between CERS and HKU, and the university's commitment to the Wong How Man Centre for Exploration. How Man gave a short lecture, updating everyone regarding our recent field work and projects. Two short films were shown during the evening.

President Zhang Xiang, Francis Yuen & Wendy

President Zhang Xiang & William Fung

John Strickland & Michael Moser

Gilbert & Christabel

Prof Cheng Kai Ming

Michael Jebsen & Billy Yung

CERS IN THE FIELD

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP:

HM in Lake Baikal water.
Team arrive Bhutan with Royal Guard.
HM at camp.
Westlake visitors at Zhongdian Center.
Team at Vladivostok light house, Siberia.
Yutaka & Pim Pim in Old Town Leh, India.
Joceline cooking at high camp, Bhutan.
Horse caravan break toward nomad's camp.

NEWS NEWS NEWS

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP:

Signing of MOUs. Visit to Westlake Univ. Misha Ivanov in Siberia with CERS team. CERS team in Natuna with George Yeo and the Bupati.

■ CERS signed two MOUs with the 180-year-old Russian Geographical Society (RGS) while our team worked in Vladivostok during our third reconnaissance trip to Siberia. These are signed with Primorsky and Yakutsk RGS branches.

■ CERS launched a second recce trip to Natuna Islands of Indonesia, including to the outer islands of Sedanau and Selaut. Joining us is George Yeo, former Foreign Minister of Singapore and CERS Senior Advisor. The Bupati (Regent) of Natuna hosted dinner for the group at her residence.

■ Misha Ivanov joins CERS as our new colleague covering North Asia as coordinator.

■ Vic Lee & HM visited Westlake University with a special tour of the new campus, and met with its president Shi Yigong.

■ HM & Miriam visited the China Academy of Arts in Hangzhou with Prof Sun Ren.

■ HM visited Taiwan and met with former CERS Chairman Barry Lam, as well as long-time friends Lung Ying-tai, Prof Charles Kao, etc.

■ HM has been appointed a member of the Advisory Board of HKU's Swire Institute of Marine Science.

CERS IN THE MEDIA AND LECTURES

● HM's latest book, the eighth one in a series titled "Enlightened Sojourn", is published, with Foreword written by 11-year-old Rinpoche Prince Vairochana, ChatGPT and Deepseek.

● HM started again to write a bi-monthly column for Taiwan's leading Global View Magazine after meeting with its founder, Prof. Charles Kao.

● HM joined Fo Guang Shan in Kaohsiung in opening its Mai Ji Shan Buddhist Grotto major exhibition.

● Zhang Fan, CERS China Director, joined a forum in Nu Jiang Prefecture of Yunnan on the subject of cultural tourism, to be followed by cave exploration in 2026. He further participated in a think tank conference on tourism at Yunnan Mi Le City.

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP:

HM's latest book & Foreword written by Rinpoche. Global View column. Zhang Fan lectures. Fo Guang Shan exhibit operning.

THANK YOU THANK YOU

■ Han Michael Jebsen, a CERS Director, hosted CERS directors at his home, and presented the 130-year history of the Jebsen Company.

■ The Margot & Thomas Pritzker Family Foundation made another five-year pledge of support to CERS.

■ The Lady Yuen Peng McNeice Foundation made another three-year pledge in support of CERS upcoming projects.

■ Dennis Yip joins CERS as a new patron, whereas Sonny Yau, Afonso Ma, Terry Chao, and HL Hsieh rejoined as patrons.

■ Chote Sophanovich, Jacqueline Zhang, Gilbert Wong, and Hans Michael Jebsen renew as yearly patrons of CERS.

■ Anna Yeung made a donation to CERS.

■ Wellington & Virginia made a matching donation to CERS in support of our project in Ladakh of India.

■ CERS 39th dinner at HKU was underwritten by CERS Chairman William Fung, with emcee Nury Vittachi, and contributions by Fred Yau on gift backpack, Alex for the 2026 calendar, Christabel for the printing of newsletter, Chip Connor for the map napkins, and the Jebsen Company on beverages.

■ A historic village house in Tai O is donated to CERS by the Cheng family for restoration and future use. The CERS team has conducted multiple site visits to thoroughly assess the premises and record the condition and features of the house.

LEFT TO RIGHT:
Jebsen & CERS. Tai O House. Surveying house.

CURRENT PATRONS

HONG KONG / OVERSEAS

- Fredrik Atting
- Dr Joseph Chan
- Lowell and Phyllis Chang
- Terry Cao
- Eric Chen
- Lydia Cheng
- Vivien Chou
- Terence Chu
- William Fung
- Adrian Fu
- Ester Goelkel
- Andy Hei and Susanna Lo
- V.K. Hsu And Sons Foundation Limited
- Hans Michael Jebsen
- Wendy Kwok
- Mei Kwong & Larry Franklin
- Barry Lam
- Christabel & Ricky Lau
- Vic Li
- Afonso Ma
- Martin Ma
- David Mong
- Pang Family
- King Pang & Magdalen Yum
- Thomas Pritzker
- Serge Pun
- Chote Sophonpanich
- Stephen Suen
- Betty Tsui
- Linda Wang
- Gilbert Wong
- Dora Wu
- Sonny Yau
- Dennis Yip
- Francis & Rose Yuen
- Billy Yung
- Jacqueline Zhang

CERS' MISSION:

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