A NEWSLETTER TO INFORM AND ACKNOWLEDGE CERS' FRIENDS AND SUPPORTERS

since 1986

CHINA EXPLORERS

CHINA EXPLORATION AND RESEARCH SOCIETY

VOLUME 28 NO.2 SUMMER ISSUE 2026

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CLOCKWISE FROM TOP:

Russian Bellinghausen Station on King George Island, Antarctica.

Simple life, warm smiles, and the rhythm of Sedanau.

Chukotka Herders.

Rehearsal for concert.

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President's Message

HM serving HM

Twice, and now the third time, Misha acted as our expedition guide and interpreter to Siberia. With a degree from the prestigious Moscow State University in linguistics, his simultaneous translation beats any apps, adding life, emotion and feeling that no apps can ever substitute. We hired Misha, beginning on January 1, 2026, as our first Russian staff, a wonderful addition to our team, offering both youth and diversity. Though Misha comes with the last name of Ivanov, he looks fully Asian, being indigenous to Siberia coming from Yakutsk, the center of that northernmost part of the Asian continent.

Small and headquartered in Hong Kong, CERS swath of colleagues and partners span several countries and regions, from Mainland China, to Taiwan, Japan, Philippines, Myanmar, Bhutan, Nepal, India and now even Russia. Misha alone comes to represents a land spreading from the Siberian Far East to Europe, across two continents. Like everything else in exploration, the potential through imagination is boundless. This is most likely how exploration begins, from a small beginning to even outer space, spiritual or real.

Momentarily, I look out from the window of our high-rise and see the first sunlight strike the frozen sea. The towers around us cast long shadows deep into the bay of Vladivostok, where two men are ice-fishing. It reminds me how some people, too, cast long shadows across human history — especially those who have spent millennia pushing the boundaries of our physical world.

The app that creates a photo of HM serving myself is new, but not that new. At the dawn of our AI age, though we can all be virtual armchair explorers, it can never replace the excitement, intimacy and emotion of being there in the first person. That is the spirit of exploration.

In this issue, we are sharing our exploration features of Siberia with our friends and supporters. Enjoy.

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

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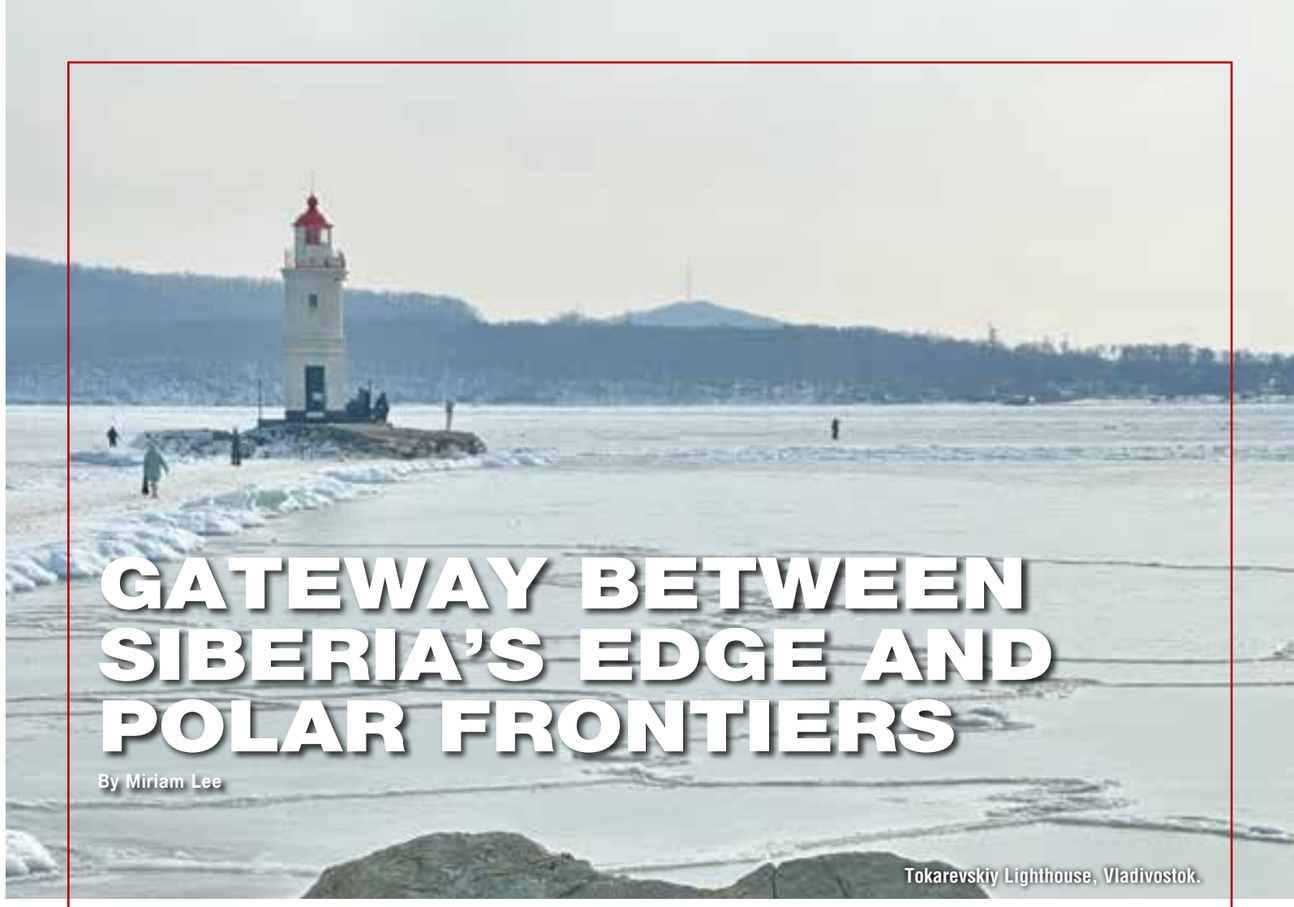


GATEWAY BETWEEN SIBERIA'S EDGE AND POLAR FRONTIERS

By Miriam Lee

Tokarevskiy Lighthouse, Vladivostok.

Our plane lifted into the pale afternoon sky, its ascent peeling us away from Macao's dense lattice of towers and neon. Through the window, the world below softened into abstraction: first the sprawl of the Pearl River Delta, then a quilt of green hills, and eventually a muted expanse of brownish-grey terrain where only the faint geometry of small towns broke the monotony. As we pressed northward, the horizon dimmed, as if the daylight itself were retreating from the cold we were flying toward.

It was an unlikely beginning for a wintry expedition. Macao — humid, glittering, and perpetually awake — felt worlds away from our destination: Vladivostok, perched on the edge of the Pacific, where winter arrives early and lingers with intent. Yet here we were, aboard a Cambodia Airlines flight on a route so new it still felt experimental, a tenuous thread connecting two cities with little shared history and even less predictable traffic. The cabin told its own story. Nearly every passenger was Russian, tanned and relaxed, returning home after a holiday spent in Macao's casinos and resorts during the Orthodox Christmas and New Year season. Their holiday mood contrasted with the tentative nature of the route itself — a venture testing the waters of demand, hoping to catch a current strong enough to sustain it.

Curious, I asked a flight attendant how the new service was faring. He offered a polite smile carrying both professionalism and resignation. "Half full is the best we've had," he said. On his previous flight from Vladivostok to Macao, only four passengers had been on board. Four. A number so small it felt like a misprint.

Suddenly, the cancellation of our original return flight — announced the very day just before we departed — made perfect sense. Exploration routes, after all, are fragile. They require optimism, patience, and a willingness to embrace futility. And sometimes, despite the crew's best efforts, the route simply doesn't carry them home. Journeys to the edges of maps rarely begin smoothly. There are always improvisations and detours, reminding us that in history, at its most honest, things are rarely convenient. Exploration is, by right, an act of faith.

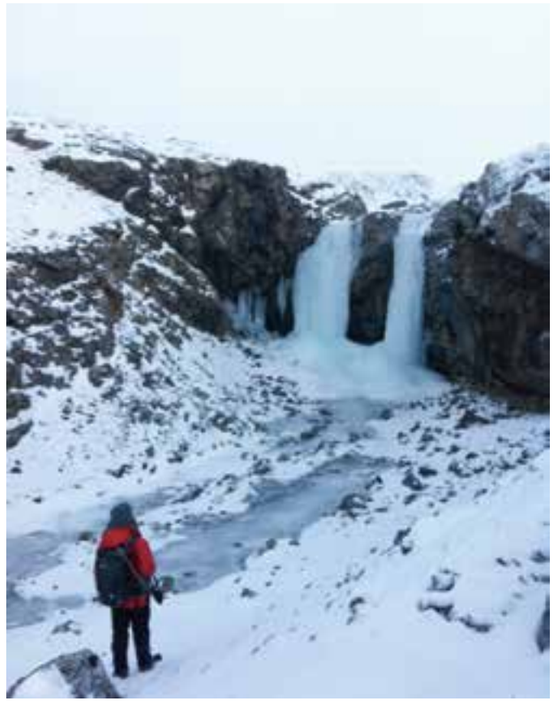
The moment our wheels kissed the tarmac, a familiar choreography unfolded outside the window. Snowploughs had carved clean lines along the runway and taxiway, their work evident in the neat embankments of snow stacked like frozen dunes beside the parking bay. The sight stirred something deeply familiar in me. I had seen similar scenes before — descending into Longyearbyen during sea expeditions around Svalbard, Greenland, and the Arctic ▶

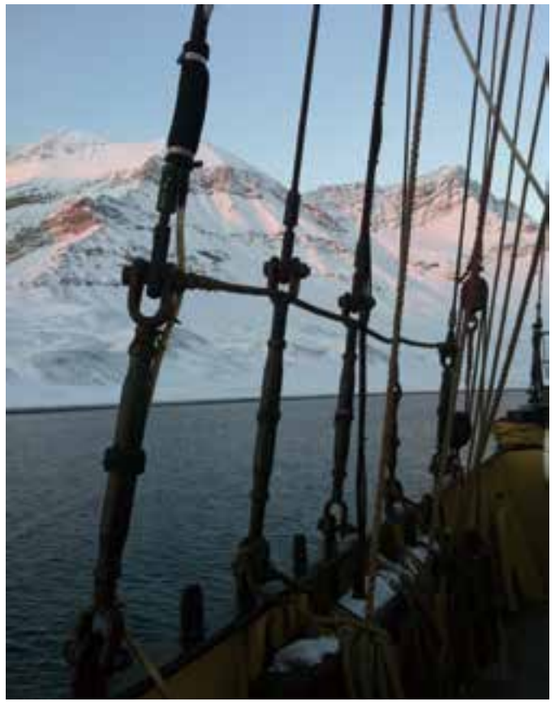
TOP TO BOTTOM:

Frozen harbour.
Snowheaps on runway.
Open-air market.

Ocean, when the world outside the cabin felt stripped to its essentials, the silence broken only by the obscured presence of polar bears. I remembered the zodiac approaches along the Antarctic Peninsula, when pebble beaches appeared like punctuation marks on an otherwise endless sheet of ice. The gentoo penguins are still vivid in my mind: hopping off ice walls with comic determination, craning their necks to inspect us, the strange, layered figures who had arrived by rubber boat. To them, we must have seemed like oversized, flightless birds who had lost their way.

Vladivostok in midwinter is not the polar frontier, yet the Siberian chill carried an unmistakable resonance. It had that same crystalline bite, the kind that sharpens the air and quiets the mind. Stepping off the plane felt like stepping back into an expedition mindset — alert, observant, slightly humbled by the climate's indifference. For someone like me, raised in the subtropics, there is a particular clarity that comes with cold places. The sensation was immediate: I was once again on the threshold of a place that demanded attention, a place where nature still sets the terms. Vladivostok — "The Lord of the East," or the "Cliffs of Sea Cucumbers" — becomes less a city and more a staging ground, Russia's temperate antechamber to its own extremes. It plays a role not unlike the constellation of polar outposts I have visited during ten polar expeditions, serving as a threshold where the resilience of Siberia meets the spirit of exploration that extends all the way to Russia's scientific stations in the Arctic and Antarctic.





CLOCKWISE FROM TOP:

Orthodox Church above Bellinghausen Station, Antarctica. Russian Bellinghausen Station on King George Island. Sailing expedition in the Arctic Sea. Trekking to an icefall in Svalbard.

Bellingshausen Station felt almost gentle, perched on King George Island where the southernmost Orthodox church stands as a quiet emblem of cultural continuity at the edge of the world. In the Arctic, Barentsburg still hums with the residue of Soviet industriousness: I remember walking past the Lenin statue that surveys a gigantic indoor gymnasium and swimming pool, built for coal miners who laboured in the frigid climate. And then there is Pyramiden, like a frozen time capsule, where a handful of caretakers keep the lights on for visitors who may or may not arrive, while polar bears test the strength of the doors and Arctic foxes claim the abandoned coal mine conveyor belts as their playground.

What struck me, standing in Vladivostok's winter landscape, was how these distant stations echoed here in spirit. The city's snowbound streets, its Soviet-era facades, and its quiet resilience felt like cousins to those polar outposts. Bellingshausen's church, a beacon of continuity in isolation, reminded me of Vladivostok's Orthodox domes rising above the frozen harbour — symbols of endurance in climates that test the human spirit. Barentsburg's utilitarian grandeur, its gymnasium and pool built to sustain life in the Arctic, found a parallel in Vladivostok's monumental Soviet architecture, designed not only to impress but to withstand the weight of winter. And Pyramiden's eerie silence, its frozen machinery awaiting visitors, resonated with the quieter ▶

TOP TO BOTTOM:
Svalbard reindeer.
Polar bear and sickle at N79°.

cape of Vladivostok, where snow and sea ice muffles the thin land bridge that leads to the lighthouse, and the city feels poised between vitality and hibernation.

These places — whether in the Arctic, Antarctic, or the Russian Far East — are not merely stations or settlements. They are metaphors for endurance, for the long prelude that precedes any meaningful act of exploration. I learned through multiple expeditions in the polar regions that the true work always happens way before the first step is taken: in the months of preparation, the quiet calibrations, the patient accumulation of supplies and knowledge. An Antarctic expedition may be as short as three weeks, but its scaffolding is built over a year or more, layer by logistical layer. Vladivostok, too, carries that same sense of preparation — a city that feels less like a destination than a staging ground, a place where journeys into Siberia's vastness begin with the same patience and humility demanded by the polar frontiers.

In this way, establishing a foothold in Vladivostok at Russia's Pacific hinge becomes not just practical but essential. Vladivostok mirrors the polar stations I have known: a gateway, a laboratory, a cultural outpost, and a reminder that exploration is as much about building the conditions for discovery as it is about discovery itself. The journey into Siberia begins long before the taiga appears outside the window — it begins in the patient, deliberate act of preparing to understand a landscape that has always rewarded those who take the time to heed and walk.

BRIDGING SIBERIA: THE EXPANDING REACH OF CERS

By Mikhail Ivanov

My name is Mikhail Ivanov, and I am a Yakut from the Republic of Sakha (Yakutia), one of the 24 recognized ethnic republics within the Russian Federation. Russia is composed of 89 constituent federal subjects, among which these republics function as homelands for Russia's diverse non-Russian (ethnically wise) indigenous and minority peoples. Unlike standard administrative regions (oblasts, krai), the republics were established with special status, granting them the legal right to adopt their own constitutions and designate their native languages as official alongside main Russian. This framework reflects the country's vast ethnic mosaic and provides a degree of cultural autonomy for many ethnic groups living in Russia, like the Yakuts.

Yakutia is immense - more than three million square kilometers, a territory rivaling the size of entire continents such as India or Argentina. It is a land of endless taiga forest, deep permafrost, diamond-rich earth, and mighty rivers that carve their way through one of the coldest inhabited regions on the planet. Yakutsk, our capital, holds the distinction of being the coldest major city on Earth. Winter temperatures routinely plunge below -40°C and can reach -60°C, with some northern settlements recording extremes as low as -71°C. In striking contrast, the short summer brings intense heat that often exceeds 35°C, sometimes climbing even higher beneath the midnight sun.

These dramatic seasonal swings profoundly shape both the land and its people. The permafrost - a layer of permanently frozen ground of hundreds of meters deep - dictates construction, agriculture, and the very rhythm of life. In winter, the soil becomes iron-hard and rivers frozen highways; in summer, the surface thaws into soft, unstable ground while the taiga explodes with frantic biological activity. This forces a culture of intense preparation and resilience. Families work feverishly during the brief warm months - gathering wild berries, fishing, hunting, drying meat and fish, and tending gardens - to survive the long, unforgiving winter. These practices are far more than survival strategies; they forge a deep connection to the land, to family, and to community, while cultivating values of foresight, endurance, and respect for nature's limits.

Siberia and the Far East of Russia

Just as great civilizations throughout history have adapted to the extremes of their environments - whether seasonal floods along great rivers or the harsh cycles of nomadic life on vast steppes - the Yakut people and many others in Siberia have developed a resilient culture finely tuned to these extraordinary temperature contrasts. Yet across wider expanses of Siberia and the Russian Far East, the traditional rhythms of life shaped by these extremes are under growing pressure. ▶

Same fishing spot in Lena river (Major river in Yakutia) during Winter and Summer.

The republics, like my native Sakha (Yakutia), enjoy special status with rights to their own constitutions and official languages alongside Russian. However, for the approximately 40 officially recognized “small-numbered indigenous peoples” of the North, Siberia, and the Far East - who together tally only around 250,000 to 260,000 people - maintaining their distinct ways of life has become increasingly difficult. Especially for those indigenous communities whose traditional livelihoods depend heavily on young, able-bodied labor - such as reindeer herding, where a single family may manage several hundred animals.

Climate change is one of the most immediate threats. Thawing permafrost, which underlies much of the region and can extend hundreds of meters deep, is destabilizing the very ground on which communities depend. Villages experience infrastructure damage, altered river flows disrupt traditional fishing and transportation routes, and changing weather patterns affect wildlife migrations, berry harvests, etc. What was once a predictable cycle of intense preparation for winter has grown more unpredictable, straining the resilience that has defined these cultures for centuries.

Modern development and infrastructure projects bring new economic opportunities but also accelerate disruption. Expanding resource extraction and energy networks open remote areas, though they often fragment traditional territories and make semi-nomadic or subsistence lifestyles harder to sustain. At the same time, younger generations - understandably drawn to education, urban opportunities, reliable services, and modern conveniences are moving away from the demanding seasonal cycles of their ancestors. As a result, native languages are fading rapidly (with dozens of indigenous languages of the region considered endangered or critically endangered), traditional knowledge of the land and rivers is less commonly passed on, and many cultural practices risk being remembered only in stories rather than lived experience.

This is not a question of blame. The pull of modernity is universal, and the desire for better opportunities, comfort, and security for one’s family is natural everywhere. Yet the pace of change in these vast and once-isolated territories often leaves little room for balanced adaptation. Valuable heritage, unique languages, oral histories, spiritual connections to the landscape, and sustainable practices refined over generations - can disappear within a single lifetime.

It is in response to these very challenges that geographical societies play a vital role. The Russian Geographical Society (RGS), with its long history of exploration, ethnography, and conservation across Russia’s territories, has long worked to document and support the country’s cultural and natural diversity. Similarly, the China Exploration and Research Society (CERS) brings a focused commitment to respectful documentation, cultural preservation, and building bridges between traditional knowledge and contemporary realities.

Over the past decades, CERS has carried out exceptionally valuable work across China, meticulously documenting ethnic minority cultures, remote ecosystems, and rapidly changing border regions while supporting local communities in preserving their heritage. This deep experience and sensitive approach have earned the organization genuine respect. Now, as CERS begins to extend its reach northward into Siberia and the Russian Far East, this expansion feels both timely and highly welcome. The society’s proven methodology of combining rigorous exploration with cultural empathy is especially well-suited to the vast northern territories, where similar pressures of modernization and climate change are at play.

A compelling example lies with the Evenki people. Wong How Man and the CERS team have long studied Evenki ▶

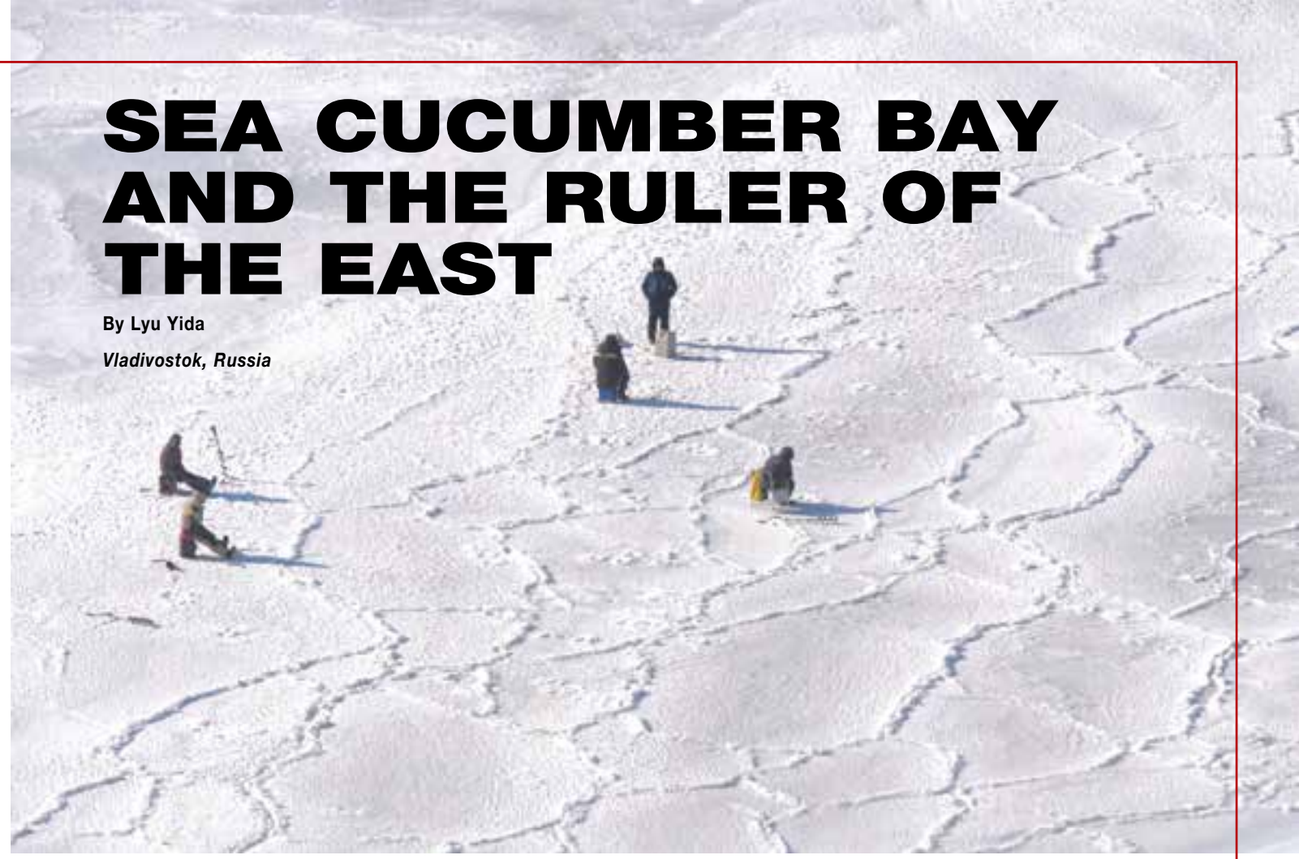
TOP TO BOTTOM:
Preparing supplies for the coming winter.
Herders of Chukotka (North of Kamchatka).

TOP TO BOTTOM:

Batagaika Crater – biggest crater in Siberia due to thawing permafrost, and frost mounds.
Wong How Man exploring the Evenki groups in China and Russia.

reindeer herders in northern China, documenting their traditional knowledge, migratory routes, and harmonious relationship with the taiga. Across the border in Russia, particularly in Yakutia and other parts of Siberia and the Far East, live other Evenki communities facing many of the same challenges. This creates a natural and promising cross-border continuum for documentation and comparative study. CERS's expertise in working with such transboundary ethnic groups, its commitment to high-quality recording of disappearing traditions, and its focus on practical preservation efforts position the society to make a meaningful contribution in Russia as well.

As a Yakut myself - a representative of one of Russia's indigenous peoples in Siberia - I have personally witnessed many of the challenges described above. That is why it is particularly meaningful to see explorers who share the same deep values and respect for these cultures and landscapes. For me, being able to contribute to turning CERS's plans into reality in my native region is both a privilege and a responsibility. I look forward to helping build these new bridges so that the rich heritage of Siberia and the Russian Far East can be better documented, appreciated, and supported in our rapidly changing world.



SEA CUCUMBER BAY AND THE RULER OF THE EAST

By Lyu Yida

Vladivostok, Russia

In January 2026, four years after the "special military operation" began, we found ourselves back in Vladivostok. Little had changed since our last visit in late 2023. On the surface, Russia's largest Far Eastern port still ran with the same steady. But the shadow of sanctions fell over the fine print of daily life. Overseas wire transfers and foreign currency cash withdrawals were a hassle inside Russia, making life inconvenient not just for foreign students there, but also for Russian students trying to go abroad, not least for us travelers.

Vladivostok had originally been a territory under Jilin province during China's Qing dynasty. At that time, its name is Hǎishēnwǎi (海参崴), literally meaning "a bay rich in sea cucumbers." The character wǎi (崴) is a local geographical term from Northeast China, borrowed from Manchu, meaning "bay" or "harbor."

In 1862, four years after the Treaty of Aigun was signed, the tsarist government renamed the city Vladivostok — "Ruler of the East." That name laid bare the strategic thinking behind this ice free port: it was not just a harbor, but a military bridgehead for controlling the entire East.

The name was only the beginning. The Russians then set about building their dominion on a grand scale. The Trans-Siberian Railway — 9,288 kilometers, the longest rail line in the world — stretched from Vladivostok in the east to Moscow in the west, its main tracks largely laid by 1904.

TOP TO BOTTOM:

Ice fishing. Millionka in the 1920s.
A Harbin restaurant on Vladivostok street.

TOP TO BOTTOM:
Driver Kevin.
Soviet poster in the canteen.
Entrance of the canteen.

Stalin's Great Purge took a darker form. Hǎishēnwǎi had once been a city crowded with Chinese merchants and families; their "Millionka (百萬街)" was one of the busiest commercial blocks in town. From 1937 to 1938, under the pretext of flushing out Japanese spies, the Soviet authorities launched a wholesale cleansing of the overseas Chinese across the Far East, roughly a hundred thousand Chinese had simply vanished from Hǎishēnwǎi. The once thriving Chinese quarter was wiped off the map — erased, as though it had never been there.

But times change, and so must policy. In October 2015, a year after the annexation of Crimea, President Putin approved turning Vladivostok into a free port — a Russia then deep in political turmoil. The zone came with its own customs, taxes, and investment rules. Chinese investment totaled $2.4 billion, accounting for 73% of all foreign capital. Slowly, the city began shifting from a military stronghold into the Far East's economic hub.

Today, the streets of Vladivostok are lined with Chinese restaurants. One can easily get northeastern Chinese food here, as if the old tragedy had never happened, and no one speaks of it anymore. After the pandemic, more and more Chinese have come to do business here, year by year. Our driver this time is a former naval soldier from Shandong province. He runs a car import and rental service here and gave himself an English name Kevin so customers from different countries could remember it. He says the competition back home is too cutthroat — in Russia, many parts of the market are still "blue ocean" — so he came here to "lie flat" and make some easy money.

Inside the library of the Far Eastern Federal University in Vladivostok, the shelves are packed with books on Northeast China — its history, culture, ethnic minorities, biology and geography. And tucked among them, even a copy of The Governance of China by President Xi.

On land that once belonged to China, Chinese traces have returned after being erased. Soviet traces, on the other hand, are almost nowhere to be found. This ostensibly Russian city actually feels less Soviet than Georgia, a former Soviet republic. There seems to be just one Soviet-style canteen called the "Sickle and Hammer" left— dressing up like the old government-run days, and now an Instagram hotspot.

Not far from that canteen stands a statue of Eleanor Lord Pray, a woman from New England. She lived in Vladivostok from 1894 to 1930. For thirty-six years, she

wrote around 2000 letters to her family and friends back in the United States and China. Her letters were no ordinary household gossip. With a pen that was sharp, warm, and clear-eyed, she chronicled the life of this Far Eastern city as it unfolded and suffered. She witnessed the end of tsarist rule, the Russo Japanese War, the 1905 Revolution, World War I, the October Revolution, the Allied intervention in Siberia, and the Sovietization that followed. She also took thousands of photographs, capturing the full texture of that era. Her words and images were eventually collected into a precious book: Letters from Vladivostok 1894–1930.

Is life disconnected from politics? That would be too absolute a claim. Still, under any system, under any power, people have to get on with living. What I admire most are those who, no matter what, keep fighting to survive. That kind of grit is a faith that goes beyond any ideology or religion. Call it faith in life itself.

And there, before Eleanor Lord Pray's silent stone eyes, a woman sells seafood at the market, working hard to put food on her family's table. Out on the nearshore water, frozen solid as porcelain, a few old men sit on the ice, fishing — as they always have, two or three of them, never in a hurry.

The true love of exploring geography and culture also has nothing to do with politics. Across from the Pacific Fleet's C 56 submarine, in an old building from 1914, we signed a Memorandum of Understanding with the Primorsky branch of the Russian Geographical Society. As How Man's ▶

TOP TO BOTTOM:
Statue of Eleanor Lord Pray.
Woman selling fish.
HM and Aleksey.

TOP TO BOTTOM:

Sino-Soviet Friendship Banner.
Signs on street says Chinese are our friends.
The Elbe Day.

hand met that of the branch chairman, Aleksey, I thought of a banner I'd seen in the Pacific Fleet Museum. It read: "From the Artillery Unit of the Soviet Garrison at Port Arthur — Long Live the Friendship of the Chinese and Soviet Armies."

Just then, a news alert popped up on my phone as I reminisce and write: Just four days after Trump finished his China trip, Putin would also make his 25th visit to China. It felt as if the world had switched to Beijing time. My mind began to drift backwards — through the eras I had lived through, and the ones I'd only known from history books.

For decades, or centuries, China, the U.S., and Russia, have shifted between enmity and friendship, locked in struggle. I passed through the Russia Ukraine war that began in 2022, the China U.S. trade war that started in 2018. Further back, to a time before the Soviet Union collapsed, the ping pong diplomacy of the 1970s, the open Sino Soviet rift of the 1960s, with border clashes like Zhenbao Island incident flaring up again and again. Then, to the Cold War, the dark stage for so many modern wars, big and small. And then to the age when the CCP's "single spark" had just been lit — still following the Comintern, still calling the Soviet Union its affectionate "Big Brother".

Finally, my mind stopped on April 25, 1945. The European war was grinding to its end. In a small village near Torgau, Germany. A U.S. lieutenant, William D. Robertson, came across a strange figure — a man on horseback, wearing a uniform Robertson had never seen.

The horseman saw Robertson's American uniform, too. He turned in his saddle and looked straight at him. Robertson looked straight back.

And just like that — an American and a Soviet soldier, face to face. Their armies had crossed half the world for this single moment. A few hours later, on a broken bridge over the Elbe near where they met, the hands of the East and the hands of the West clasped together.

This is just a blink in the long river of history. But I believe it is a blink we keep longing for.

Because it reminds us of human: we were enemies once. But we were also friends.

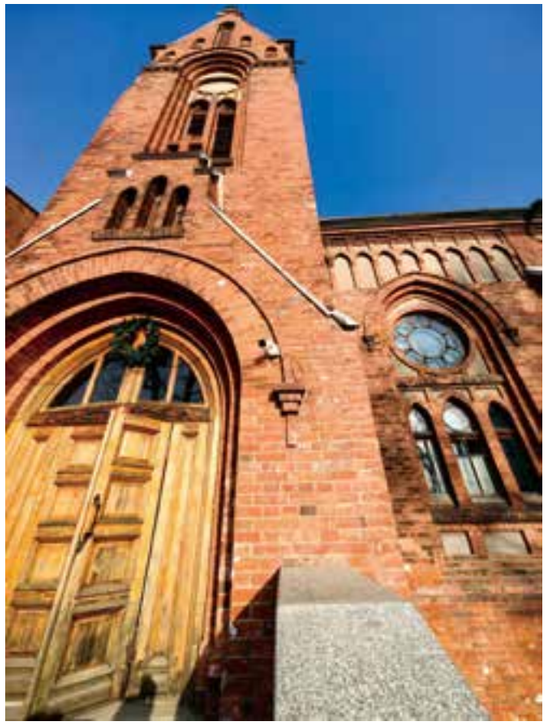
FIRST LUTHERAN CHURCH IN VLADIVOSTOK

By Wong How Man

Vladivostok, Siberia

In 1887, St. Paul's Church, a single-story wooden temple, was constructed in the corner of No.14 Pushkin Street on a hill a short distance from the bay of Vladivostok, barely five years after the city was founded as the capital of the Primorsky Krai, or province. During Czarist days, when European royalties and elites of different countries intermarried frequently, the then provincial military governor was Admiral Gustaf von Erdmann, of German descent. He led the creation of this first Lutheran church, which twenty years later, was redesigned and built with bricks brought in from Germany, in Gothic style with a spire tower by the prominent German architect Georg Junghendel.

It was at a time when Europeans lived more congenially as a large community among different nationals. Congregation of St. Paul's Church peaked at over four thousand, mostly of German heritage. Among them were admirals, officers, scientists, merchants, teachers and artists, many followed an influx of Europeans after the end of the Russo-Japanese War between 1904 and 1905. By the end of the First World War, it still had around 3000 in its congregation. Today, a century later, the total number is 53. The two world wars started a wave of Germans moving away, and upon the fall of the Soviet Union, more immigrated to Europe or America. Today, when I arrived for the Sunday service, around 30 people attended the church with approximately 200 seats.



TOP TO BOTTOM:

St Paul's Church early 20th Century.
Bell tower spire.

Konstantin Reichenau, now 69, traces his background to Germany, and for six generations, including his children and grandchildren, has lived here in Vladivostok. His Bavarian vest inside a tweed jacket is not the only trait of his descent and heritage, as he is probably the most active advocate and de facto manager of the St Paul's Church. As a railroad engineer, he has traveled throughout Russia and much of the former Soviet Union, including to countries in Europe. We met during the Sunday service in church when I decided that visiting a Lutheran Church may be more interesting than going to the many large and small Orthodox churches throughout the city. When I introduced ourselves being from Hong Kong, it drew a big smile to his face, saying that he has been to the city five times, for meetings and conferences.

"Today, with 30 people, our congregation is not bad," Konstantin reminded me. Pointing to the corner walls at the end of the building, Konstantin recounted the turbulent history of this Lutheran Church. Following the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917, all churches were banned and closed by the mid-1930s. Even the earliest and largest Orthodox Church was dynamited to pieces, and replaced by a statue of Lenin. It wasn't until the mid-1990s that churches were rebuilt or reinstated. St. Paul's was one of such cases. In 1935, it was first turned over to the Navy as a clubhouse for elders and junior officers of the Pacific Fleet. Later, it became the Gorky Cinema, and still later the Weapons and Military Museum with equipment and weapon exhibits in its yard.

"It wasn't until 1997 that the Church was finally returned to our hands. Then organizing a major repair and restoration took over ten years. Raising funds, forming committees, assigning work and finding craftsmen for restoration was a laborious process," said Konstantin. Leading me to one corner of the building, he picked up an old piece of brick by the radiator and told me, "Here is one half piece of the original brick from Germany. These old bricks are brittle and would break easily as it aged. We managed to find other bricks from a dismantled barrack for reuse and rebuilt the interior." On the wall were pictures demonstrating the long process of revamping the church building, from window frames to even the entrance steps. Konstantin was noticeably proud of their joint achievement in restoring the Church to its current grandiose.

Today, with its small congregation, the church is also lending out the space for use by outside organizations and charities. Most notably for musical concerts for its most wonderful acoustic, as Konstantin attested to it. "Tonight

we have a concert on Harry Potter movie soundtracks that is fully sold out, every single seat. In fact, tomorrow night we host another concert too, also sold out," said Konstantin with pride. I asked if I could come back before 7pm. "There won't be any seats left, but you can stay for a while to observe from the balcony," he answered.

I did return in the evening, saw the final rehearsal of a string quartet, accompanied by a grand piano and an organ on two sides. The organ was another item, or instrument, that Konstantin craved about. It came all the way from the Netherlands and was said to be one of the very best. He said that a musician has come all the way from Europe just to have a chance to play on its three-tier keyboards. While I am not a musician or with ears calibrated to be a critic, seeing Konstantin's enthusiasm was enough for me to become a believer in his words.

History repeats itself, so they say. But I hope the turbulent history of St Paul's Church will not be repeated. As I walked out into the snow, I turned and looked back in darkness of this Church. Lights coming through its round and ornate windows gave me a glimpse of hope. Hoping that the prayer for peace with the joyous songs will be continued, with the resonance of the church bell chiming far and wide. Like my favorite Tokarevskaya Lighthouse at the tip of Vladivostok that I have gone out to time and again, the St. Paul's Lutheran Church can stand as testimony of the past and a beacon through time of darkness into the future.

CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT:

Pastor giving sermon. Full house concert. Concert in progress. Organ performance. Tokarevskaya Lighthouse. Refinishing windows. Konstantin with HM. Church as seen from balcony.

ROOTS AND TIDES IN SEDANAU

By Natalie Lai

CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT:

Sedanau & fishing boats.
Syahriadi feeding fish at his keramba.
Baby Napoleon fish, carefully raised in the keramba.
Simple life, warm smiles, and the rhythm of Sedanau.
Fish carrier vessel collecting the catch for wider markets.
Zulkifli (middle) and Rustampuri (right) explaining their work at sea, with Dian (left) translating.

"Where are Natuna and Sedanau?" That's the question I hear most after this trip. The Natuna Islands lie at the northern edge of Indonesia, between Peninsular Malaysia and Borneo, almost like a child that has wandered away from the rest of the country. Sedanau is one of these islands.

Dian greeted us at Batam airport with quiet excitement. For some of my teammates, it was a reunion—they had first met him during a trip to Natuna in 2024 and were now fulfilling their promise to visit his hometown, Sedanau. From Batam, we flew to Ranai, the main island of Natuna, then continued by ferry to Sedanau. Along the way, Dian shared stories of his hometown, and my curiosity grew about this distant fishing island I could barely find online.

Stepping onto Sedanau, the pace of everything softened. There was no rush, no noise, only the steady rhythm of daily life by the water. Brightly painted stilt houses stood over the sea, alongside small family-run shops, local eateries, and boats gently tied along the shore. The island felt remote, yet not lacking.

In a place where tourism has barely taken root, our visit felt less like passing through and more like being received. Curious glances followed us as we explored, but they were never distant, often accompanied by warm smiles, small waves, or quiet greetings.

The sea is central to life in Sedanau. Fishing is both a tradition and a livelihood, passed down through generations. Like many locals, Zulkifli and Rustampuri were born into fishing families, learning the necessary skills and knowledge from a young age.

Before each trip, they decide which fish to target and prepare accordingly. Tuna, for example, requires ice storage, while live fish such as grouper must be kept in water tanks. Larger fish are sold directly to fish carrier vessels that distribute the catch elsewhere, while smaller ones are sold to keramba families. One such farm belongs to Syahriadi, Dian's uncle, who raises them in netted enclosures set in the water beside his stilt house until they reach market size.

At his keramba, Syahriadi showed us a few baby Napoleon fish, moving slowly in the water. Among the fishermen, these are the most prized catch, so valuable that landing one is like discovering a small treasure. "If we manage to catch one, we're very happy," they told us. But the Napoleon fish are highly sensitive and clever, nibbling cautiously and often avoiding bait altogether.

As they steered the boat, Zulkifli and Rustampuri spoke about how they locate their position, read the tides, and watch for changes in the water. Yet beneath their matter-of-fact tone was a reality that needed little emphasis: fishing offshore is never without risk.

In the past, before radios and GPS, losing direction at sea was not uncommon. They recalled a time when their boat drifted far into open waters after the engine broke down—more than a hundred miles from land, with nothing but water in every direction. There was little they could do but wait.

When asked what they would do if they ran out of food with no way to call for help, their answer was calm: "It is all written by God. If that is how we are meant to die, we accept it. Nature is taking us back."

Out at sea, control is limited. What remains is trust: in experience, in nature, and in something beyond themselves. It is through this quiet confrontation with uncertainty that their respect for the sea and their identity as fishermen take shape.

Yet not every life here follows the same tide.

Dian's grandfather was a fisherman and boat builder, carrying on a family tradition tied to the sea. Dian's father took a different path, becoming a teacher and opening ▶

Sunset at Sedanau.

doors for Dian to explore life beyond the island. Dian spent over a year working in Bali, one of Indonesia's most popular tourist destinations, where he saw the potential of tourism. Yet every step he took brought him back to Sedanau, ready to apply what he had learned to support his community.

For Dian, this is not just ambition but a way of giving back. As the eldest son, he takes responsibility for supporting his younger siblings, ensuring they can pursue opportunities that help them flourish. When we visited his home, he showed us a cabinet filled with his siblings' awards, speaking with quiet pride and genuine happiness at their achievements.

This same sense of care extends beyond his family to Sedanau itself. What he learns elsewhere, he hopes to bring home. In his own way, he has already begun experimenting—once even creating a Google advertisement for this island titled "The Heart of the Ocean." Although the ad is no longer active, it was his first attempt to introduce his hometown to a wider world.

In many places, development comes at the cost of tradition. In Sedanau, it feels less like a choice and more like a balance still being shaped. Dian hopes to open the island to the world through education, exposure, and small efforts to share Sedanau beyond its shores. Yet he is clear that fishing is not just a livelihood, but part of the island's identity.

The fishermen, in their own way, believe the same. They continue to pass down knowledge of the sea to their children, while allowing them to choose their own paths. What remains unchanged is a deep sense of where they come from: a respect for the sea and the community that sustains it.

I asked Dian what makes Sedanau special. He paused, then smiled: "The island is beautiful, for sure. But what makes it truly beautiful is the people. The people are kind." In that simple truth, I felt the island's balance between tradition and change, between life by the sea and the pull of the wider world.

Watching Sedanau unfold, I was left with a quiet question: could it follow the path of places like Bali, opening itself to the wider world, while keeping its soul intact? Or would that very process begin to change what makes it unique? Either way, Sedanau is defined not by its distance from the world, but by how firmly it holds onto what the world is slowly losing: identity, community, and a way of life deeply connected to both people and nature.

HOMEWARD SAILING: LIFE & LIVELIHOOD ON SELAUT

By Dian Rizki Anugrah

Before this journey, I had never imagined that a simple encounter in Natuna two years ago would eventually lead me to become part of the CERS family. I am a native of Sedanau Island of the Natuna Islands, one of the remote archipelagos of Indonesia off the coast of Borneo.

I first met the CERS team in 2024 while working as a Front Office Officer at Jelita Sejuba Resort Natuna. At that time, I had the opportunity to assist and guide the CERS team during their exploration in Natuna. What began as a professional assignment slowly turned into something more meaningful. In just one week, I became familiar with their mission, their passion for nature, conservation, and storytelling, as well as the warm spirit of the people behind CERS.

After the trip, I stayed in touch with one of the CERS members, Yida. Over time, our communication continued as I pursued my own professional journey as the Executive Sales Marketing at Adiwana Jeevawasa Bali. Then, in 2026, Yida contacted me again with exciting news — that CERS was planning to return to Natuna, and they wanted me to accompany the team once more.

That invitation felt deeply personal to me. Returning to ▶

TOP TO BOTTOM:

Passengers from Selaut Island and supplies purchased by Basirun. Basirun and his colleague loaded a motorcycle onto their boat. Journey to Selaut Island.

Natuna alongside CERS did not simply feel like another adventure; It felt like a homeward sailing for me. Together with the CERS team, I explored Sedanau and the nearby Selaut Island — not simply as a guide, but as someone returning to the islands and waters that have shaped my life since childhood. Bringing the CERS members to experience the beauty of my homeland, meet the local communities, and witness the untouched nature of Natuna made this journey deeply meaningful and personal.

During this adventure, after many meaningful discussions with How Man and Miriam, I decided to officially become part of CERS — not merely as a companion to the expedition, but as an explorer who shares the same vision, passion, and commitment to conservation and storytelling. This made my time on Selaut Island even more intimate. I was no longer an outsider or a guide, but as someone who had found a new kinship in exploration.

From Sedanau, I boarded Basirun's traditional wooden boat. Basirun is a 36-year-old fisherman who also works as a transport captain between Sedanau and Selaut Island, approximately 20 kilometers or a two-hour boat ride apart.

Once onboard, I noticed a variety of goods loaded onto the small boat — rice, sugar, vegetables, fruits, cement, motorcycles, and even building materials such as roofing sheets and nails. Basirun explained he and his colleagues provide inter-island ferry service two or three times a week. Residents of Selaut Island would come to his house before getting onto the boat, bringing their lists of goods they needed. Basirun and his team would then purchase these items on their behalf and deliver them to the island. This system reflects a strong sense of community cooperation and mutual support.

Upon arrival at Selaut Island, we were greeted by residents eagerly waiting to collect their goods. Payments were made directly to Basirun for his service, creating a simple yet efficient economic cycle among the islanders.

Selaut Island is blessed with extraordinary natural beauty. Its crystal-clear waters, colorful coral reefs, and clean, pollution-free air create a serene environment. The local community is also incredibly welcoming to visitors, though they rarely see any foreigners. The small island covers approximately 240 hectares, with 210 hectares dedicated to plantations (mainly cloves, vegetables, and other crops), 15 hectares for residential areas and village offices, and 15 hectares designated as a protected forest.

The island experiences an average rainfall of 0.44 millimeters, with a rainy season lasting around four months from November to February and a balmy average temperature of 29°C. The highest point is the top of the mountain at about 1,000 meters above sea level.

Although Selaut Island is home to only 331 residents — 155 men and 176 women — the community reflects a diverse economy. Village records show that about one-fifth are active fishermen, anchoring the island's identity in its maritime traditions. A handful pursue livelihoods as government employees, traders, or farmers. Yet the majority sustain themselves through mixed or informal occupations as housewives, students, and islanders who combine different forms of work such as fishing alongside plantation activities—depending on seasonal rhythms and economic needs. This shows how Selaut's people balance the enduring heritage of fishing with adaptive, multifaceted livelihoods that keep the island's economy resilient.

Selaut Island currently has a single elementary school, producing only about five graduates each year. Beyond Grade 6, students must travel to Sedanau for middle school — a daunting two-hour boat ride each way, or else rely on relatives to host them during the week. For many families, this proves impractical, and children often drop out. In response, CERS once offered to establish a community-run dormitory on Sedanau, a gesture warmly welcomed by Selaut islanders. Just weeks ago, however, the Natuna government announced plans to officially ▶

CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT:

Mr. Wan Mustar the fish distributor.
Iced fish from storage.
Local fisherman checking iced fish.
"Bagan" floating house for catching squids.
Empty monkey trap.
Young clove tree.
Bamboo irrigation duct.
Mr. Samsi the clove farmer.

TOP TO BOTTOM:

Traditional handmade octopus hook.
Yellowfin tuna caught by local fishermen.
Locals drying cloves in front of their houses.

open a junior high school on Selaut later this year, a development that will finally resolve the long-standing challenge of access to education. With this initiative underway, CERS is now channelling its resources toward other projects in the region, continuing its broader mission of exploration, conservation, and community support.

Economically, Selaut Island relies heavily on its natural resources, with fishing at the heart of the livelihood — 1 ton of yellowfin tuna, 5 tons of mackerel, 4 tons of octopus, and 3 tons of assorted fish in total in 2025. These are sold to fish mongers, including Mr. Wan Mustar, whose home doubles as a temporary storage facility equipped with ice preservation. Weekly production ranges from 100 to 300 kilograms, which are then transported to Sedanau or Selat Lampa before being shipped to larger markets in Kalimantan and Batam.

Alongside its maritime economy, clove farming is a cornerstoone of life on Selaut Island. Around 70% of the island is covered in clove plantations, yielding 15–20 tons of dried cloves annually. Local families keep only a small portion for cooking, while the vast majority, nearly 95% of production, is sold beyond the island, with most shipments bound for Jakarta, Semarang, and Surabaya. Harvested once a year, and they are sold at a relatively high price, around IDR 110,000 per kilogram. Animals like monitor lizards, long-tailed macaques, and Asian glossy starlings are common in the vegetation. Yet not all coexist harmoniously. The macaques are notorious for raiding crops, much to the frustration of farmers. Despite repeated attempts to trap them, these animals often outsmart the traps.

Marine life around Selaut is fascinating yet fragile. I often see hawksbill sea turtles and green sea turtles gliding through the waters, each year between March and June, when they return to Kukop Island — just across Selaut — to lay their eggs. A single turtle nest can contain 100 to 150 eggs. Yet this remarkable cycle of renewal is shadowed by human interference. Despite government regulations, turtle eggs are still collected and consumed, only 2,000 to 3,000 eggs remain annually across the island. Many fail to hatch due to human interference, which threatens the survival of these endangered species. There also appears to be a lack of consistent enforcement and structured conservation programs. Local youths make valiant efforts to patrol the nesting sites, but their vigilance is sporadic, constrained by the demands of daily economic responsibilities. Protecting these turtles requires real action—conservation initiatives, community education, and stronger regulations.

This journey has not only revealed the beauty and resilience of Selaut Island but also the urgency for environmental preservation. I felt compelled to contribute to turtle conservation efforts and raise awareness about the importance of safeguarding these remarkable creatures, whose survival is intertwined with the island's ecological future.

INTRIGUES OF THE COLD WAR

An attempt to assassinate Zhou En-lai

By Wong How Man

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP:

Natuna and Nine-dash Line.
Plane crash site.
Haji Nordin.
Karnaini contemplating.
Sulihin explaining to CERS.

Serendipity it must be. Just as I am about to write a sober piece about a botched assassination plot on the life of Zhou Enlai in 1955, the Weekend Financial Times front page for its Lifestyle & Arts section (unbefitting the piece should be put under) has its cover story titled "The age of assassination". It was triggered of course by the volatile situation of Iran's head of state being ambushed and killed. The piece mentioned the supposed plot of an attempt on Napoleon's life, as well as on other notable leaders. Napoleon was spared as Wellington thought such an act during a battle was ungentlemanly. Trump does not seem to concur, and thus acted otherwise.

Mine, however, is not just from research or hearsay. I happened by chance to have my feet on the island, and in the water, where the airplane plunged to earth in a failed attempt to take the life of Premier Zhou. Google "Selaut" and you would come up with next to nothing, in fact, "nothing". "The island has 117 families with a total of 314 residents, averaging around three persons per household", said Sulihin, a village representative, telling me over an impromptu home meal about their recent census, down to exact count. It is no coincidence that after Suharto came to power as the long-time president of Indonesia, many names took on "Su" as prefix. "We have never seen any foreigners here before," said Karnaini, who is now 82 years old and the oldest man on the island. He closed his eyes and reminisced a bit before answering my question regarding other visitors to the island. ▶

THE PLANE WAS SABOTAGED

causes of crash of Kashmir Princess to be published Friday?

Kashmir Princess sabotaged

timebomb in plane

本埠新聞

調查印航專機失事事件

調查團一行抵星

香港警務處懸賞佈告

賞格拾萬圓

查一九五五年四月十一日印度航空公司「喀什米爾公主」

一九五五年六月十二日

香港警務處處長

TOP TO BOTTOM:

Report of plane crash.
HK news re investigation.
HK police offering award.

"No, no foreigners had ever set foot here," chimed in 71-year-old Nordin. Haji Nordin, however, had seen many many foreigners in Mecca. When fortune befell him, he was chosen by the government to be among an entourage of over 50 Muslims to make the pilgrimage to Mecca, with all expenses paid. That was in the year 2018. The villagers all vouched for Nordin to be their representative, as he had been the teacher of Islamic study in the island for thirty years and always led the prayers. He taught boys to read the Quran and basic religious knowledge, whereas his wife would teach the girls. He understands Arabic, but cannot speak it, reciting several paragraphs of the Quran, sometimes up to fifteen times a day.

For the largest island in the Natuna group, with 80,000 some people, they are just a number. But when a place is tiny, every person counts as an individual, with a name and a face, even a personality, within its community, like Suhilin, Karnaini and Nordin. Such places are natural and perfect choices for CERS to focus on.

That notion should answer how I chanced upon this island? Google for me is a filter, little information online, great. No information, even better. Or a place under sanction, I go find out for myself. After all, since a schoolboy, I've been sanctioned throughout my life, by my teachers, by bullies stronger than myself, and as adult still being told what not to do. In the past, the "no, no's" generally reversed what public opinion dictates to me. Selaut fits the former in this case, little known. At the time, I knew absolutely nothing about destiny of an "assassination" plot. It came later, a day after I had physically left the island.

So how did I get there? I was in Natuna first time in January 2024, an island near China's Nine Dash Line to find out how this line may have affected the islanders in reality. After all, it is a "dash-line" not "solid" red line. The reconnaissance trip brought more questions than answers, warranting a second trip. I was looking into some matters related to fisherman of the area, going from subsistence fishing to fish farming to meet a new-found overseas market need. Fishing rights was also a matter of interest to me, in international or disputed water.

Somehow I got sidetracked, even into the farming of bird's nests. But that's a totally different topic of interest. So how did our team of five got to Selaut? From Hong Kong we flew to Singapore, hopped on an hour-long ferry ride to Batam, an Indonesian island nearby. Next morning, an hour flight took us to the main island of Natuna in the middle of the ocean between Indonesia's West Kalimantan, Malaysia's Sarawak, and Singapore. It has a population of some 80,000 people and administered by a Regent Cen Sui Lan. As our CERS senior advisor George Yeo was traveling with us for the first three days, we got special, even at times "unwanted", attention. A banquet at the official posh residence was offered, as George is a much-respected former Foreign Minister of Singapore. But a picture with the Regent at her residence seemed to open doors later on.

An hour by speedboat ferry took us to Sedanau, an island with some 6000 people, half of whom live in stilt houses over the water, according to five lines on Wikipedia. Then another hour on a chartered cargo boat and we reached Selaut, which had no mention on Google. We intended to put it on the map, maybe, maybe not. Measured mention perhaps. Featured as a movie set, or a celebrity destination wedding, would shoot this obscure island to the top of universal search. Below is the story.

April 11, 1955. Zhou En-lai, premier of the young People's Republic of China, was to board an Indian Airlines airplane to Indonesia for the Bandung Conference of non-aligned nations, a first-time gathering of Asian and African state leaders without Western colonial powers, and a pivotal moment for the newly-founded PRC to step onto the world stage. The plane, Kashmir Princess, was a late-model Lockheed L-749A Constellation, more fitting for the premier of a big, though not yet strong, country. It was chartered to take the Premier and his delegation from Hong Kong directly to Jakarta, as at the time China did not have any long-range and good-looking airplane.

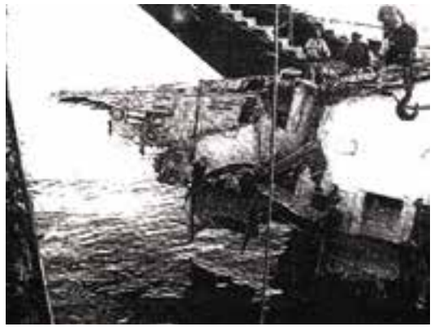
His entourage included top foreign ministry personnel, leading trade representatives, deputies and journalists of the New China News Agency, and three foreign reporters from Austria, Poland and North Vietnam. The trip was extremely important for the young nation, as at the time only a handful of friendly countries had set up diplomatic relations in recognizing the PRC at the Bandung Conference. Most countries still recognized the exiled Nationalist government holed up in Taiwan as the Republic of China. Out of 29 participating nations, only six had formal diplomatic relations with the PRC: Afghanistan, Pakistan, Burma (Myanmar), India, Indonesia, and the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (North Vietnam).

A few short days before the fateful Kashmir Princess left Beijing for Jakarta, Zhou Enlai, be it by secret information or by luck, diverted his plan to go first to Yangon in Myanmar, at the invitation of then Prime Minister U Nu, to have a meeting with several head of states, including Prime Minister Nehru of India and Nasser the President of Egypt, before flying onward to Bandung. That last-minute diversion fouled up a planned sabotage of the flight. Nonetheless, thinking that the premier is on this special flight, the plot went ahead.

Halfway to its destination, an explosion on board caught fire in the right engine and quickly spread throughout the plane. Within minutes, the plane plunged into the ocean off Natuna, the Indonesian archipelago that we are now visiting in the South China Sea. All eleven passengers on board were killed, including eight Chinese members of the delegation. Two of the five crew members died, whereas three of the cockpit crew survived, floated in the sea with the help of their life vests for nine hours before they reached a small island off Sedanau and Selaut. ▶

TOP TO BOTTOM:

Zhou Enlai, U Nu, Nehru & Nasser.
Corner café at Sedanau.
Junaidi showing monument.



TOP TO BOTTOM:
Salvage ship at work.
Recovered airplane front.
Bottom side star board wing.
Stilt houses of Selaut.

These are the two islands that I am now visiting and focused our eyes on, by chance, not by design. I first heard of this incident while having coffee at a corner café next to the tiny hotel I stayed at in Sedanau. Junaidi returned to Sedanau after working overseas for ten years and decided to bring his savings home. In between trying to convince him to put the first traffic signal at his corner and rename his cafe "Always Green Light Café" to claim a spot in the Guiness Book of Record, he told me about the plane crash story. Little did I know that three blocks away by the roadside is a small monument in memory of this event, with a model airplane attached to its top. Let alone that piece of cement block was put up by Dian, our guide, now turned CERS staff, together with his fellow schoolmates in Sedanau.

The story of the Kashmir Princess became the topic of several books, English and Chinese, and it seems a movie is now being completed some seventy years after the incident. Even a testimonial report has come out decades later by Gu Zhengwen, one of three Nationalist spymasters who masterminded the deluge of this airplane, bribing a janitor at Hong Kong's Kai Tak Airport in planting the CIA-provided time bomb fashioned as a tube of toothpaste into one of the landing gear holdings.

Despite immediate closing of the airport after the event and surveillance of airport personnel by the then British government, and award of HKD100,000 offered by the police, this janitor by name of Zhou Ziming, also known as Zhou Ju, who was paid a handsome reward of half a million Hong Kong Dollars, was smuggled out of Hong Kong that same day, April 11, by a passenger flight operated by General Chennault, the famed Flying Tigers Chief.

Subsequently, the dismembered aircraft was lifted out of the ocean floor by the dispatch of a British salvage ship. Even pieces of the time bomb were recovered. Today, this "James Bond" movie plot in real life is largely forgotten. But for CERS, the story may just add a bit of spice as we are now starting to explore these little-known islands on the fringe of the South China Sea, adding new stories of current relevance about its people that we will try to uncover. Maybe in time, Selaut and Sedanau will have some happier stories after all, be it known or not known on the internet.

But before the stampede began, market economics told me I should enter at low tide. So with no hesitation, I bought a seaside abandoned house in Selaut for USD1000, waiting the tide to rise again. Behold!

THE WHOLE WORLD IS IN A COCONUT

By Lyu Yida

Sedanau, Indonesia

Turquoise sea and rows of coconut palms.

The last time we came to Natuna was exactly two years ago, and by chance, both times fell right before the Lunar New Year, when the celebration was about to begin. So, walking through streets strung with red lanterns and couplets, and since we have been working around sea islands, now looking out at the coastline where endless rows of coconut palms swayed in the wind, everything feels familiar and warm.

That was when we met Dian, he was smart, open, free — like one of those Napoleon fish gliding through the current, belongs to nothing but the sea. He told us his name, Dian, had once belonged to his older sister, who had passed away when she was still a baby. It's their tradition: if an older sibling dies before the age of ten, the eldest surviving child takes on their name and lives with it — as if the one who has passed is seeing the world and living out their life through them.

Sedanau, Dian's home island — in his words, it's a beautiful little island "in middle of nowhere." But actually, Sedanau and the Natuna islands around it are pretty important. Their waters overlap with the Nine-Dash Line that China claimed in the South China Sea. And this is 2020s geopolitics — nobody can say for sure what might happen in the near future.

But at least for now, the island is peaceful and lovely. On the dock from the Natuna's main island (Ranai) to Sedanau, we ran into a Buddhist master in his kasaya robes. In a country where over 86% of the population is Muslim, that's not something you see every day. So after we got off the boat at Sedanau, I followed them — and before I knew it, I found myself standing at the gates of a Buddhist temple called Xie Tian Gong, which means "Hall of Harmonizing Heaven."

It turned out the monk is a master coming from Batam — a much bigger, more prosperous island near Singapore, the kind you actually see on tourist brochures. He was here to teach people how to conduct funeral rites according to Buddhist tradition. He makes the trip about once every two months — to give dharma talks and offer blessings. Maybe ten or so devotees from Ranai had also come to join the session.

Nelson Lin, thirty-seven, was one of them. He runs a construction business in Ranai, and his family came from Chaozhou, a coastal city in southern China. On this tiny ▶

island of just six thousand people, he explained, three hundred are Chinese — and nearly all are Buddhists.

Before 2000, it was Sedanau, not Ranai as it is today, that served as the administrative heart of the Natuna Islands. Small, compact, and easy to move goods around the island, it became the first stop for Chinese sailing from coastal areas across the South China Sea to Southeast Asia. Wherever the Chinese settle, trade followed. Large freighters from Thailand, Vietnam, Kalimantan, and Batam would anchor at Sedanau first, then offload onto smaller boats for Ranai.

The Chinese in Ranai, by contrast, are mostly refugees from Kalimantan who escaped Suharto's persecution in the 1960s. Sedanau's Chinese community is closer-knit, and its Buddhism has stayed more traditional than on the surrounding larger islands. That's why people from the neighboring islands often come here to gather and learn.

Nelson fetched a fresh coconut, set it down, and smiled. "You must be tired from all the listening. Have some water."Then he went on.

The temple was built in 1971, and it's a wonderfully strange place. The altars hold a bit of everything — Guanyin, Confucius and Guan Gong all together. There's also a local mountain spirit named Ciok Ong, a stone god, and the Tua Pek Kong who rules over Sedanau. And what's even more curious: they've enshrined the old village headman, still wearing his Muslim cap.

"We crossed the ocean to come here," Nelson said. "The rule is simple — respect the place you're in, worship whatever god the place worships." He is the fourth generation of his family in Indonesia. His ancestors came fleeing famine. When Xie Tian Gong was first built, it was much smaller. Over time, more Chinese arrived by boat, settled here, and brought the Mazu sea goddess statues from their own ships into the temple. More gods moved in, so the temple grew.

Xie Tian Gong's story reminded me of another about respect. When Zheng He's fleet first reached Malacca in 1405, the kingdom had only been founded for less than five years. It was a small, frightened state. Zheng He had overwhelming military power, but unlike the Europeans who came later to colonize, he did not build forts or seize land. Instead, he gave Malacca something like an angel investment — the imperial endorsement and naval protection of the Ming dynasty. He practically catapulted the little kingdom into becoming one of the world's busiest trading ports for the next hundred years.

No cultural arrogance from above. No forced trade or missionary zeal. That's the Eastern way at sea, whether you are a commoner or a king: respect the customs of the land, make room for differences, do business together as equals, that is how flowed in like tidal water, adapted, and quietly left their mark. Those used to "divide and rule" simply cannot understand or even imagine this kind of harmony.

We have heard the Europeans launched the Age of Discovery for so

long that the Chinese themselves have nearly forgotten: 1,500 years earlier, Han dynasty merchant ships had already reached India. The very term has been repeated so often that it has given us an impression — that without the Europeans, other civilizations were all isolated from one another, quietly waiting in their boxes to be discovered. Language shapes thought. This Western narrative has long since welded our perspective shut without most of us even noticing.

But Sedanau, Xie Tian Gong, and centuries of Chinese diaspora tell a different story — older, gentler, quieter. It's just been told too little and too late.

Another full moon, another foreign night. We gathered at Dian's home. His mother and sisters had prepared a feast — plenty of local dishes, and fresh coconuts, of course. The house was filled with warmth, with laughter, with an easy kind of harmony that you don't often find. Dian kept telling us stories from his childhood on Sedanau — the mischief, the adventures, the small disasters. He kept smiling and shaking his head. "What am I supposed to do with my island people?" He said. "They're too innocent. Too good."

And he was right. Everyone we met had that quiet goodness. Junaidi, for instance, his nice small café is the island's unofficial intelligence outpost, like Lulu Café in Shek O. He kept pressing coffee on us, and when we left, he pulled the big Indonesia map off his wall and handed it over to us.▶

CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT:

Monk at the dock. Nelson Lin sharing the temple's story. Painting the lion before the Lunar New Year.CERS sailing team. The old village headman in his Muslim cap. Tua Pek Kong — the god who watches over Sedanau. Confucius in the temple. Xie Tian Gong view from far.

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP:

With Dian's sisters in the kitchen. The full moon outside Dian's front door. Friendly gentle faces of the island. Lovely island children. Junaidi and HM pointing out Sedanau. A rich homey local meal.

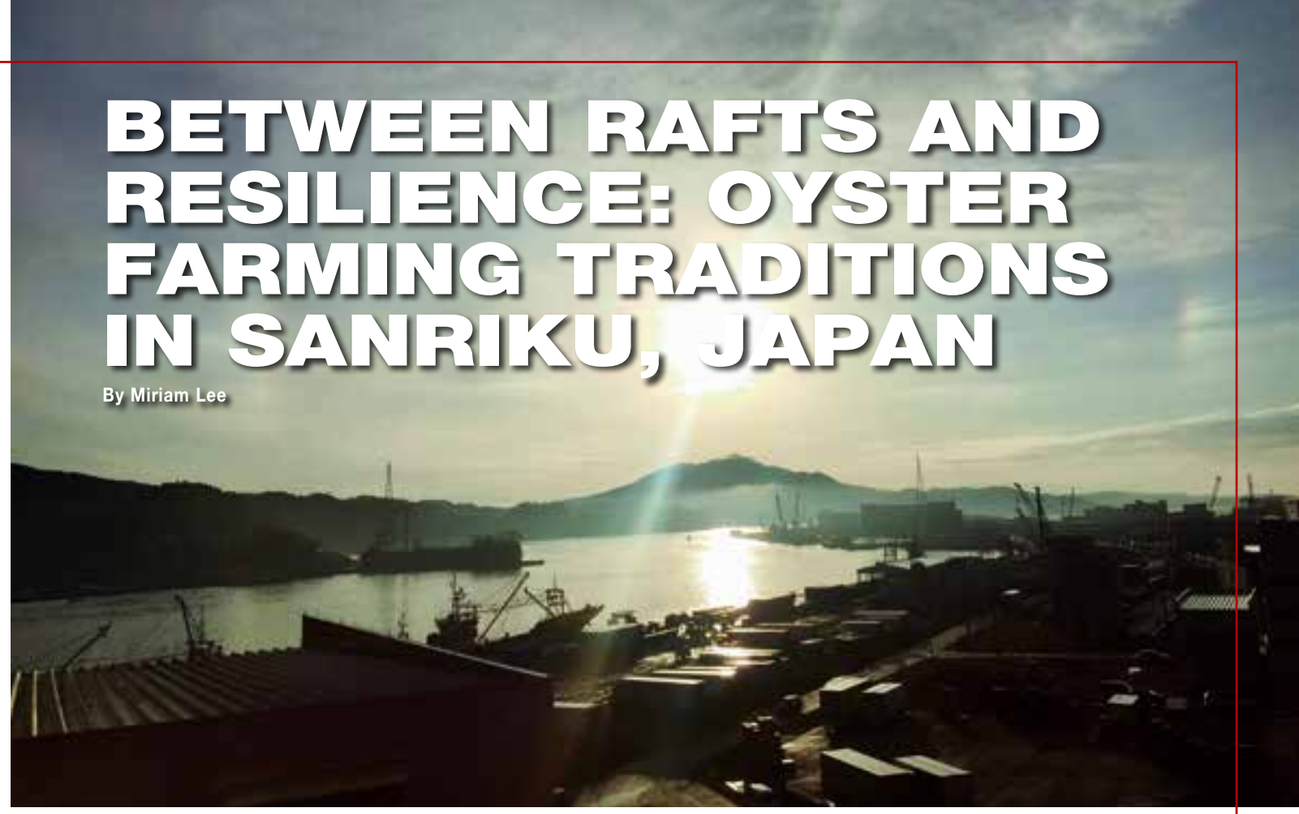
He had worked for an American telecom company in Singapore for ten years, saved up enough to open his little shop, and came straight back to Sedanau.. "Because only here," he said, "do I feel that human is just human. We talk like human beings. Simple. That's it."

That full moon night, Junaidi, Dian's sister Neca, and I talked for a long time around this strange, harmonious little island. It felt like Marshall McLuhan's global village had actually come true. This small place somehow manages to gather mosques, a Catholic church, and a Buddhist temple all together. Religions live side by side here. Cultures blend. All anyone wants is a simple, quiet life.

Back in 2008, the Beijing Olympics shouted the idea of a global village from every screen. I was young then, and I truly believed the world was a village — no races, no borders, just one family, as the 2008 theme song went: You and me, from one world, we are family.

Then I grew up. I learned new words — colonialism, ideology, social class — and the global village slipped away, further with each passing year. But now, sitting here, holding yet another fresh coconut, I've lost count of how many strangers have pressed one into my hands since we arrived. Each of them asked for nothing in return. Just a smile, just a gift. I look around. People I never imagined meeting. Their homes are so far away from mine, yet here they are, right in front of me. We talk. We laugh. We are so genuinely, impossibly happy.

Then I realize that in certain rare and precious moments, the earth can still simply be a village. And the whole world, is right here, tucked inside this coconut before me.



BETWEEN RAFTS AND RESILIENCE: OYSTER FARMING TRADITIONS IN SANRIKU, JAPAN

By Miriam Lee

I was rinsing off the cold and fatigue in the guesthouse shower after a long day along the wind-swept Sanriku Coast, the water pirouetting to the syncopated rhythm of jazz streaming from my phone. Then, without warning, the soft cadence fractured — a blaring buzz cut through the melody, followed by a solemn AI female voice intoning, "Earthquake! Earthquake! Earthquake!" In that same breath, the bathroom cubicle shuddered violently. For about a minute, the world trembled, and in those shaking moments, a cascade of thoughts surged — fragility, survival, and the raw immediacy of nature's power. A magnitude 7.7 earthquake had struck deep in the Pacific off Aomori Prefecture, sending a tsunami warning of one meter to the very stretch of coast where I stood — a stark reminder that in Sanriku, the earth and sea never truly sleep.

I have always been fascinated by fishing villages and coastal communities. So when a professor friend in anthropology asked me if I wanted to tag along on a recce trip to Kesennuma, I jumped at the chance. On that last visit before the pandemic, he was working with a sociology professor from Japan, both tracing the fragile threads of post-disaster recovery — how fisheries were being rebuilt and how social networks were reknitting themselves after being torn apart. Standing on streets that hummed with quiet resilience, it was hard to reconcile this calm with the chaos that once engulfed the Sanriku coast. The 2011 Tōhoku Earthquake, the most powerful ever ▶

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP:

Daybreak at the fishing port of Kesennuma.
Keeping track of the aftershocks on my phone app.
Breaking news on earthquake and tsunami warning.
Regional warning on earthquake.
M7.7 earthquake near Sanriku Coast.

recorded in Japan and the fourth strongest in modern history, unleashed a fury that defied imagination. Tsunami waves, some towering nearly 40 meters, swept from Miyako to Sendai, erasing entire settlements and even designated evacuation points. Official figures released in 2021 tell a grim story: almost 20,000 lives lost, over 6,000 injured, and more than 2,500 still missing. Kesennuma, a tranquil fishing town, was transformed in an instant into a black, churning vortex. Anything from the sea level to 15 metres above vanished — homes, schools, shops, port facilities, fleets of fishing boats. Even oil tanks succumbed, igniting infernos that turned the town into a burning sea. Today, the scars remain faint but indelible, etched into seawalls, memorials, and the collective memory of a community that learned to live with the ocean's dual nature: giver of life, harbinger of destruction.

It was sobering to walk past empty lots, where faint impressions of vanished structures lingered like ghosts on the earth, silent testimonies to homes and lives swept away by water or consumed by fire. Those who stayed wrestled with the elusive idea of "normal," a dream that seemed to dissolve the moment they reached for it — time and things lost, suspended in memory. And then there were the absences that spoke louder than words: the silence of those who had left, carrying trauma too heavy to bear, leaving behind not just a town but a chapter of themselves.

The small hotel where I stayed had risen from the rubble, rebuilt after the earthquake, standing just steps away from the bustling fish market where trawlers and longliners dock to unload their shimmering cargo. Inside, the air was thick with the scent of salt and sea, as workers sorted the day's catch bound for markets across Japan or destined for local processing plants. Outside, stark markers etched on walls told a silent story: the height of the tsunami waves, a haunting reminder of what the remaining residents had endured.

Kesennuma today is still a major swordfish port, its season stretching from November through April, when these muscular swimmers ride the frigid currents offshore, hooked on long lines that snake through the deep. Closer to shore, the waters yield a kaleidoscope of marine life — saba mackerel, sea bream, monkfish, octopus, saltwater conger eel and many more. Yet what drew my attention was not only the bounty of the sea but the people behind it. Across Japan, traditional farming and fishing villages share a common struggle: ageing populations and the steady migration of youth to sprawling cities. Here, the challenge is compounded by the tsunami's devastation, which erased not only homes but the town's sole vocational high school — a lifeline for training in modern fisheries. Retaining young talent has become an uphill battle, and so, foreign workers now crew many of the boats. In Kesennuma, most are Vietnamese, braving the gruelling rhythm of long-line fishing — days and nights at sea, tethered to the promise of a catch and the weight of a tradition they did not inherit but now help sustain.

On another shimmering morning, we crossed the bridge to Oshima Island, where oyster rafts floated like quiet sentinels in the Oshimaseto Strait between the island and the Kawakuwa Peninsula. Komatsu-san had rebuilt this farm from the wreckage of the mega-earthquake, and now more than thirty rafts lay anchored in limpid waters framed by slopes thick with trees and bamboo. Here, nature dictates the rhythm of cultivation: gentle currents near the beaches cradle the baby oysters, while the stronger flows at the strait's bottlenecks toughen the mature shells, all nourished by plankton washed down from the verdant hills above.

I was struck by the persistence of tradition — rafts still fashioned from bamboo, arranged in neat grids like a Sudoku puzzle, each joint lashed with ropes bearing fifteen-meter lines. On every line hung fifteen recycled scallop shells, each shell hosting twenty to thirty juvenile oysters destined to reach market size in eighteen to twenty-four months. It was a living geometry of patience and precision. The scene invited comparison with Hong Kong's Deep Bay, where oyster farming has endured for over seven centuries, its oysters thriving in brackish waters that have sustained generations of fisherfolk. Both regions share a common vulnerability: in Hong Kong, typhoons batter the coast and threaten rafts; in Sanriku, earthquakes and tsunamis can erase entire communities overnight. Yet resilience persists, interlacing tradition with modernity — cranes now hoist heavy lines from the water, and tall, narrow ▶

CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT:

Old furniture of the hotel that survived the 2011 Tōhoku Earthquake. Ubiquitous markings of the height of the tsunami triggered by the 2011 Tōhoku Earthquake. A street tile depicting the sea's harvest. Deep-sea fishing vessels at Kesennuma fishing port. A bountiful haul of swordfish. Moonfish. Saltwater conger eel. Anglerfish. Ruins of the former Koyo High School, now a memorial museum; miraculously all students and staff managed to escape to higher ground when the tsunami struck, reaching the top floor of the 4-storey building.

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP:

Young fishermen sorting Saba Mackerel.
Bamboo oyster rafts in Oshimaseto Strait.
Pulling up a line of mature oysters by a motorised crane.
Komatsu-san explaining the growth of oysters.

tanks of steaming water cleanse shells of barnacles and other hitchhikers. Komatsu's small restaurant, perched by the farm, serves oysters fresh from the strait — a modest enterprise, but one that sustains a livelihood and safeguards a cultural lineage, proving that resilience is not only about rebuilding structures, but about preserving the soul of a place.

As I left Oshima, the sea lay deceptively calm, its surface glinting like polished steel under the winter sun. Yet beneath that serenity lingered the memory of tremors —multiple aftershocks that rippled through the region in the days following the quake, subtle reminders that the earth's restlessness is never far away. For those who farm these waters, resilience is not a choice but a way of life, forged in the tension between tradition and uncertainty. In Kesennuma and in Hong Kong's Deep Bay alike, oyster farmers live at the mercy of nature — typhoons on one shore, earthquakes on the other— yet they endure, tethered to rafts and roots, carrying forward a culture that clings to hope as steadfastly as oysters cling to their shells.

CERS IN THE FIELD

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP:

Street gang of Natuna.
HM with kids in Sedanau.
Natalie & Miriam diving inside fish net.
Regent of Natuna hosting CERS team.
Villagers of Selaut with CERS.
CERS staffer Yida, Dian & Natalie in Sedanau costume.
At home in Sedanau.

CERS IN THE FIELD

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP:

CERS & HKU at Batak village. Performing dental check. HKU cavers in Palawan. HM icefishing in Siberia. Hokkaido wildlife scouting. HKU group at Zhongdian Center. Dental check in Palawan. Fish caught at CERS site.

NEWS NEWS NEWS

CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT:

Her Majesty the Royal Grandmother of Bhutan with HM at Kesang Dechen Ling Lodge. CERS team at Natuna airport. Russian Geographical Society in Zhongdian Center. HKU Buddhist study group visit Tibetan nunnery. Dr Mihai of HKU leading dental research in Palawan.

■ HM officially moved into his new lodge Kesang Dechen Ling inside grounds of Namseyling Palace in Bhutan. Her Majesty the Royal Grandmother made a visit and joined HM for lunch. Her Majesty also offered a sumptuous lunch at her palace.

■ CERS launched a reconnaissance trip to small islands around Natuna of Indonesia and the South China Sea. Joining us on that trip is CERS Senior Advisor George Yeo, former Foreign Minister of Singapore.

■ CERS hosted at our Zhongdian Center two respective chairmen of the Russian Geographical Society, Sakhalin branch's Yuri and Yakutia's branch Alexander, both are MOU partners with CERS.

■ CERS Palawan team coordinated a dental research and community service project to the Batak jungle tribe and island communities for a group of HKU Faculty of Dentistry professors and final-year students, joined also by University of the Philippines Dental School.

■ CERS hosted professors and graduate students of HKU Centre of Buddhist Studies to our Zhongdian Centre in Shangri-La Yunnan including nearby project sites.

■ Melinda Gunton and her husband Mark visited CERS in HK. Melinda was one of our first volunteers as we relocated from the US to HK between 1993 and 1994.

■ Li Na, CERS project manager in Hainan is also in charge of artifacts collecting in China. She took a trip to Inner Mongolia bordering with Russia and procured the very last birch-bark tents of the Ewenki Yakut tribe. This rarest chum would grace our Zhongdian Center in Shangri-la Yunnan, together with other houses of minority nationalities.

■ Dian Riski Anugrah, a young man who has assisted CERS twice during our exploration of the Natuna Islands, has joined CERS as our new colleague in managing our upcoming projects on Indonesian islands in the South China Sea.

CERS IN THE MEDIA AND LECTURES

● Sally Wu, anchor for Phoenix TV channel, produced a half-hour interview program on How Man and CERS.

● Miriam Lee, CERS Executive Director, presented a paper on transformation of the Evenki people's traditional landscape architecture at the JCAU conference in Quanzhou, Fujian Province.

● HM gave a lecture to the Maryknoll Convent Secondary School during their Assembly.

● In Taiwan, HM presented a half-day lecture to a class of forty young and successful entrepreneurs attending the PARAGON IX at the Leadership Impact Academy in Taipei.

● A half-hour program was filmed for broadcast of the Conversational Leadership Impact Academy in Taiwan. Ocean Geographic, a leading dive magazine in Asia, published an extensive interview with HM regarding his multiple expeditions to the sources of the Yangtze, Mekong and Yellow River.

● Global View published a second opinion column piece by HM on his first roll of photos taken in China in 1974.

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP:

HM speaking at Maryknoll Convent School. River sources article in Ocean Geographic Magazine. Phoenix channel film crew at 1939 Exhibit House. Phoenix channel filming at HM's Cape D'Aguilar studio.

THANK YOU THANK YOU

■ Ester Goelkel continued her family's major annual donation to CERS, spanning two decades.

■ Fredrik Atting continued as CERS patron, as well as made additional support to our new education project in Sedanau Island of Indonesia.

■ Vic Lee continues his annual substantial support to CERS.

■ Francis Yuen & Rose Lee extended their major donation to CERS.

■ Billy Yung made his annual donation to CERS.

■ A number of CERS patrons renewed their annual support to CERS. They are Dr Joseph Chan, Vivien Chen, Lowell & Phyllis Chang, Adrian Fu, Andy & Susanna Hei, Wendy Kwok, Derrick & Pang Family, Thomas Pritzker, Serge Pun, Stephen Suen, Linda Wang, Gilbert Wong, Dora Wu, and Sonny Yau.

■ Adrian Fu supported CERS acquisition of the last birch bark tent of the Ewenki Yakut Tribe at its new home within our Zhongdian Center in Shangri-la, Yunnan.

Last birch bark tent of the Ewenki set up in Zhongdian Center.

CURRENT PATRONS

HONG KONG / OVERSEAS

- Fredrik Atting
- Dr Joseph Chan
- Lowell and Phyllis Chang
- Eric Chen
- Lydia Cheng
- Vivien Chou
- William Fung
- Adrian Fu
- Ester Goelkel
- Andy Hei and Susanna Lo
- The Hung Hing Ying & Leung Hau Ling Charitable Foundation
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- Wendy Kwok
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- Barry Lam
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- Stephen Suen
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- 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.