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Exploration Trip to Palawan

The Philippines — like India, North Korea and many other South Asian countries — to me, had indeed been an unknown place that I had never thought of visiting. Before traveling to the Philippines, all I heard about this nation was the Manila Hostage Crisis, its corruption, and how "backward" or "underdeveloped" it was. Neither did I know about the Batak — a minority group with a population of ~300 individuals — nor did I have an idea what to look for in this country, and that was exactly why I joined this 9-day exploration trip.

Interestingly, in spite of the variances in terms of the social infrastructure and the way of living, there are several parts I found captivating and, surprisingly, resonating with my imaginary 'ideal'.

Lifestyle – the Biological Clock / Living Conditions

The Bataks' way of living is undeniably very primitive but at the same time natural and refreshing. During our trip, we had a chance to camp in a Batak village overnight and had a taste of cooking in the wild, playing and washing at the river, sleeping and chatting under the dark clear sky of stars, waking up by cockcrow instead of an alarm clock's squeak, and travelling for a whole day on a primitive bamboo raft they made on spot. All of these might sound ineffective — spending much time but being barely productive — or even boring to an urbanite, but as a Chinese medicine student, I found this simplicity of life in line with the natural biological clock and with the healthy lifestyle as described in the ancient classic of 《黃帝內經》. It is exactly how people are expected to live in order to be long-lived — healthily and happily, and not in bed with assisting tubes.

In this week of following the sun to rise and rest and living with minimal materials, I feel very much refreshed and energized even after one week from the trip now. It was as if my brain had become more 'spacious' for new ideas and more 'empowered' in taking new initiatives. I guess that is how the saying 'early to bed and early to rise, makes a man healthy, wealthy and wise' comes to pass.



Figure 1-2. (Left & Middle). The Batak kids
Figure 3 (Right). Sunset at CERS Palawan Site

And having lived my whole life in a materialistic society, sometimes I feel that there are perhaps too many physical commodities and goods that might be helpful in certain ways but are often more space-occupying than necessary to my life. The Bataks' simple way of living reinforced my thought because, instead of excessively creating new or complicated tools from the natural resources, they are only making good use and full use of what is already existing in the natural environment. Hence, rather than needing rubbish bins everywhere like in Hong Kong, the majority of their waste is organic and can simply be discarded back to nature.

Cultural – Personality / Mentality

Apart from the organic, simple and sustainable lifestyle they lead, I am also impressed by their collectivist — or, quoted from the CERS short film, 'equalitarian' — mindset. In a capitalist society like ours, people often engage in intended or unintended social comparisons — they feel proud when they see themselves higher than the other, and are unwilling to be outdone. Our society puts more emphasis on personal ability but it is different among the Batak. Their 'equalitarian' mindset drives them to share and cooperate with one another willingly, no matter which ethnicity.

I remember our long rafting experience on the third day in Palawan, where we sat on the primitive bamboo rafts while the Bataks stood in front and in behind paddling for 9 hours. There were multiple times we got very close to tree branches along the coast, the Bataks, with no hesitation, reacted fast and came to protect us with the bamboo in hand and/or with their bare hands.

Later, as the weather eventually became rainy and windy, spooling up swirls and rapid turbulent currents along the Maoyan river, our raft was caught in the vortex of swirls thrice. We ducked down just in time to stay safe but our shield, our table and the first row of chairs crashed into some thick branches and were moderately disconfigured. We thought that the

damage was perhaps not that serious, and we did not really mind sitting directly on the bamboo for just the next few hours. However, when the others were preparing lunch in the rain, several other Bataks came over and very efficiently repaired the shield and the table, and replaced the broken chair with the second row, so that we could sit more comfortably under a shield, like how we started off.

In the afternoon, the weather and the river condition worsened and we encountered a point where more people were needed to keep the sailing safe. Without second thoughts, the Bataks responsible for the other rafts jumped into the water and swam to ours to help. One raft after another, they coordinated and cooperated meticulously and combated this difficult situation together. I was wondering, if we consider similar circumstances in, like, workplaces in Hong Kong, perhaps it is more likely for us to see some better-skilled people conquering the obstacle and just sitting and looking down at those in mess.



Figure 4. Bamboo rafting

The Bataks' harmony, I think, does not only hold among the ethnic group, but has also extended to their environment and the animals within.

In the kayaking tour along the Underground River, which is currently a UNESCO site, we had a chance to witness the wonder of stalactites dripping and forming new pillars and colonies of bats and other organisms resting in their dark yet natural niche. It is something perhaps no longer common to see in many tourist attractions in economy-driven societies. I remember visiting a cave in mainland China years ago, where their stalactites were artificially shaped to accommodate more people, the stones were highlighted by colored illuminations, and all lifeforms that could be possibly found on site were tourists and their guides. The loudspeakers were sounding like sirens everywhere and, without the need of headlights or torches, we could clearly see iron warning boards pinned on the walls of graffiti —

ineffectively telling people not to scribble or destroy the area. I found this very ironic because — in the name of tourists' convenience — these lights, boards and tour guides themselves were perhaps already a major source of pollution to the natural scenery.

On the contrary, the Philippino staff at the Underground River prepared for each and everyone of us a set of headphones with audio recording that introduced the landscape right into our ears. Crowd control measures were upheld, there were at most 2 torches per kayak and they only shone light in accordance to the audio, minimizing the disturbance to the cave and its inhabitants. Although the cave was dark and had no vibrant or eye-catching embellishments like in the one I visited, it is, to me, a more captivating and better demonstration of nature's beauty. After all, good food tastes good even without seasonings.



Figure 5. Underground River

In the October Indigenous Peoples Month Celebration, the Bataks — from kids to elderly — gathered together to dance and celebrate their cultural identity. There were men dancing with swords to imitate the bee's aggressive attack but neither the 'bee' nor the 'bee hunter' really hurt each other. The dance was taught to the next generations at their young age, and it symbolized the different creatures' individual character but their will to live harmoniously together. I think this is not solely an exercise that boosts physical health but is also a way of education that promotes acceptance and a respectful attitude towards the 'non-self' — human or not, living or not.



Figure 6. Traditional Batak Dance at the Indigenous Peoples Month Celebration

In view of the above, the Bataks' simple way of living, their gratitude towards nature, and their awareness in maintaining a peaceful and sustainable relationship with their natural reserve were something I wholeheartedly appreciated and enjoyed during the exploration trip.

Adventure

In addition to the local experience, we also had a taste of the hard work of explorers: Trekking through the Hundred Caves, snorkeling among starfishes and corals, making way across an unexpectedly rugged and rough mangrove heavily-populated by mosquitoes, crossing 11 rivers on a car...! None of these are easy, not to mention all the measurements and logistics a real explorer has to further conduct!



Figure 7 (Left). Spectacular view in the Underground River

Figure 8 (Middle). Me diving from the boat

Figure 9 (Right). Crossing river to arrive the Batak village

Conclusion

All in all, this exploration trip has given me an opportunity to experience the inspiring and refreshing side of a so-called ‘backward’ environment, reinforced my core values of harmony

(or 「和」 in traditional Chinese philosophy), and brought me to some unquestionably once-in-a-lifetime adventures that I could never forget! I learned to appreciate the hard work of explorers and I am thankful to CERS for the awesome arrangements of the exploration trip. I hope I could further strengthen my reinforced values by really practicing them, and I look forward to exploring and learning about more ethnic groups and their philosophy with the guidance of CERS in future.