



Chair Explorer's Message:

The establishment of the Centre for Exploration at the University of Hong Kong is not just an ovation after my fifty years of exploration since 1974, but also a recognition the contributions of my many colleagues, past and present, at CERS. It is also an applause to those who stood behind CERS and our work, steadfastly supporting us through difficult as well as better times. Fortunately, their support has been with us for the majority of our existence.

HKU, being an institution of higher learning, is taking the unprecedented step of establishing a Centre for Exploration in order to reignite and perpetuate the curiosity and "spirit of exploration" we are all endowed with as a child, and to further future research and education in collaboration with CERS through the activities and functions of this new Centre. We would rise up to this challenge flying forward, maintaining ourselves in the forefront of exploration while following up with research and education opportunities for others in using our past, present and future pioneering results.

These centre pages of supplement to the CERS newsletter will from now on focus on work and results associated with the WHM Centre for Exploration. Like other magazines and journals, the centre pages are of special significance, just as important as the front and back pages. Please enjoy the reading.

Wong How Man, Honorary Chair Explorer
WHM Centre for Exploration, University of Hong Kong



For two weeks between December 2023 to January 2024, 15 students from HKU visited and stayed at several CERS sites in Tibetan and Lisu regions of northwestern Yunnan. Besides providing individual post-trip reports and six short videos, they were asked to submit short impromptu impressions after the first five days - one-third of their time into the trip. I am gratified that the selections below are quite telling of the impact on these promising young students.

■ I don't like monkeys. Not even the "cute" mon chichi puppets that have driven the world crazy can change my mind, let alone the real ones that look like my ancestors. But there is just something that is so mesmerizing about those snub-nosed monkeys that can make me rethink my statement. And that is their juicy, plump "Kylie Jenner" lips....They were all I could think of when I was watching them through those binoculars this morning. So even though it sounds a bit delulu, I have decided to follow my heart and do a research project on these fleshy lips....I have a plethora of questions: why are their lips so different from all those monkeys and chimpanzees that have dried, crinkled lips like old men? Do they have some kind of sexual attraction for these monkeys? If they aren't involved with kissing,

then what is the purpose of these sexy lips? - *Cheung Wai Man*

■ On this trip, I saw livestock walking on roads in the city and people chopping wood for fire. The way they live in nature in a slow-paced life is a new fun thing for me to recognize. What is more, on the 2nd night there was an electricity short circuit while we were having a lesson. When I got out of the house, I saw stars, not the ones in Hong Kong, but a massive number just like in the movies. I realized that I have been used to technology for so long and have forgotten that the beauty of nature is waiting for me silently by my side. - *Mak Hoi Ting*

■ The Golden Monkeys, found in the Baima Snow Mountain Nature Reserve, have a funny appearance. Their lips are as thick as sausages, and they know no manners when eating – frantically snatching for usnea and stuffing it into their mouths. The whole class burst into laughter when we first saw the Golden Monkey featured at the beginning of the documentary....It is easy to despise and laugh at something when you are ignorant about it.... But as we saw the same funny-looking Golden Monkey in the end, everyone was overcome with emotions. No one foresaw that a monkey's society could resemble so much a human civilization, a system with respect and integrity. - *Wong Tsz Kiu*

■ The world is getting smaller but homogeneous. Lots of old traditions and cultures are shrinking day by day. I came here to explore disappearing stuff before they become completely extinct. The situation is worse than I thought; even Shangri-la has become a famous normal tourist destination rather than an isolated paradise as described in the novel. Some people may say that we cannot deprive local people of the chance to enjoy the convenience and safety of modern society. Some others may in turn argue that the original way of living is much happier, despite hardship and shorter life. Either way, the trend to modernization seems to be unstoppable and we must accept it. Sadly, the completeness of some cultures and traditions is already broken compared to the past. This may not be a good time for conventional "exploration" anymore. Perhaps what CERS is doing now is the best way to mitigate the upsetting transformation.

- *Sun Sheng Yao*

■ The journey to Shangri-la is bittersweet, each chapter bursting with its own color and character. When it comes to bitterness, Shangri-la is much colder than Hong Kong. Some students are unwell because of altitude sickness. Lack of enough hot water is also the biggest problem for me, because the temperature is always below 0°C....As for the sweetness, we enjoyed the stunning scenery and immersion with the ethnic cultures. Yesterday, due to a power outage, we could see the stars clearly....The most impressive memory was pilgrimage at Damo Meditation Cave. We spent around half a day on the road, and the network was unstable, even without connection. This is actually an Arcadia....What is most remarkable is the process of getting there; I saw the kindness of the Tibetans. The ground was slippery as a result of ice – many of us slipped. The Tibetan teacher, "Mr Cheese," went ahead and helped us clear the road by cutting through the ice with his own shoes. His move moved me. After that, I went ahead like him and helped my companions clear the icy way to prevent them from sliding off the cliff. I enjoyed not only the stunning scenery, but also learned how to love and care about others. - *Hu Shenhong*

■ It interests me why the Songzanlin Monastery is both a sacred place for pilgrims and a popular photo spot for tourists, where the same piece of wood is both a beautiful, valuable decoration in a collector's eyes and a holy, invaluable embodiment of the eternal spirit in a Buddhist's eyes, and why the same mountain is both the "Khawakarpo" that local Tibetans worship and the "Meili" that numerous mountaineers desire to conquer. What I aim to point out is the discrepancy between a religious form of life and a secular one. The life and meaning of a Buddhist statue essentially comes from the divine rather than the human. The divine-human interaction is bidirectional in the sense that the divine spirit becomes alive when one actually leads a religious way of life in such spirit after being transformed. What I learned from the local Tibetans, especially the Buddhists, in the past several days is that their form of life is, indeed, a manifestation of – rather than an effect caused by – the eternal spirit or the first principle of their life. - *Wang Hao Wendy*

■ We listened to CERS staff member Li Na's talk on how to collect traditional objects that may no longer be used by people. One view I agree with is that only objects that have been used have a soul.

These items represent local culture and are extremely precious and important evidence, showing people's lives....Environmental protection is an important issue at present. It is unrealistic for people to live like before. Without human intervention, it is inevitable that traditional culture and customs will gradually disappear and no longer be known. What CERS does is to preserve these traditional objects and record the traditional culture. Traditional lifestyles do not have to be maintained, but future generations need to remember their own culture. - *Zong Xuanke*

■ The Tibetan plateau may lack oxygen, but it does not lack faith. It is mistaken to think that given the austere natural environment, Tibetans are forced to renounce their secular lives and focus on "transcendent" matters like the afterlife and enlightenment, as I used to think. The lack of oxygen does not hinder Tibetans from genuinely expressing themselves and embracing their emotions, as noted in my conversation with local residents and lamas, who did not shy away from sharing their personal stories and feelings. Perhaps embracing your emotions is not antinomic to attaining spiritual enlightenment. This thinking might have been reflected by the way Tibetans portray their Buddhist deities. Unlike those in other parts of China, deities on the Tibetan plateau are much more human-like – sometimes even portrayed in sexual union! - *Au Man Lik*

■ In my past 5 days in Tibetan Yunnan and at CERS project sites, I found the spirit of an explorer is to stay curious and embrace persistency. The conversations with How Man and Ms. Li Na made me understand the importance of discovering one's passion and pursuing it. With passion, you are able to overcome challenges and setbacks, pushing the boundaries of our knowledge and capabilities. Explorers are not limited to physical expeditions; they can also explore ideas, cultures, and personal growth. Through my own exploration, I learned that being an explorer requires embracing uncertainty and being open to new experiences. It involves stepping outside of the previous comfort zone and embracing the unknown. It is a continuous journey, and each step unveils new insights and opportunities.

- *Zou Qing*

■ In Old Town, I chatted with a young local lady boss in her shop, and I noticed that the same melody had been playing repeatedly over and over in the shop. I asked what the song was, and she said that every Tibetan listens to it. They play it when they dance as a way of expressing emotions. Dancing can be done every day at any moment at the drop of a hat. On my way out of the square, I happened to see a group of people dancing spontaneously. I watched their light and active bodies, and my heart left with a chatty, simple, sincere and beautiful impression of the Tibetan people. - *Song Zhuolan*

■ The most impressive thing that I witnessed on the trip so far was how much the ethnic minorities loved their homeland and how they were so proud of their identity. I used to look at the world with a typical 'Hong Kong' person's mindset. For example, I thought people would leave their homes and try so hard to change their identity (for instance from Hong Kong to British) for better job opportunities and livelihood. However, after talking to several Tibetans (sometimes I used body language since some of them didn't speak Mandarin) I found that they were so respectful of their identity and never wanted to change it. One 31-year-old Tibetan man said he prefers living with nature and he thought that the most beautiful place was his homeland even after he went to big cities like Shanghai. For the elder generation, I noticed that they always wore traditional Tibetan clothes and were practicing their religion whenever they were free. - *Ashley So Tsz Yuet*

■ Over the last few days in Shangri-la, my experiences with Mr. Wong have been truly transformative. From our conversations and interactions, I have come to realize the profound importance of

following one's heart and chasing one's passion. Mr. Wong shared his own personal journey of pursuing his interests, emphasizing the joy and fulfillment that comes from aligning one's actions with one's passion. His inspiring stories about how he left National Geographic to pursue his passion have left an indelible mark on my understanding of personal fulfillment and purpose. I now understand that the pursuit of our passion is not only crucial for our own happiness but also for making a positive impact on the world around us. Maybe your high-paying job is indeed attractive, but it also makes me ask myself: Do I really want such a comfortable life? My answer became clear after I came to Shangri-la and learned about CERS. I hope to understand different cultures in the corners of the world like Mr. Wong. I also hope to try my best to protect the lost cultures and not let these unique cultures become all the same. The customs disappear! Mr. Wong has shown me that when we follow our hearts, we unlock our true potential, and our actions become infused with meaning and purpose. I want to follow Mr Wong and make my own exploration in life.

- Lam Wai Yi

■ I saw first-hand meanders of the river in U-shaped valleys that were once filled with glaciers along the upper Yangtze River. I can't tell you how many times I've drawn meanders on practice papers and the number of case studies I've read about the Yangtze, but I have never seen either. Seeing it was gratifying, it put more context into what

I was learning; I can see the water flowing through the meanders, eroding the sides of the river. The Yangtze is no longer a river of a case study where dams were built and caused flooding, but it is a river that made communities possible through its abundance of water used in irrigation and farming all the way from the plateau to villages downstream geographically, and people's way of life have been intertwined with it for generations....CERS Zhongdian Centre is filled with precious exhibitions and looks like a museum. Because with context, I saw that everything was so meticulously displayed and still has a life to it. My time with CERS this winter has been short but filled with nothing but learning every day. I take away with me an increased passion for geography as I search for my niche in whatever I do. - Chan Tin Ho

■ I kind of feel lost so far, but it's not about the trip, it's about myself....With my classmates I can see their insights and sentiment about the things and the place but it's hard for me to feel that way; it's almost like my heart or brain is wrapped up by a layer of plastic or whatever that blocks me from feeling such emotions. Am I just born that way? Perhaps it's just because the trip has just started, and I hope to encounter something that is not just 'interesting' or 'good to learn' for me but can awaken the enthusiasm at the bottom of my heart.

- Zhang Meizhao

HKU FOUNTAINSIDE DIALOGUE

The new Centre for Exploration at HKU started a quarterly "Fountain-side Dialogue" at the courtyard of the HKU Main Building, adjacent to our new offices. The Dialogues are open to faculty, students, and the public, usually starting at 6pm and lasting an hour with Q&A to follow.

In the first Dialogue, How Man quizzed Dr William Bleisch, a CERS veteran of 38-years, regarding the confrontation between nature conservation and culture conservation. Which is more important? And what are ways to arbitrate between the sometimes opposite agendas of different advocacy groups?



In the second Dialogue, How Man presented Chu Wen, a young KOL (key opinion leader) hailing from northern Xinjiang and a PhD candidate. At the age of 8, Chu started following her father, a wildlife biologist and conservationist on his work in the Altai Mountains. She is now into the fifth year of her very successful Wildlife Rescue Center there, starting with conservation of the endangered Asiatic Beaver, and now inclusive of all the wildlife left at her NGO's doorstep.

At a trial run of this activity, it was a challenge to adjust the microphone and speakers to be audible to the audience while not becoming a nuisance to other classroom activities in the vicinity. We may also have to accommodate occasional competing functions at the adjacent Loke Yew Hall. Our team however did manage to find the switch to turn off the fountain during our dialogue, as otherwise it would have obstructed our audio.



OTHER NEWS

ANNOUNCEMENTS

- The University of Hong Kong has appointed Associate Vice-president Prof. Derek Collins as the Founding Director of the Wong How Man Centre for Exploration. Prof. Collins will bring to this new role great energy and enthusiasm backed by years of travel, including several scouting trips to CERS major centres and project sites in Hong Kong SAR, Mainland China, Myanmar and the Philippines.
- HKU has also appointed Dr Hayson Liu, who formerly had a 16-year stint with the university, as the new Centre's Deputy Director. Dr Liu has led several HKU student trips to CERS sites, CERS Shek O Exhibit House, as well as led over a dozen HKU/CERS film nights on campus.
- CERS has hired its third full-time filmmaker, Yida Lyu is a recent graduate of HKU with a masters in Journalism. In her new position, she would serve in documenting many of the activities of this new Centre as well as other exploration expeditions which from now on would carry both the banner of CERS and the HKU WHMCfE.
- The new HKU WHMCfE with CERS has jointly hired Lor Shan, a recent graduate of the university in Bachelor of Science to be involved in future administration, field trips and other educational activities.



HKU WHMCfE flag on expedition to Siberia

The new flag of the Wong How Man Centre has been carried to far-flung corners with our latest expeditions. To date it has been seen in Siberia and the Russian Far East, at the banks of the Amur River, the island of Sakhalin, and the seaport of Vladivostok, as the CERS team visited these places and had exchanges with various chapters of the Russian Geographical Society (founded in 1845).

First map wall & ethnographic display at new Centre

The new WHM Centre for Exploration installed a large topographic map of Asia to facilitate discussions with students in its office at Rm119 University Main Building. In its second office, Rm118, select ethnographic objects that CERS collected in the past were put on display to highlight cultural diversity.



People in the News

- Media support of the opening of the Wong How Man Centre
- Meetings with faculty from various HKU schools & departments and from the University of Glasgow
- Visit by Ashi Kesang Wangchuck, Princess of Bhutan, and her daughter Princess Tashi
- Visit by CERS China colleagues Zheng Fan, Li Na, and Zhou Chen

