

5/23/16
6PM

Hello,

I'm back in China! It feels as if I never left. Yet I did leave, and I lived my normal life in Colorado all spring semester, for nearly five months, actually. And throughout the Spring semester, as I studied for my classes and helped organize awesome events with CSU Field Ornithologists, I searched for support to help me return to China this summer. I thought about returning to China nearly every day, constantly preparing for it in small ways. I was very content to be home in Colorado—studying abroad last fall semester truly made me appreciate my own home—yet I accepted that when summer break arrived I would be gone again.

I will return to Man'e Village in Xishuangbanna Prefecture as a volunteer for a restoration experiment called Green Rubber and also as an intern at the Xishuangbanna Tropical Botanical Gardens (XTBG). I was initially directed to Man'e by Dr. Rhett Harrison, a tropical ecologist at the World Agroforestry Center (ICRAF) who conceived of Green Rubber. This project aims to clarify whether understory intercropping can restore soil health and biodiversity to rubber plantations. Currently, the sterile monoculture rubber plantations which have replaced most of the lowland rainforests in Xishuangbanna do not provide some important ecosystem services and don't have much value to wildlife. Perhaps, by planting other crops of economic value under rubber trees, these agricultural lands could even serve as wildlife habitat to some degree. Dr. Harrison and his colleagues at the World Agroforestry Center gathered a small group of interested rubber farmers in Man'e to take part in an experiment testing different levels of intercropping complexity for economic viability as well as impact on ecosystem services and wildlife.

Last fall I lived in Man'e for four weeks with the kind and generous family of Dr. Yi Zhuangfang, a researcher at ICRAF who currently resides in Washington D.C.. During this time, I became very interested in Green Rubber, and now I have returned, in part, to volunteer as an avian field technician conducting bird surveys for Green Rubber. This season will yield preliminary data about the state of birds in rubber plantations, so that we can make comparisons between the experimental treatments in later years.

Last fall, I spent a few days at XTBG upon arriving in Menglun to gather my bearings before moving in with my host family in Man'e. There, I met Dr. Alice Hughes, a bat ecologist, and was fortunate enough to follow along for an evening of bat catching—she and some students were doing a study on ectoparasites. Alice became a mentor and second advisor for me during my time in Xishuangbanna, and I also plan to help with bat banding and biodiversity research projects in her lab this summer.

I have returned to China to better understand the language and culture. I must take full advantage of my limited time in China to improve upon my Mandarin. Man'e is an ethnically Dai village, with a rich culture unique from other groups in China. I will spend my summer living again with Yi Zhuangfang's family and learning the fascinating Dai culture.

A final objective to occupy my time this summer involves a personal interest in community-based wildlife management. My unique opportunity to become connected within the village will help me better understand the potential for a community-based solution for overharvesting wildlife. I became interested in unsustainable wildlife hunting during my time here last fall when I saw how few animals are left in the nearby nature reserve. Even though hunting in this reserve is illegal, the people still hunt regularly for sport, driving down wildlife populations and leading to many local extirpations. Yet I developed friendships with some of these hunters. I realized that each person continued in what he/she knew was an unsustainable activity because would continue even if one person stopped. Might the villagers devise some way of working together in a community-wide effort to reduce hunting pressures? I will try to find out this summer.

For the last two days I have lived in a hostel in Kunming, the capital of Yunnan Province. I am using my time to meet with friends in Kunming, to recover from a tough semester, and organize my mind in preparation for my busy summer down south. It has rained constantly since I arrived, but I still have walked many kilometers around the city, visiting a great deal of the locations we I first saw during my semester here last fall. Green Lake Park still boasts lush verdure and relaxing emerald pools covered with lilies. In my first few hours in Kunming, I stopped to watch a huge group of colorfully-clad people usurp the sidewalk as they performed Tibetan dances to lively music. Along my route to school last fall, I found the same lady selling pineapples and melons on her little cart and the same man sitting beside his tools, waiting for a customer with a moped in need of repair. I was surprised that I could return to a city of several million people and find the same faces on the street! Some things have changed since I was last in Kunming in January. I returned to “Foreigners Street” to find many shops closed and many new ones opened. Yet the little dumpling restaurant at which I ate so frequently before school last Fall, and whose owners I interviewed for a project—that restaurant was still there. I entered to order a steaming bowl of rice noodles, and the owner took a moment or two to stare at me before grinning broadly and stating, “You came back.”

I leave for the south on Wednesday. I will send out periodic email updates like this, and you can always respond if you want!

Cheers,

-Francis