

Dear all,

I hope all is well wherever you are these days. I'm here in Man'e still. I'll jump right into what's been happening these past two weeks. Following my last email update, the village leader and I finally arranged a meeting with the participants of Green Rubber to discuss the experimental contract. The new version of the contract was the result of two prior meetings with the farmers, and I expected no problems. From my perspective, the villagers had every reason to want to sign this contract. It gives them 500 RMB per plot per year for simply allowing us to plant economic crops from which they can derive significant benefits in the future. But immediately they were asking for 1000RMB/plot/year instead! It became clear to me that participation in this project has no basis in conservation values. These farmers have not bought into the concept of improving soil health, climate, and biodiversity on their land—the only thing that motivates them is money.

Another major challenge in China is that the government legally owns farmers' land. At any time, a private investor could show up and pay the government to develop farmer's land. The farmers would have no say in the matter, but they would at least receive monetary reimbursement for the crops they lose. Would the reimbursement money from the experimental crops belong to the farmers? A simple phone call couldn't answer this question at the time, and thus the contract remained unaccepted.

This meeting followed a string of frustrating events, which I need not describe in detail. After 43 days in the village, I desperately needed to leave. I spent a day constructing a spacious home for the owl out of wire mesh, so the bird could move about freely even if it was never let out of its enclosure. My host grandfather agreed to feed the owl while I was gone. A cloud lifted and I floated away to Laos.

The next evening, I found myself in Luang Namtha with a new Australian friend booking a two-day trek into Namha nature reserve. Laos is a different world than China. The mountains are greener, there is less trash on the ground, and houses are spaced apart like in American suburbs. Most buildings are only one story high. Laos is visibly poorer than China, although I did see plenty of houses that looked well-off. Our first day of trekking led us through the nature reserve to a valley home to three villages of remote upland rice farmers. These people, as well as our guide, were of the Khmu ethnicity, and their language was full of trilling "R" sounds like in Spanish—completely different than Lao. The three villages in this valley had, up until three months ago, never had road access, and currently the road is so poor that it is virtually useless. On the trails, we passed groups of bent, red-eyed villagers making the long journey on foot to the market in Luang Namtha, wearing plastic flip flops or nothing at all on their feet. I thought hiking in these mountains was fun and relaxing because I don't have to go hiking unless I want to. For these people, trekking was a regular and grueling chore.

This was the first time I ever saw swidden agriculture. The forest (probably including a fair amount of the nature reserve) was carved into large patches of vegetation at various stages of succession. Villagers planted rice in flooded terraces in the valley bottoms and then transported it upslope, where they planted it again by hand on land where the forest had recently been cleared and burned. The crops were not in neat rows, and plenty of corn and vegetables and herbs were dispersed seemingly randomly amongst the rice plants. Despite the deforestation, there was an

appreciable diversity within these swiddens. Furthermore, after a few years the forest was allowed to regenerate. We passed through large tracts of previous swiddens that hadn't been cleared for 20 or 30 years. A miniature forest was already coming back. I think slash and burn agriculture is a really beautiful way for humans to meld into the local environment, creating a very heterogeneous and diverse landscape. The problem is simply that population densities are now too high for this practice to be sustainable. It takes too much land.

Back in China, a day in Mengla's "Skytree" nature park proved euphoric. I spent seven hours within this little patch of the Xishuangbanna Nature Reserve developed for tourism. Here I enjoyed a cable walkway through the forest canopy where I was able to spot Velvet-fronted Nuthatches high in the top of an enormous emergent tree. The day also yielded a lifer Bar-winged Flycatcher Shrike feeding a fledgling Banded Bay Cuckoo at least twice its size, as well as a wonderful flock of leaf birds, drongos, and my first ever Great Barbet!

A single day back in the village ended with me on a bus once again, headed for Kunming, where I spent three days meeting with friends and teachers. I visited the dumpling restaurant I wrote about last fall to find a different sign had replaced the old one. Prepared to accept the quick turnover of businesses in Kunming and the possibility my friends had gone out of business, I approached the restaurant and peeked inside. To my relief, I was greeted by the same hardworking couple I have gotten to know over my last several visits to Kunming. They had decided to renovate their business to attract more customers, and thus they adopted a local Yunnan favorite, Dali Ersi (饵丝, a sticky rice noodle)!

And so now I am back in Man'e. I am working hard on a study of the illegal bird and bat catching in the reserve. I think the best way to stop this unsustainable and unregulated harvest of the forest's birds and bats is an outreach/educational program by the reserve patrol office and the ecologists at XTBG. We need to change people's attitudes towards conservation rather than hoping law enforcement and strict punishments will always act as a deterrent (stricter punishments are supposedly scaring villagers now, but fines and jail time have not worked to prevent them from catching birds and bats for the past several years). A successful educational program must be based on an understanding of hunters' behaviors, motivations, and current conservation attitudes. This is the information I am trying to gather in Man'e.

Recently, every day has been exhausting. Every hour I must force myself to complete difficult tasks—swallowing the awkwardness of breakfast noodle restaurant interviewing, tracking down hunters for more in depth interviews, slaughtering adorable rats for my owl—much of what I must do is quite uncomfortable. My only alone time is when I'm entering data. I spent two and a half hours politely waiting in a hunter's home for the man to finish processing bamboo, fish, etc. so I could interview him. The family was very welcoming, inviting me to sit with the grandfather, who had been drinking rice liquor for nearly nine hours. The interview never became a priority, and the hunter (suffering from a hangover) suddenly went to bed, leaving me without any data. The next two mornings featured morning interviews with bat and bird catchers who left abruptly halfway through the interview. To stay in accordance with good ethics, the interviews are completely voluntary and they end as soon as the interviewee no longer wants to participate. I hope they will trust me that I'm not telling the police or the reserve patrol officers. Many villagers are very trusting when talking to me, usually those with whom I have spent

considerable time chatting, playing, eating, etc. But I can't possibly win this level of trust with all of the people in the village engaged in these activities, and therefore a good proportion of them will not be willing to provide information for my project.

Still, life is endlessly interesting here. I have learned new life skills, particularly washing my clothes by hand. I have been washing all my clothes by hand for a month now, and now I know that in the United States I never fully appreciated washing machines!

Man'e does truly feel like home. I am treated to wonderfully delicious food every day, and even at the breakfast noodle restaurants where I do my interviews, people greet me with a smile—including many people I have already interviewed. Recently I witnessed another version of "Closed Door Festival" (关门节), which I thought I had already seen last December. This time the whole village packed into the big temple and prayed from 5AM to 6:30AM, offering tables full of fruits and sticky rice as offerings to the monks and to the Buddha. I play volleyball with the old men whenever I can, and I have, as a result, developed a more hand eye coordination.

And lastly, the owl is making lots of progress when it comes to flight. I think it could fly away if I let it out of its house for a long time at night. It is more inquisitive than before and I witnessed it catch an insect visually at night (a large katydid I placed near it). After a week of caring for it, my host grandfather has become a good ally in raising the little bird. He fed it lots and lots of fish from his fish pond. But Scops Owls are insectivorous, and, after a discussion with a local expert on caring for wild raptors, I learned that I really should only feed it insects, lizards, and rat meat. The difficulty of producing these foods in sufficient quantity has kept me up late at night and caused more worry than it should. Sometimes I feel like Tiny Owl doesn't appreciate all my hard work for it. I gave it a waterproof roof on half its house, and it still stands out in the rain and lets itself get soaked. I often move it out of the rain even though I should let it learn for itself. I love the little bird so much that I don't mind the hassle of raising it for a while. Perhaps only one more week and it will have grown big enough to leave me forever.

Well, that's nearly three pages. As always, let me know how things are with you 😊

Cheers,

-Francis



A community cleaning day! The entire village joined together to clean the streets, collect trash, trim the trees, etc., in preparation for a big feast with the new communist party officials in the township government. Elections were held in June, and the new officials just took office.



Working hard for the little owl. It likes bugs.



This is the fruit of *Baccaurea ramiflora* (三桠果).
This is one of the intended crops to be
intercropped in Green Rubber



The pig slaughtered for the communist party feast.



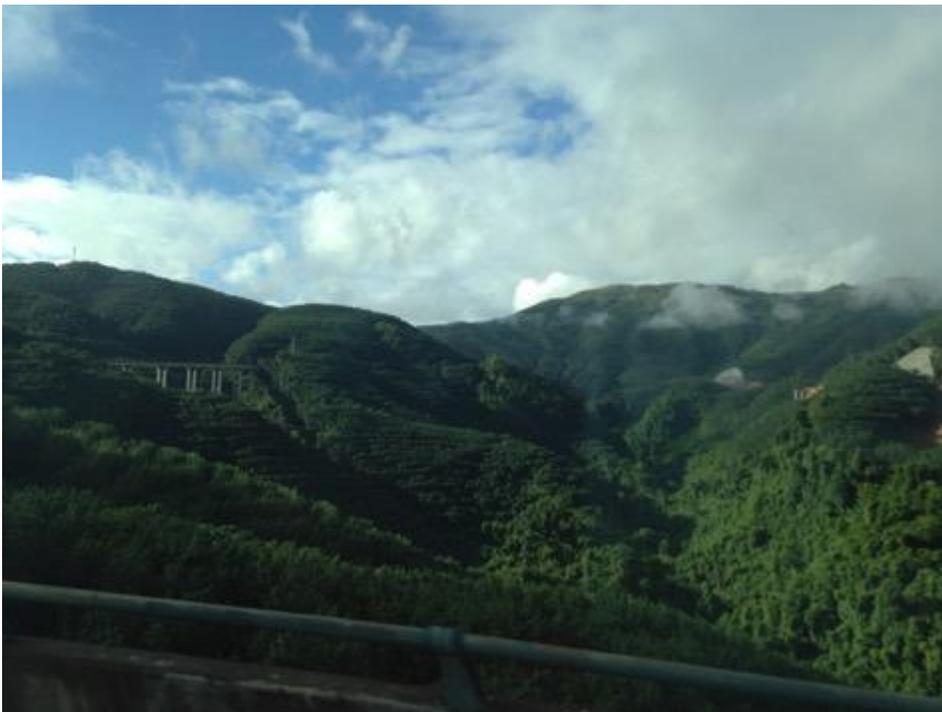
My little friend.



They still print Dai language newspapers that are distributed each week.



Waiting for everyone to show up to discuss the Green Rubber experimental contract.



This is twenty-first century Xishuangbanna. Almost every tree you see in the photo is a cloned rubber tree. The mountains are covered in monoculture plantations



This is the end of China.



Am I rich? Well, it's 2000 kip to take a pee in Laos.



First meal in Laos



Downtown Luang Namtha. The commercial district of this provincial capital ends right there at the green trees at the end of the road. Kind of a small place.



Rice paddies in the valley here. The slope to the right is an old swidden that has been recovering for maybe 8 or 9 years.



What'up? I'm a massive mushroom eating snail!



After a long day in the fields, a Khmu villager hoists his musket for a few hours of hunting before nightfall. These people rely primarily on wild meat for their protein. This activity is most likely not sustainable, with so many hungry villagers and so little forest to provide meat. The big animals are very scarce apparently. The situation is different than in Man'e, however, where farmers are comparatively wealthier and (mostly) do not need to rely on wild meat for protein.



We slept the night in a hut in a rice field.



We ate from communal dishes into which everyone reached their bare hands. Delicious food, but forget about food safety or sanitation.



The new road that is pretty much useless at present.



One of the villages I visited during my morning of birding.





Eco-tourism (including the trek I was on) is providing the villages with a little supplementary income and hopefully encouraging protection of the nature reserve.



This patch of regenerating forest was a swidden rice field 30 years ago.



After so much time in China, where there are people everywhere you look, seeing a landscape with so few people felt like a wonderful breath of fresh air. I really enjoyed my time in Laos.



Our Khmu guide on the left and Ian, my Australian friend, on the right.



Bird heaven in Skytree Park just outside of Mengla





This is Kunming. It is the biggest city I have ever been in. It is my base in Yunnan away from Man'e. I have spent a lot of time here over the past twelve months.



The Anhui immigrants revamped their business, now complete with pictures of Dali and ethnically Bai people dressed in traditional clothing! Well, they may not be from Dali, but their Ersi tasted pretty good 😊



Traffic congestion is a growing problem in the city. Kunming is experimenting with something new: traffic cops to explain to cars and mopeds how traffic lights work.



Ammomum villosa is a ginger with medicinal Properties. The villagers have cleared extensive sections of the understory in the nature reserve to farm this crop IN THE RESERVE. They collected 506kg of berries in three days, making 12650 RMB total.



Early morning prayer for the Closed Door Festival.



Tiny Owl is savoring the taste of whatever I just fed it.



The most intelligent three-year-old in the village is taking a critical look at my questionnaire.



My friend snapped this photo in Laos. The majority of bush meat the Chinese Dai people eat during their Dai New Year (in April) is actually imported in from Laos.



This fruit is roasted like a sweet potato, and it tastes and feels just like the custard you find inside pineapple buns at Dim Sum restaurants. Not kidding. The most delicious fruit EVER!!