

MONKEY MADNESS
ASIA'S LAST PRIMATE-EATING
HIMALAYAN TRIBE

HOLY HERMIT HEALERS
THAILAND'S HARRY POTTERS
HAVE REAL MAGIC WANDS

CORPSES & FIRE WARS
INDONESIA'S ISLANDS HIDE
UNUSUAL WAYS OF LIFE

ASIAN Geographic™

NO. 130 ISSUE 2/2018

Traditional Practices

THE WEIRD AND THE WONDERFUL

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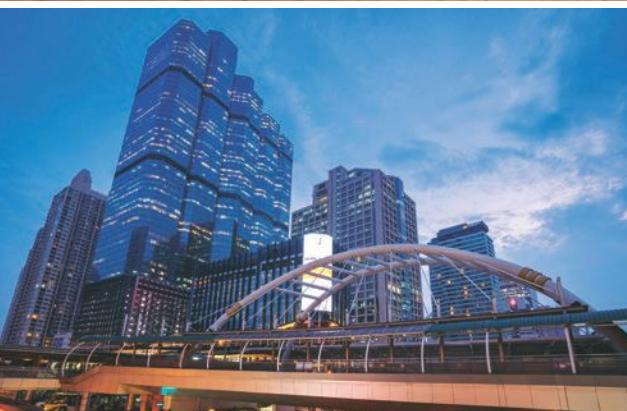
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α7R III

THE STRAITS TIMES
DIGITAL
EDITORS' CHOICE



Rave Reviews (Sponsored Article)

How I photographed ASIAN Geographic's Culture story: "Vanishing Act"

ASIAN Geographic contributor Pongkiat Rungrojkarnka – affectionately known as Pocky – shares his delight in the thoughtful improvements that make night shoots 100 percent better with Sony's α7RIII technology

Text and Photos Pongkiat Rungrojkarnka

I enjoy photographing the city at night. With Sony's newest full-frame high-resolution mirrorless camera, the α7R III, I can capture moments with better dynamic range and greater responsiveness.

The α7R III has few changes to its overall design, but the real difference is in Sony's attention to detail. With a bigger rear navigation wheel, added joystick, and the ergonomic positioning of its buttons, the α7R III is an overwhelmingly pleasant camera to use. At its heart, is the 42.4MP4 full-frame Exmor R™ CMOS sensor provides a high dynamic range, leading to better details from shadows and highlights in post processing. With an electronic viewfinder, LCD panel, ISO 32,000 and an upgraded autofocus, I'm able to shoot in challenging, low-light conditions with the camera operating the same speed and accuracy as in broad daylight.

Though operating on the same batteries as the α9, I can easily take 600 to 650 photographs per charge, greatly lightening my load. The additional SD card slot allows continuous shooting, without worrying about busting existing memory space – and believe me, every photographer knows the frustration of being unable to capture the perfect moment without having to first delete a few hundred pictures, especially now that the camera boasts double the burst rate and faster recording speed! This is one function you'll definitely be thankful for.

This impressive list of upgrades in specifications and usability will surely please discerning photographers looking for a high resolution camera with high speed functionality – and makes the α7R III, in my eyes, one of the most impressive cameras in Sony's α Series lineup.



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-Bohey Dulang, Sabah, Malaysia-





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Image: Pahiyas Festival, Lucban, Quezon
Photo Credit: Tourism Promotions Board Philippines

A BOUNTIFUL HARVEST



As the month of May ushers in abundance and prosperity of nature's gifts, different regions in the Philippines delight in dazzling spectacles of magnanimous proportions. Flamboyant parades, religious rituals, and gratifying performances illuminate towns and cities, and locals open their doors to the world in celebration of the good fortune of the harvest season.

In Lucban, Quezon, homes are adorned with colorful rice wafers known as *kiping* to welcome the annual Pahiyas Festival. The occasion, which has taken the historic town to new heights as a cultural heritage site, begins every 15th of May and continues in the next few days with a series of activities including a horse racing event, a grand parade featuring performers, floats, and marching bands, and a procession that honors San Isidro de Labrador, the patron saint of farmers.

In the Visayas Region, the island of Guimaras comes alive with the Manggahan Festival, also a celebration of thanksgiving for the abundant yield of its world-famous produce: sweet and succulent mangoes.

The event held throughout the month of May is a showcase of colorful parades, cultural shows, sporting competitions, and concerts. The highlight is the extraordinary, mango "eat-all-you-can" contest that promises a remarkable experience for locals and visitors alike.

The main attraction nationwide is the Santacruzan or Flores de Mayo, a religious parade that started in the mid-1800s to commemorate the discovery of the "Holy Cross" of Jesus Christ by Queen Helena of Constantinople and her son, Constantine the Great.

The occasion, which also honors the Mother of Christ for blessing the country with a rich harvest, is marked with floral offerings, gastronomic gatherings, and attractive pageantries featuring the town's lasses garbed in dashing gowns.

Journeying around the Philippines in the month of May unleashes epic tales of thrilling adventures. And stories are made even better by festivals, which once relished will never be forgotten.

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Born of an ancient custom to protect underage girls, women wed as early as five and typically take three husbands

BY ELENA DEL ESTAL



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Chhatrapati Shivaji Terminus,
Maharashtra, 19th Century AD

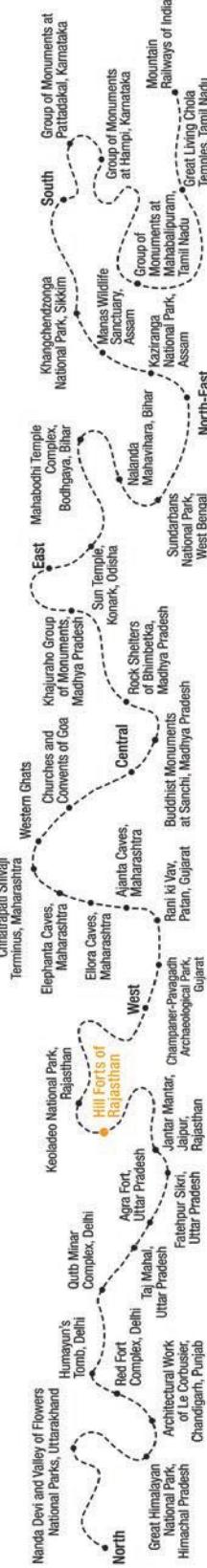


Hampi, Karnataka,
14th Century AD



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PHOTO © CLAUDIO SIEBER

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Thailand's version of Harry Potter – forest wizards with magic wands – are making a comeback after years of living in the shadows

BY FRANCIS WILMER

MA'NENE & PERANG API

66 Death and Rebirth on the Emerald of the Equator

Two words: *skeletons* and *fire*. From the Indonesian islands of Bali and Sulawesi come ancient practices both queer and extreme

BY CLAUDIO SIEBER, LESTER V. LEDESMA

RAUTE

80 Kings of the Dwindling Forest

One last mountain tribe still hunts monkeys for its meals – a menu choice that's slipping through their grasp

BY RAM PAUDEL



ON THE COVER

A man from Barsana, India, has the word "Radha" drawn on his face during Holi. Under Shaktism – a division of Hinduism – believers worship the Hindu goddess Shakti and her avatars, including Radha

This photo won Portrait Photograph of the Year at the ASIAN Geographic Images of Asia competition 2017.

PHOTO © DONELL GUMIRAN



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{ EDITOR'S NOTE }



PHOTO © TANYA SHARAPOVA

**"Tradition is not the worship of ashes,
but the preservation of fire"**

Gustav Mahler, composer and conductor

• • •

I am Teochew, and every year since my father was a teenager, grandma would go to the wet market before the Dragon Boat Festival and jostle with other grandmas to buy salted eggs, chestnuts, bamboo leaves and red beans. Then she'd lug her haul back into our tiny kitchen and spend the following days wrapping and steaming the world's meatiest, most substantial sticky rice dumplings, each the size of a fat grapefruit. Wars were had between siblings, neighbours and in-laws over these pyramids of deliciousness.

I was 13 when grandma died, and her recipes with her. None of us had learnt them; We always assumed she'd be there, doling out dumplings every June, the same way you never expect a car accident to claim your cat on a muggy Tuesday after breakfast. In the minds of her daughters, there was always next year to request a demonstration and record the secret method. Such complacency makes time seem kinder than she really is.

What is tradition? A people's loving protection and willing maintenance of ancient observances? With these efforts, rituals like fire wars (p74) can survive the generations. Even the slightest renewal of interest in a past custom might revive a fading subculture from the brink (p58). But this era's theme seems largely defined by the underdog tribe's failure to resist bartering unique heritage for a share in progress – meaning ways of life, like monkey hunting (p80) and corpse care (p66), are pretty much doomed. Faced with social exclusion and poverty, it is hard not to sympathise with these peoples.

Losing a dumpling recipe is hardly equal to losing a culture. But it suffers from the same sense of bereavement. Traditional practices are a connection to eras past, and enrich our world with their wonderful diversity. Each one we lose, we forfeit to cold history – the same way that since her death, I can only ever taste grandma's dumplings in my mind.

Rachel Genevieve Chia
RACHEL GENEVIEVE CHIA

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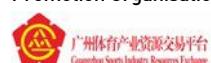


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PICTURESQUE

THE SIMPLE LIFE

Old as the Hills

Nestled in the wilderness, southwest China's largest minority tribe lives a world away from civilisation







PICTURESQUE





Photos Claudia Xiaoli Lee

Stepping into Sichuan's Daliang Mountains is like stepping back in time.

Here, women care for the home, which is shared with livestock. Toilets might be next to animal pens. Clothes aren't always spotless. On a scroll, in an old syllabic script, is recorded the tribe's precious history, safeguarded by the village chief.

Its people may be poor, but the irony is rich: The same mountains that ensconce the Yi people and keep their traditions safe from fast-developing modern China have also ensured their exclusion from sanitation and healthcare initiatives – and prevented them from selling produce to the cities.

Exempt from the country's onetime one-child policy, many Yi have big families, but cannot afford to send more than a couple of children – often boys – to school. As with every other hill tribe, there's been a gradual exodus: Young men are heading to the cities in search of a better life, leaving behind women, children, and the elderly.









PICTURESQUE





**01**

A village classroom. Few Yi send their children to school, and those that can afford it often prioritise the education of boys

02

A man performs on a traditional Yi musical instrument

03

In cramped homes, livestock often share living space with the family

04

Following traditional customs, women carry out most of the chores, while men fritter the hours away

05

A woman wraps herself and a child in her coat to keep them warm

06

A roadside dentist tackles a Yi woman's tooth problem

07

Inside the typical Yi home, beds are made from planks and situated beside the kitchen

08

Children seldom bathe, and hygiene standards in the village are low

09

With no money to attend school, three brothers play and roam around the village in the daytime

10

A Yi woman, clothed in traditional garb, poses for a photograph



10

CLAUDIA XIAOLI LEE is a fellow in Applied Photography (FRPS) of the Royal Photographic Society of Great Britain. The Taiwanese photographer seeks to capture life's ephemeral moments – the emotional, the intimate, and the unusual – and travels at least four times a year to shoot internationally. Her works have won awards such as Artiste Distinction from the International Federation of Photographic Art, the Silver Level Portfolio Distinction from the Photographic Society of America, and the Best Author Award in the Greek Photographic Circuit. She has been featured in *The Photographic Journal*, the official publication of the Royal Photographic Society.



OLDEN ANTIDOTES

Doctor's Orders

Medical practitioners across the ancient world often came up with novel remedies to heal people's ailments – resulting in a mix of effective prescriptions and crackpot cures

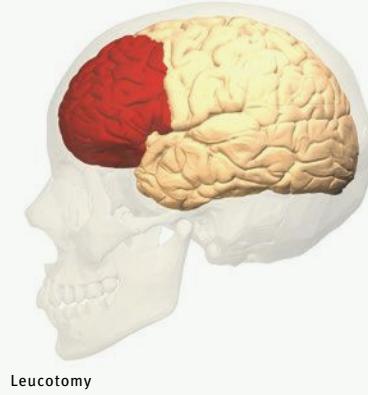
Text Lim Jun Xi



Apothecary Medicines



Bloodletting



Leucotomy



Hirudotherapy

Apothecary Medicines

5TH CENTURY BCE

Apothecaries in medieval Europe often concocted strange medicines using odd ingredients to heal various ailments. A skin infection treatment might consist of fermented crushed onions, garlic, bull's gall, and wine, while complaints of a bloated stomach might be met with a mixture of wine, cumin, and anise. Surprisingly, some of these creations actually worked – thanks to the antibiotic or disinfecting properties of their ingredients.

Bloodletting

5TH CENTURY BCE

The ancient Greeks believed that sickness was caused by excess blood in the body. As a cure, doctors would cut different parts of the body and drain out a specific volume of blood to tackle different illnesses. The technique was used throughout the Western world until around 1890, and even today, bloodletting is still used to improve conditions like hemochromatosis by getting rid of the excess iron in the blood.

Hirudotherapy

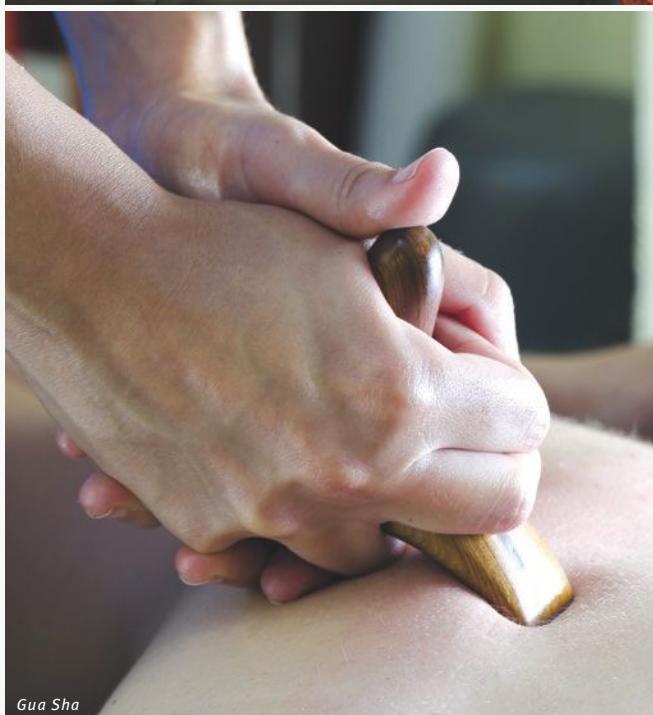
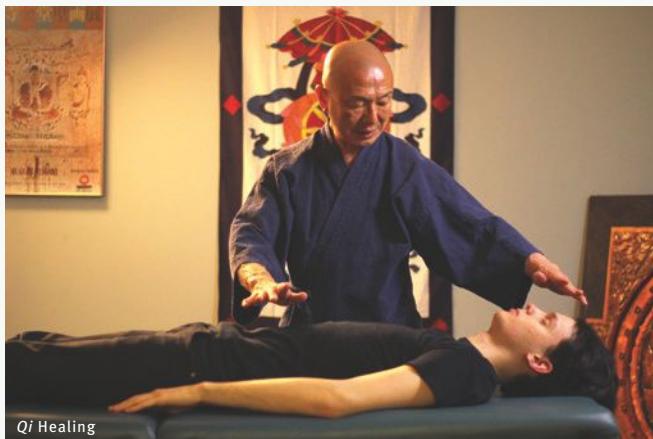
16TH CENTURY BCE

The ancient Egyptians were thought to have pioneered the use of non-poisonous leeches in medicine, but the practice was widespread across Ancient Greece and Ancient Rome to cure anything from headaches to grievous wounds. Physicians collected the leeches during the rainy season, when they were abundant, kept them in jars of fresh water, and fed them powdered dried fish or frogs.

Leucotomy

20TH CENTURY

This cure for mental disorders was invented by a Portuguese neurologist, António Egas Moniz, in 1935, and became wildly popular in Europe and America during the 1940s. Also known as lobotomy, it involved removing the front portion of a patient's brain, and apparently improved their condition! In reality, the procedure often resulted in serious impairments or death, and thankfully, it was abandoned by the 1970s.



Gua Sha

3RD CENTURY BCE

This traditional Chinese therapy was believed to cleanse the body of trapped waste and bring fresh blood flow to sore and stiff muscles. Practitioners of the massage technique press and rub a smooth bone, coin, or stone across a patient's oiled body in long strokes. Still popular today in many Asian countries, the treatment causes the body to erupt in bruises from the breaking of numerous capillaries.

Mercury Elixirs

5TH CENTURY BCE

In their pursuit of immortality, some Chinese emperors had their imperial alchemists attempt to concoct the elixir of life. Many of these mixtures contained mercury and arsenic, toxic chemicals that claimed the lives of these rulers. Ancient Hindu scriptures also mention the use of *rasasindura* (a mercury compound) in herbal and milk products. It was thought to boost immunity, but often led to mercury poisoning.

Qi Healing

6TH CENTURY BCE

Ancient Chinese philosopher Lao Tzu first described breathing techniques as a way to stimulate *qi*, the “vital energy” underpinning traditional Chinese medicine and martial arts. The belief is that this “life force” flows around the body, and illnesses are caused when the flow is blocked. Healers use a variety of techniques to restore balance, regenerate depleted *qi*, and flush out disease-causing *qi*.

Moxibustion

17TH CENTURY BCE

Considered one of the oldest medical therapies, moxibustion was used in ancient China, Japan, and Korea, and consisted of burning dried mugwort on special points of the body. In some cases, the herb was burnt just enough to heat the skin, while in others it was left long enough to cause second-degree burns! Practitioners believe that it stimulates the circulation of blood and *qi*.



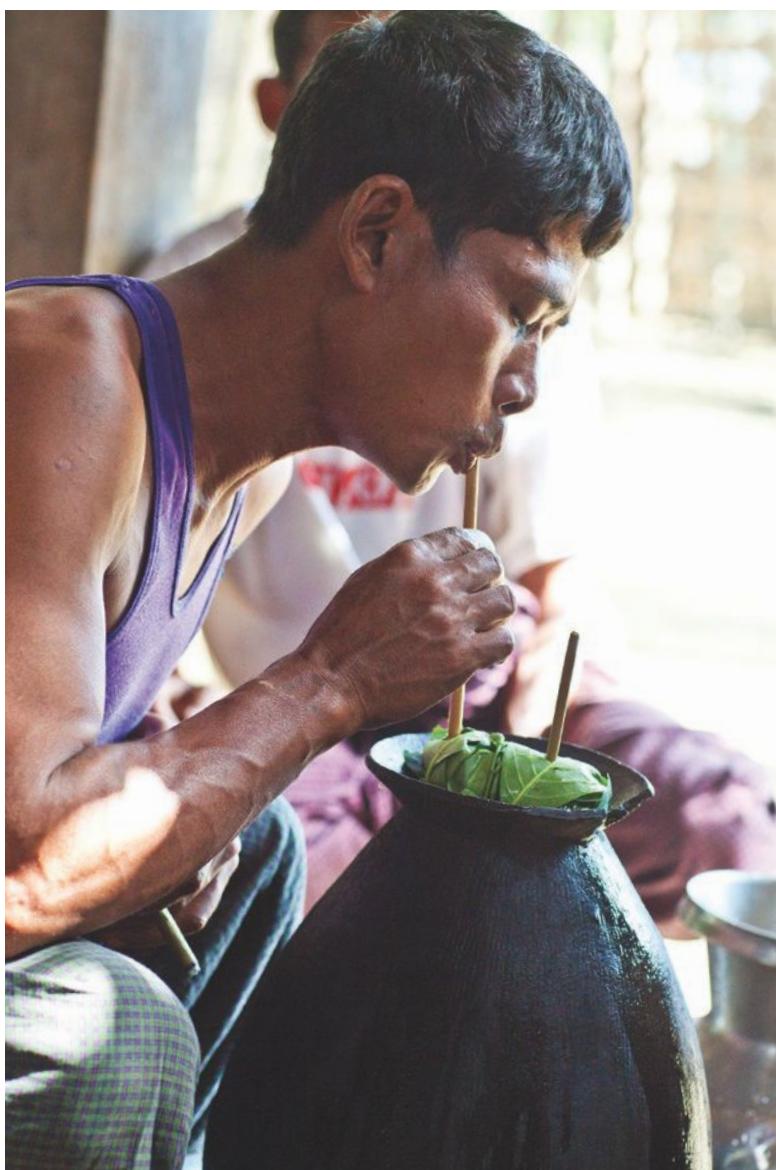
REVEALED

A BACKYARD BREW

Homemade Moonshine

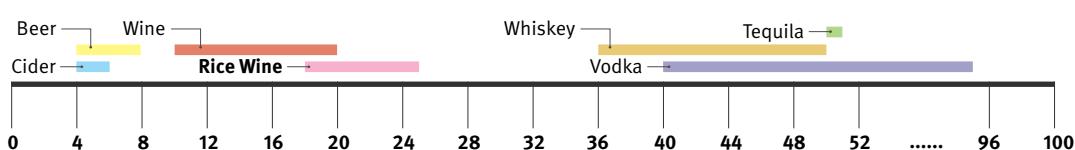
There's no drink more reflective of Myanmar's rice-loving culture than its namesake wine, a traditional tipple fermented in the humblest of abodes

Text Alex Bescoby



ABOVE A Chin tribe man drinks local wine during the Kachin Manaw Festival in Myanmar's Mrauk U district

ALCOHOL PERCENTAGE OF COMMON DRINKS:



Myanmar, despite the Buddha's encouragement to abstain from intoxicating substances, is home to a dizzying array of homemade alcohol. Apart from the ubiquitous national staple, Myanmar Beer, many rural communities are manufacturing their own do-it-yourself rice wine brews using spare rice and millet. The final product's shelf life of just a few days means there's always a batch being fermented and drunk somewhere. Whether out of bottles, cups or a pot with bamboo straws, this cultural beverage has been the country's drink of choice for years.

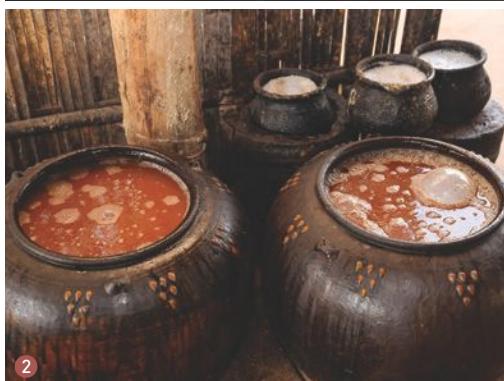
In Myitkyina, the state capital of Kachin – Myanmar's northernmost subdivision in the Himalayan foothills – thriving micro-distilleries hum with life behind almost every home. Manned by women, huge cauldrons of white rice are steamed over smouldering log fires, then fed into a rickety system of sealed metal pots and bamboo tubes, within which the fermentation happens over four to five hours. Recipes vary from house to house, and are fiercely guarded; from them streams a precious source of secondary income for the family. Potential buyers are faced with dozens of different brew-strengths on offer, but Kachin rice wine, called *sapee* – a thick pink liquid that looks and tastes like a fruit smoothie – is always a popular pick.

To the locals, the drink is a cure-all elixir that replenishes strength. Indeed, researchers claim rice wine's probiotic properties impart amino acids, minerals and antioxidants to the body, and lower the chances of cancer. The grog is also known to aid digestion, improve metabolism, and pair well with local river snails cooked in garlic. ♦ AG



1

PHOTO © ALEX BESCOBY



2



3

HOW TO: DIY RICE WINE

Nectar of the Gods

The Burmese brew happy potion in this simple three-step process

1. Rice is boiled till cooked. Yeast is added either before or after boiling
2. The mixture ferments in a pot. The yeast microbes act as enzymes, converting the rice starch to sugar
3. The alcohol is distilled into bottles and sold

5 Other Cultural Concoctions

Rice wine has always been beloved across Asia, with every country boasting a signature spirit

NEPAL, TIBET, INDIA

Tongba

Made from millet. This liquor is drunk by steeping fermented grains in hot water and sipping using a metal straw with a filter at the bottom

INDONESIA

Brem Bali

Made of white or black glutinous rice immersed in water, then fermented in a jar lined with banana leaves. The drink often features in Hindu religious ceremonies

Vietnam

Rượu cần

Made of glutinous rice and herbs from the local forest. It's drunk from a big communal jar via bamboo straws at special celebrations

JAPAN

Sake

Brewed in a beer-like process from rice, mould, and clean water from pristine lakes or rivers. There are different grades of sake based on how polished the rice is

SOUTH KOREA

Makgeolli

A milky, fizzy beverage made from rice or wheat mixed with *nuruk* (a fermentation starter). Its flavored with corn, chestnuts or fruit



PHOTOS © SHUTTERSTOCK

DATA SOURCES: MICHAEL RUCKER, SUNRISE HOUSE, SOUTHEAST ASIA FERMENTABLE

HANDMADE HOLINESS

A Dyeing Art

From artisans in two rural Indian villages come a huge share of the Hindu world's sacred bracelets

Text Sirsenu Gayen

Strands of red and yellow thread sway in the wind as they dry on clotheslines along the roadside. Qur'anic verses blare over speakers. Muslim artisans are hard at work, knee-deep in buckets of dyeing chemicals – *sans* protective gear.

For generations, the families of Khanjhanpur and Alhaadganj – two villages near the town of Lalgopalganj in the Indian state of Uttar Pradesh – have been making *kalava*, an object intimately familiar with the wrists of thousands of Hindus across India and Nepal. Also called *raksha* or *mauli*, this nondescript thread bracelet is tied for devotees during religious ceremonies, and

counted among the holiest of talismans. First mentioned in the Hindu epic *Mahabharata*, the bracelet is thought to give its wearer pure thoughts, long life and protection against their enemies.

This nondescript thread bracelet is tied for devotees during religious ceremonies, and counted among the holiest of talismans

BELOW An artisan in Khanjhanpur village, Allahabad, dyeing *kalava* threads


PHOTO © SIRSENDU GAYEN

Spiritual Strings

Red threads feature throughout Asia – often imparting the wearer with protection and prosperity

➊ Israel

Red string bracelets are worn for protection against evil and to ward off bad luck. They're also secured on baby cots to keep infants safe

➋ China

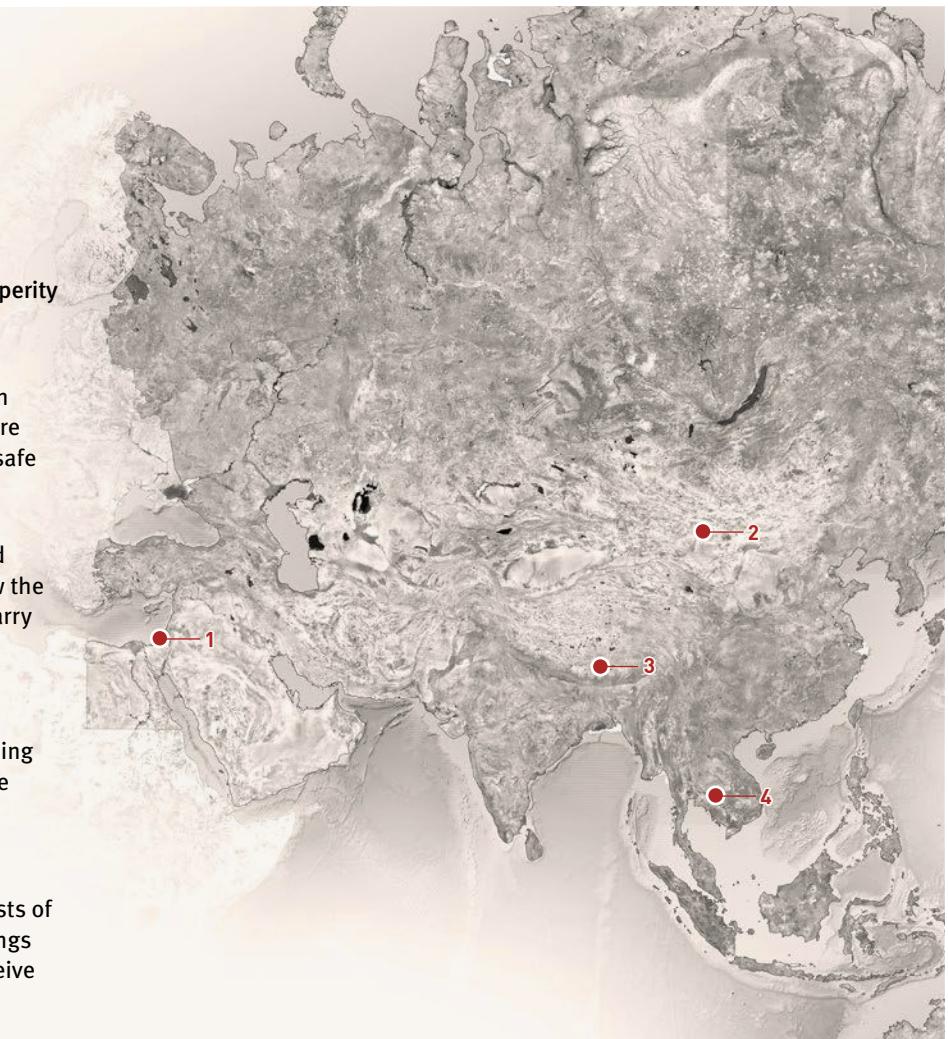
Before a wedding, a bride's hair is brushed and tied with a red string to symbolise how the couple have been destined to meet and marry

➌ Tibet

A red thread represents bravery, and is offered in a religious ceremony amid chanting of scriptures by monks. It's later tied on the wrist to unite body and soul

➍ Cambodia

Family and friends tie red string on the wrists of newly married couples. The longer the strings stay on, the greater the blessings they receive



DATA SOURCES: BUZZLE, CLASSROOM



Kalava-making is a family effort, and in many cases the only source of income for villagers. Everything is done by hand, and everyone chips in, even children. Dyeing begins before daybreak, and only late in the evening – over 12 hours later – are the sun-dried threads stored for the night. One batch takes up to six days to make, in a method passed down through the generations.

Lalgopalganj's *kalavas* are shipped out and offered at temples across India and Nepal.

Production is a year-round affair, although the month before the nine-day-long Navratri festival in autumn is when demand peaks. Though no one knows for sure how two remote villages came to be at the centre of a *kalava* enterprise, it's something that temples in the nearby holy city of Allahabad – which sees some of the largest pilgrimages on Earth – surely give thanks for. ♦ AG

ABOVE At the Raksha Bandhan festival, sisters often tie an ornate *kalava* on their brother's wrist for spiritual protection

SKIN DEEP

Cosmetic Improvements

As the saying goes, beauty is pain. The forebears of the formulas on today's makeup market were some truly unusual ingredients – some even poisonous or repugnant – slathered on in the name of glamour


India
26TH CENTURY BCE

HAIR

Used as hair dye, henna is made from the leaves of the henna plant, which are dried, crushed into a fine powder, then made into a paste. When applied to hair or skin, it then binds to the keratin, staining it an orange or brown colour

FACE

An Ayurvedic tradition, *ubtan* face masks comprise a herbal paste of turmeric, saffron, sandalwood, chickpeas and mustard seeds. Meant to detoxify the skin, it was thought to have been prescribed by Vedic physicians

NECK

Instead of baths, Indians used bathing cosmetics like turmeric germicidal cream, comprising chickpea flour or wheat husk mixed with milk to exfoliate the skin

EYES

Both men and women lined their eyes with kohl, a black powder made from burnt sandalwood paste combined with ghee or castor oil. It was thought to impart medicinal benefits to the wearer, like strengthening and protecting the eyes

Iran
19TH CENTURY BCE
UPPER LIP

Facial hair was removed by applying a paste of bone ash, fat and jasmine oil to soften the skin before plucking out the offending hairs with tweezers. A second paste of egg whites, rosewater and lemon juice was lathered on to prevent pimples

CHEEK

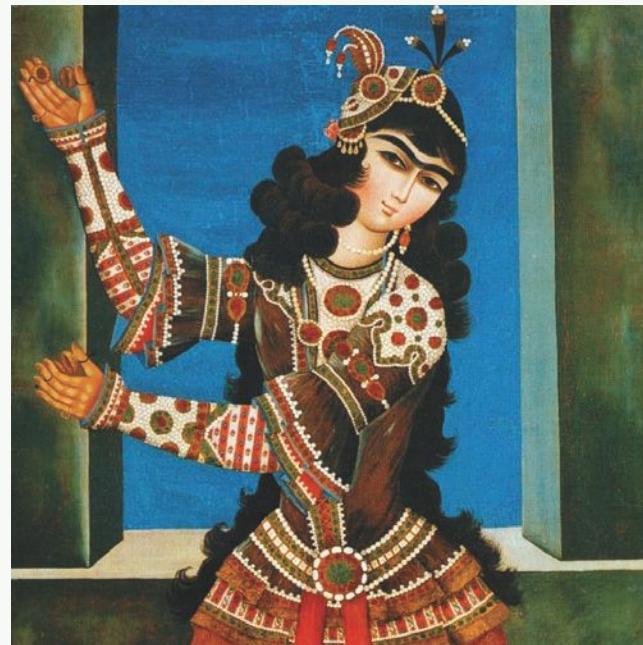
A beauty spot, called *kal*, was painted on a corner of the mouth or cheek using a mixture of musk, oil, black wax, and ambergris (a substance produced in the intestines of sperm whales)

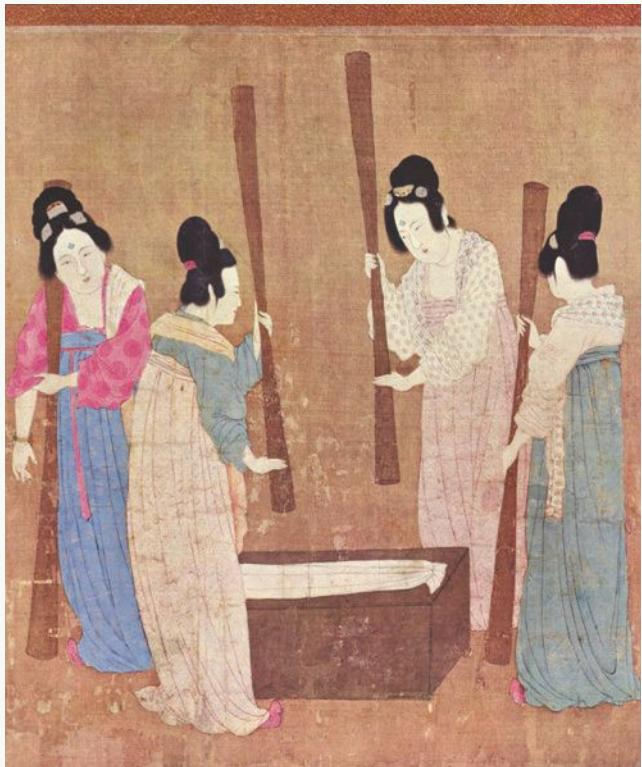
HAIR

The earliest hair gels consisted of sticky liquids, such as the seeds of the quince fruit soaked in hot water, along with wet starch flicked onto the hair to give it a pearl-studded appearance

EYELIDS

Black powder, called *sormeh*, was used as an eyeshadow and manufactured from the soot produced when burning goat fat, bone marrow, or nuts such as almonds and pistachios



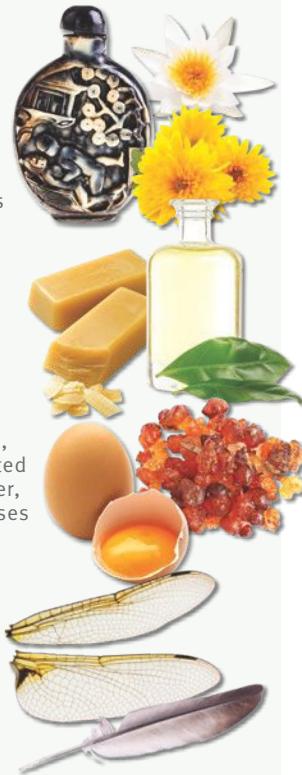


China

2ND CENTURY BCE

NECK

Perfumes were made from flowers like lilies, lotuses and chrysanthemums. People also burned incense candles in their bedrooms to perfume their hair and clothes using aromatics like Persian rosewater and patchouli oil



LIPS

Lipstick was made from beeswax and occasionally scented with tea oils. Lip gloss was created from a combination of vermillion-coloured minerals and animal fat

NAILS

The earliest nail polishes were made from gum, gelatin and egg. The colour of the polish denoted social class: Only royalty could wear gold, silver, black and red, while those from the lower classes were forbidden from using bright colours

FOREHEAD

After a princess was said to have woken up with the imprint of a fallen plum blossom on her forehead, it became fashionable for women to draw flowers on their faces and glue items like bird feathers, fish scales, dragonfly wings and precious stones to their foreheads, cheeks and eyes

Korea

1ST CENTURY BCE

FACE

Beauty lotions were juice extracts from plants such as gourd stems, while apricot and peach oils relieved liver spots and freckles and moisturised the skin. Honey was a popular face mask

EYEBROWS

Eyebrows were reshaped and painted using charcoal, gold powder, or inks made from plant ash and coloured soot; indigo, black, blue and brown were common shades

NECK

Perfume was made from dried clove buds, believed to have a calming and rejuvenating effect. People bathed in water scented with clove and also used the spice as a deodorant

LIPS

Poorer women used dried red peppers to colour their lips, while royalty used a combination of saffron flowers and cinnabar



Japan

7TH CENTURY

FACE

In pursuit of a fair complexion, women brushed their faces with a white powder containing ground rice, zinc and lead. The application likely led to serious skin diseases



SCALP

Bird droppings were famously used for facials: *Uguisu no fun* (nightingale faeces) was beloved for its ability to condition and soothe skin. Monks also used it to polish their bald scalps



TEETH

Also a practice in Southeast Asia, the Pacific Islands and South America, women stained their teeth black by drinking a cocktail of oxidised iron filings, soaked in spiced tea or alcohol to cover up the unpleasant taste



CHEEKS

Safflower pigment was used as a rouge and lipstick, and became so popular that it was worth its weight in gold ♦ AG



NATURE

LOFTY APHRODISIAC

Bhutan's Magic Mushrooms

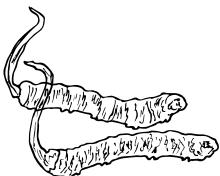
The shepherds of the Himalayas are just over a decade into a new tradition built on rocky foundations, for the rare fungi they harvest may soon cease to grow

Text and Photos Tanya Sharapova





A Layap cleans and prepares harvested cordyceps for sale. One kilo can command up to USD42,000



Cordyceps *Ophiocordyceps sinensis*

Cordyceps starts as a parasitic fungus that seeks a caterpillar host. It germinates in the victim's body, then kills and mummifies it as the insect buries itself into the soil. A brown shoot then grows from the mouth of the corpse.

SIZE
2cm to 5cm



LOCATION
Cold grassy alpine meadows in Nepal and Tibet at elevations over 3,800 metres

USES
Effective against tuberculosis, leprosy, leukaemia, tumours and kidney infections

RIGHT The Layap once lived in yak wool tents when herding on the mountain, but these are becoming a rare sight as plastic tents take their place today

A heaving storm lashes at the bent backs of 200 hopefuls as they scrabble at the earth. Crawling on all fours under pouring skies – some mothers with blanketed babies strapped to their backs – their nimble fingers unearth caterpillar-like brown roots in shades of yellow, white, and black. The yellow ones are worth the most. But a Layap will settle for any one, spending weeks on the steep mountainside to excavate them, clean them with toothbrushes, and tote them off to auctions in Gasa, where buyers await.

Traditionally, Bhutan's semi-nomadic people were yak rearers, spending their days tending herds some 4,000 metres above sea level. But a decade ago, a new practice was born: For a month in June, entire families ascend even higher up the Himalayas to harvest *yartsa gunbu* (meaning "summer insect, winter plant"), the local name for cordyceps. Gathering the coveted medicinal plant is prohibited for most of Bhutan's population, except 1,200 inhabitants of seven villages, including the Layap, under a 2004 royal decree designed to supplement highlanders' income on top of sales of yak meat and dairy.

"I would have continued picking cordyceps if I hadn't been told that my daughter was born. I only came down from the mountains for a few days to see my wife and baby"

Tashi, Layap

But cordyceps commands a price of up to USD 42,000 per kilo, and this eye-popping price tag has led some Layap to change their age-old traditions: When a single trip can feed a family for a whole year, why should they still shepherd?

"I would have continued picking cordyceps if I hadn't been told that my daughter was born," says Tashi, the Laya village headman's son-in-law. "I only came down from the mountains for a few days to see my wife and baby. The weather is ghastly, with strong wind and rain, but we are still harvesting with enthusiasm."



A Layap woman collects cordyceps at an altitude of 5,000 metres with an umbrella nearby to shelter her son from the rain. Entire families make the trip up the mountains in June





CORDYCEPS COLLECTION

PRE 2004	2004	2008	2009	2017
Cordyceps is harvested illegally in Bhutan and smuggled out via Tibet due to high demand from Chinese consumers	A royal decree permits cordyceps harvesting by one person per family of yak herders (whose animals traditionally graze in meadows where the fungus is present)	Every yak herder is now allowed to harvest and sell cordyceps at regional auction points. 10% of the harvest is kept at a regulated price for regional doctors	Due to over-exploitation and illegal collecting, a limit of three persons per household is imposed on cordyceps harvesting	The number of buyers at cordyceps auctions has doubled from a decade ago. Rangers patrol the mountains to deter illegal harvesting



To reach cordyceps grounds, a Layap must hike slippery paths, cross rivers and wend through forest, eating and sleeping under tarp between a rock and a tree branch amid torrid weather. But with all that mountainous yak-rearing, perhaps no people are better equipped to gather this fungus, whose sales have since made them the richest community in the country. Chinese, American and Japanese buyers clamour for the "Himalayan Viagra" to make tonics, while it is to locals a medicine and household remedy.

But not all Layap have been swept up in the cordyceps craze. Some, like Wangmo, still herd: Each yak in her flock of 49 has a name, and her son sells their butter and cheese at Punakha, the closest big city.

"I'm absolutely uninterested in that expensive caterpillar," says the middle-aged Layap, who is wearing a flowery blouse and black skirt made from yak wool. "I like constantly moving from one pasture to another. I can't imagine life without my yaks."

Perhaps Wangmo is onto something. Experts – and the Bhutan government – have observed that the quantity and quality of cordyceps in the Himalayas has been decreasing with each passing year. Global warming threatens the longevity of this fungus, throwing into question how long the Layap's new tradition can stick around for. ♦ AG

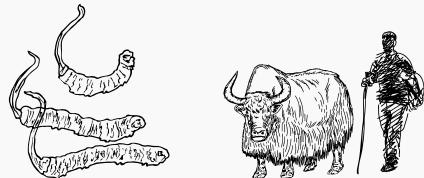
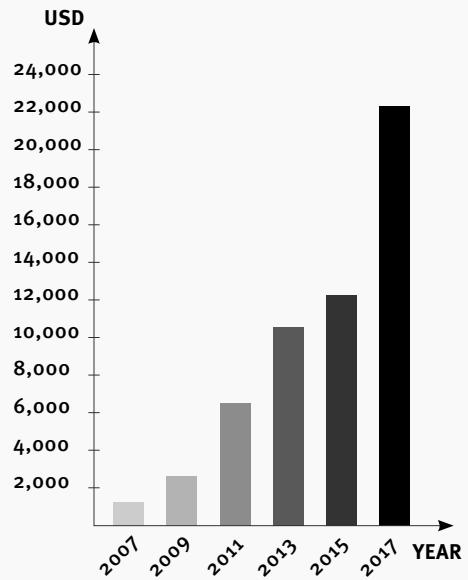
ABOVE Cordyceps is valued in Asia for its medicinal properties and is sometimes taken as an aphrodisiac

LEFT Inside a traditional Layap kitchen

Sprouting Demand

Cordyceps is graded by a combination of colour, size and weight. The thicker the fungus, the higher the price

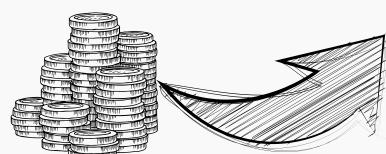
Average auction prices for cordyceps (per kg) in Bhutan



USD42,204 vs USD155

The highest bid for cordyceps (per kg) in Bhutan in 2017

A typical yak herder's yearly income



900%

The increase in cordyceps' value between 1997 and 2008

DATA SOURCES: BHUTAN DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURAL MARKETING AND COOPERATIVES, DRAGON HERBS BHUTAN, SANGAY WANGCHUK, THE THIRD POLE, RA ONLINE, KUENSEL ONLINE

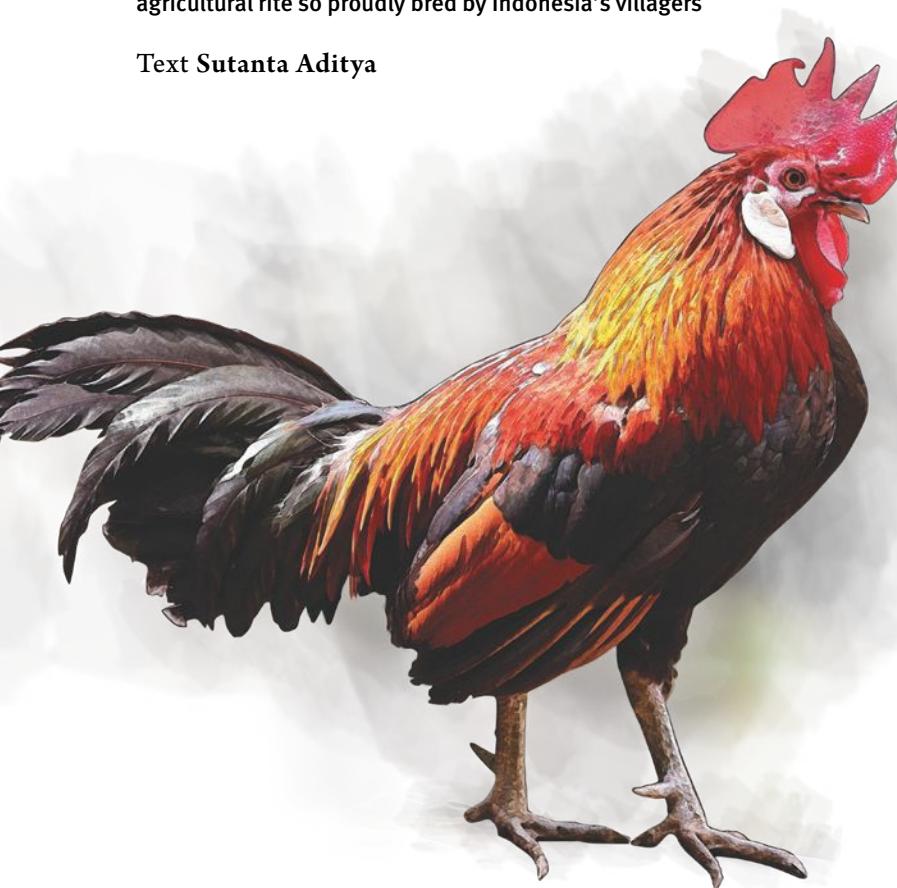
REGAL BIRDS

Cock of the Roost

Secular cockfighting might be largely outlawed, but its religious counterpart lives on. We look at the bird behind this ancient agricultural rite so proudly bred by Indonesia's villagers

RIGHT Two men prepare their roosters for a fight. After the eruption of Mount Agung, cockfighting surged in popularity in the area

Text Sutanta Aditya



Red Junglefowl
(*Gallus gallus*)

Order: Galliformes
Family: Phasianidae
Genus: *Gallus*
Reproduction: Mating and egg-laying
Life Span: 30 years in captivity
Location: India, China, Southeast Asia
Behaviour: Using sharp leg spurs, males battle to the death over territory

Near Tulamben village in Bali, a battle is taking place in the shadow of Mount Agung. With crops destroyed and tourists fled, the area has become as sluggish as the lava from the volcano, whose recent eruption brought thousands of villagers' livelihoods to a screeching halt.

But the atmosphere betrays nothing of the grim situation. Instead, the air is thick with cheering; bets are thrust from hand to hand in the gathered crowd. The people are keen to forget, however briefly, the fatigue of their newest hardship amid the excitement of a good match. It's over in three more moves – with a spatter of blood, the victorious cock mauls its opponent.

To the Balinese, it's the blood that's most important in cockfights, not the fortunes that rise and fall with each match. With roots in Hindu ceremonies called *tabuh rah*, the ancient tradition of pitting fowl against one another is thought to purify agricultural land, glorify the gods, and appease evil spirits by watering the ground with the blood of the vanquished rooster. Even today, such men-only ceremonies are widely held in temples across the region.

"The philosophy of cockfighting is based on the ritual of a blood sacrifice, but has since developed into putting metal spurs on combative roosters – to ensure greater blood loss during the brawl – and taken on high entertainment value," says 70-year-old Hindu leader I Wayan Subada.

COCKFIGHTING: AN ANCIENT SPECTATOR SPORT

ABOUT 6000 BCE	ABOUT 5000 BCE	ABOUT 3000 BCE	16TH CENTURY BCE	5TH CENTURY BCE
Chickens are first domesticated in China	The red junglefowl is domesticated in Asia	Cockfighting begins in Iran and spreads to Asia and the Middle East	Cockfighting is wildly popular across the Indus Valley and Southeast Asia	Cockfighting spreads to the Mediterranean, Europe and the Americas



PHOTO © SUTANTA ADITYA

“The original aspiration of the profession is noble: to produce a classy specimen that is proud, pure and elegant”

I Nyoman Darma, cockfighting activist

But to have good cockfights, one must have good cocks, and the nuanced process of rooster breeding takes place between carefully selected specimens by professional breeders. Hardy jungle chickens are crossed with larger breeds from countries like the Philippines, and up to 10 specimens of rooster can be test-bred in order to hatch the strongest chicks.

These precious pets are well-pampered: Vaccinated, fed, massaged and bathed, they're kept in a shady spot in the jungle, and given a harem of hens with which to mate.

An ideal father must be a champion fighter with a high victory rate, so his offspring will be as powerful, according to 35-year-old cockfighting activist I Nyoman Darma. The best specimens have a good skeletal structure, shiny foot scales and pretty plumage – vibrant orange and iridescent black and gold feathers. Splotches or freckles are not tolerated.

“People today might breed bloodthirsty birds for betting fights,” says Nyoman. “But the original aspiration of the profession is noble: to produce a classy specimen that is proud, pure and elegant. Such a bird brings luck to its owner.” ◆ AG

5 FACTS ABOUT ROOSTER BREEDING



10 years

a rooster's active breeding period

7 years

a hen's active breeding period

2,000

the average number of chicks a rooster can father in a lifetime

20%

the percentage of male chicks per clutch of eggs

3 years

the age of a rooster at its physical peak

10TH CENTURY

• Tabuh rah practices are noted on inscriptions in Batur and Batuan in Bali

12TH CENTURY

• Carvings in Angkor Wat, Cambodia, show cockfights being held

20TH CENTURY

• American anthropologist Clifford Geertz publishes “Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight”

• Cockfighting is banned in most countries. In Bali, it is allowed for religious ceremonies, but illegal fights are widespread



EQUALITY AND JUSTICE

Letter of the Law

The world's first written laws came from its first civilisation, Mesopotamia, and along with it the earliest judicial proceedings in the presence of a king

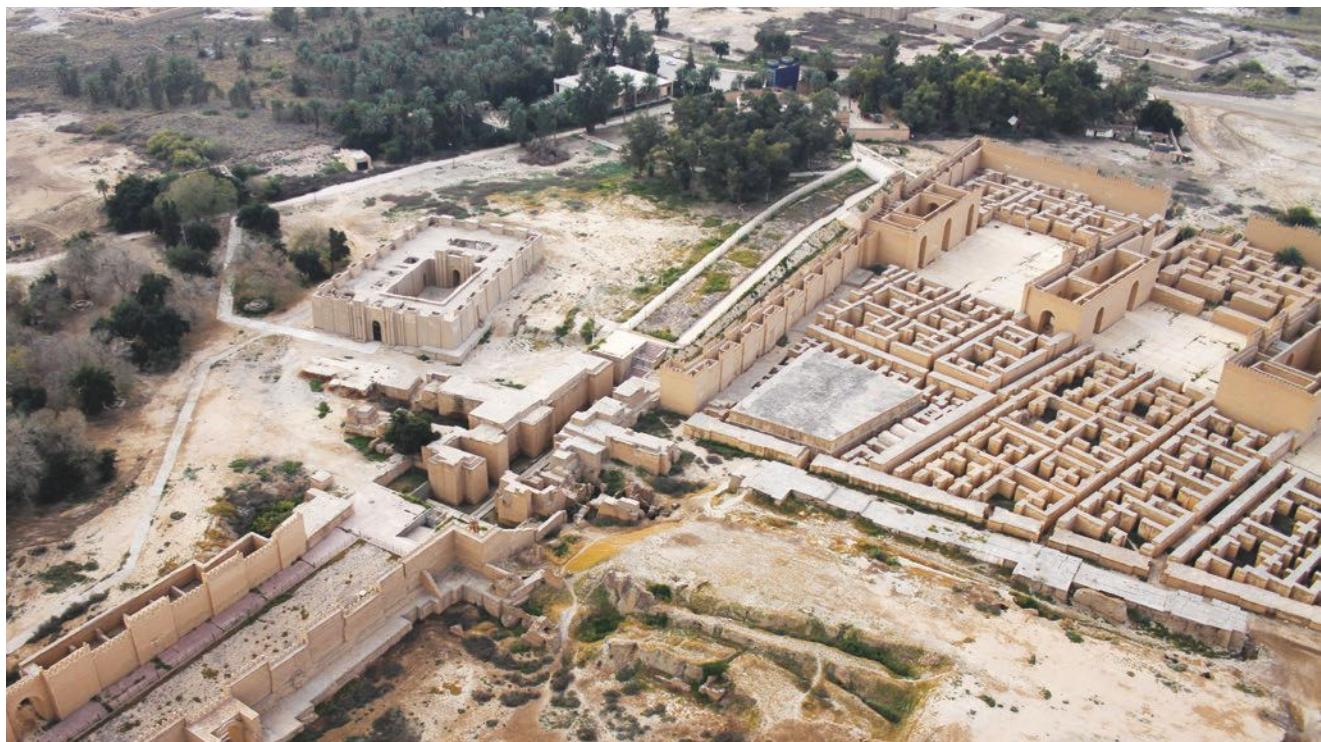


PHOTO © SHUTTERSTOCK

An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. So goes the ancient adage about retaliatory justice – also known by the Latin term *lex talionis* – that governed the cradle of civilisation, formed the foundation of constitutions, and occasionally peppers angry conversations today.

It is in Mesopotamia that standardised law was conceived, and most likely out of necessity for governing disputes between people who, for the first time in history, were organised into closely quartered cities and ruled by a

sovereign king. The legislation of the time is widely regarded as decidedly advanced: Many kings, such as ancient Sumerian king Lipit-Ishtar, had legal codes to determine the rights of ordinary citizens, including concepts like minimum wage and presumption of innocence, dating all the way back to 2100 BCE.

Ruling monarchs often cited a benevolent motive necessitating the creation of a legal system: to protect the weak from oppression. This attitude toward their power in lawmaking is perhaps best summarised by the declaration

ABOVE The restored ruins of a palace in ancient Babylon

ANCIENT MESOPOTAMIA



● The world's first city-states develop in southern Mesopotamia

● Sumerian king Ur-Nammu writes the first legal code

● King Hammurabi of Babylon issues the Code of Hammurabi

● The Hittites of Hattusa write similar sets of laws to the Babylonians

● The Mesopotamian empire falls into decline

MESOPOTAMIA:
THE CRADLE OF
CIVILISATION

POPULATION

Over
100,000

LANGUAGE

Sumerian, Akkadian,
Amorite

RELIGION



Ancient Mesopotamian
religion (polytheism)

ASSYRIA
PHOENICIA
MESOPOTAMIA
IRAQ
ELAM

EGYPT

Red
Sea

SAUDI
ARABIA

Persian
Gulf

UAE

OMAN

YEMEN

The Fertile Crescent

A region where the earliest agriculture
and civilisations flourished



PHOTO © WIKICOMMONS

preceding the world's earliest code of laws by Sumerian king Ur-Nammu: "I did not deliver the orphan to the rich. I did not deliver the widow to the mighty. I did not deliver the man with but one shekel to the man with one mina. I did not deliver the man with but one sheep to the man with one ox."

When disputes did arise, parties often pleaded their case before the king himself or his appointed judges, and rulings created a body of precedents from which the general

severity of punishments could be inferred. Legal agreements were ratified through the swearing of oaths before pagan gods, and contracts, carved into clay tablets, were placed in temple archives for safekeeping. In order to ensure all citizens knew the law, it was often inscribed on stone and displayed in public.

Lex talionis was born of one of these stone documents: the famous Code of Hammurabi, which dates back to around 1780 BCE. Inscribed in Akkadian on a black stone pillar over two metres high, the text comprised 282 decrees by King Hammurabi, the first king of Babylon. These ancient statutes outlined punishments for different crimes, and contain the famous adage under rule 196: "If a man puts out the eye of another man, his eye shall be put out." This code is topped with a carving of the king receiving the laws from the Babylonian sun god, Shamash. ◆ AG

LEFT The Code of Lipit-Ishtar (circa 1860 BCE) inscribed on a stone slab, discovered at the site of the ancient Sumerian city of Nippur in modern-day Iraq

THIRD TIME'S THE CHARM

Newari Nuptials

Unlike in many Asian societies, widowhood is a foreign concept for Nepal's most socially advanced community. Born of an ancient custom created to protect underage girls, women wed as early as five and typically take three husbands

Text and Photos Elena del Estal

The 15 little girls are waiting for the priest to bless everything, including their new, symbolic husband: a fruit. They run and play in the courtyard, clothed in matrimonial colours of red and gold. Over the next two days, they will be showered with attention and gifts, and there's little reason not to rejoice, for they're married!

Unlike other cultures, Newari girls all undergo conjugal rites that start in early childhood and feature three rounds of

BELLOW Purnima, 9, is dressed for her wedding to the Sun by her aunt and cousin in Bhaktapur

RIGHT Sujata and Shiva surrounded by family at their wedding in Kathmandu

RIGHT BOTTOM Little brides get their feet painted in celebratory red for the Ihi ceremony



NEWAR NATION: HOW IT CAME TO BE

1ST CENTURY

The Kirats migrate to the Kathmandu Valley where they form Nepal Mandala

5TH CENTURY

The Licchavis of India defeat the reigning Kirati and found a new kingdom

13TH CENTURY

By now, a large number of immigrants from India live in the Kathmandu Valley and have assimilated into Newar culture and language, in turn bringing Vedic influences, Sanskrit languages and a caste system

15TH CENTURY

Newar arts' golden age. Each caste specialises in a certain craft, and trade with Tibet flourishes

NEWAR:
THE ORIGINAL
INHABITANTS OF THE
KATHMANDU VALLEY



POPULATION

1.3

MILLION

(5% of Nepal total)

LANGUAGE

नेपाल भाषा

Nepal Bhasa (Newari)

RELIGIONS



Hinduism and
Buddhism



nuptials, with the final one culminating in union with a man.

For these little brides, Ihi is the first step. Sitting in their father's lap, they cradle the consecrated bael fruit, or wood apple (a representation of the Hindu god Vishnu, chosen for its resistance to rot), and become permanent wives of the immortal deity. Some believe this practice originated from the 19th century, when, fearing the lusty desires of men from other tribes, Newari families sought a way to protect their girls' purity by having a god claim it first.

Still prevalent today, the practice has expanded to protecting women from the stigma of widowhood. After the ceremony,



the girls will carefully keep the fruit in pristine condition for the rest of their lives.

The next marriage, called Bahra or Gufa, must happen before a girl's first menstruation, typically around 13 years. She spends 12 days isolated at home in a dark room, away from men and sunlight, during which she receives sex education from female relatives. On the 13th day, she is unveiled outdoors and wedded to the Sun for protection against evil in a female-only ceremony.

In the third and final marriage ceremony, the mature Newari woman dons a red sari to marry her flesh-and-blood partner in Ihipa, a three-day party with friends and family, after which she moves into her spouse's home, all her weddings finished at last. ♦ AG

18TH CENTURY

The Gorkha Kingdom conquers the Kathmandu Valley and unifies Nepal

20TH CENTURY

The caste system is abolished in 1962, but discrimination thrives up till today

JOINED IN MATRIMONY

A Newari Girl's Successive Spouses

CHILDHOOD

Age

5–11



Husband: **Vishnu**

ADOLESCENCE

Age

7–13



Husband: **The Sun**

ADULTHOOD

Age

Mid-20s



Husband: **Spouse typically arranged by the parents**

HERITAGE LOST

Vanishing Act

Thanks to centuries of successful integration, Bangkok is home to a large proportion of Sino-Thai. Yet the bearers of this unique mixed heritage may soon find the Chinese half of their identities left behind, as the city's urban development overwhelms key cultural communities

Text and Photos Pongkiat Rungrojkarnka

Loud clanging sometimes sounds out amid the twisting alleyways near Bangkok's Golden Mountain temple. Here, hidden in a side street, lies the famous Ban Baat, the last community of craftsmen making but one thing from morning to night: bowls.

These aren't just any bowls. They're *baat*, alms bowls which local monks use to collect food offerings every morning, and they're carefully created by families up to six generations into the trade with practically the same method and tools: metal, a hammer, and some good old elbow grease.

Yet these craftsmen – often Thai Chinese – are slowly being swallowed up by Bangkok's rapidly expanding metropolis. After centuries in the area, the small community, once created by King Rama I to preserve the *baat* tradition, is being threatened by cheaper versions churned out from factories. Today, only a few families whose careers revolve around the dying craft are left.

These communities and their uniquely Thai-Chinese practices have already begun to disappear from the places they've resided in for centuries

Baat crafting isn't a complicated process, but it is tedious and requires a fair amount of endurance, says Prachum Ekamol, a 70-year-old craftsman who has been making the bowl for over 50 years. He patiently points out the benefits of a handmade product: Well-rounded edges protect the monks, who have to carry the bowl for long hours; this cannot



SONY α7R MARK III, f/2.0, 1/2500s, ISO 1600

be achieved by machines. When the bowl is tapped, it produces a pleasant ringing sound, clear like a bell, unlike the dull chimes from those off a production line. And it has a shinier finish.

To keep the shrinking practice alive, the community is taking desperate measures. One of the oldest artisans, Nuan, 71, has begun

ABOVE Nuan, 71, has been making *baat* since she was eight

TOP RIGHT *Baat* for sale on display at the entrance of Ban Baat

RIGHT Sheet metal is welded to make the sides of a *baat*

THAI CHINESE:
THE WORLD'S
LARGEST OVERSEAS
CHINESE COMMUNITY

POPULATION

9.6

MILLION

(14% of total)

LANGUAGE

ภาษาไทย

Thai

汉语

Chinese dialects

RELIGION



Buddhism



SONY α7R MARK III, f/2.8, 1/12s, ISO 100

making bowls again despite years of retirement due to bad health and failing strength. Having been in the business for 63 years, she can't bear to give up her Chinese heritage.

Since arriving on Thai shores in the 17th century, Chinese immigrants have assimilated with local Thai in a remarkably smooth manner, resulting in years of intermarriages between the two ethnicities. Yet the Chinese aspect of this mixed cultural identity is beginning to fade in the city's capital: Practices like *baat*-making and worship rituals face extinction, thanks to infrastructural redevelopment and a lack of successors to continue the trade.



SONY α7R MARK III, f/2.2, 1/1600s, ISO 800

Like Ban Baat, another of Bangkok's oldest Chinese communities – Charoen Chai – may soon go, as plans to develop the railway line across the Chao Phraya river and Charoen Krung Road wipes out the historic Chinatown district, where the older generation of Thai Chinese buy joss papers and other items for traditional celebrations and rituals. During the New Year, the area's temples, like Wat Mangkon Kamalawat and Wat Leng Noei Yi, are filled with worshippers intent on dispelling bad luck. And Charoen Chai specialises in Chinese food: streets upon streets of bakeries, dessert shops, and roadside stalls hawking the popular Jubkang noodles – a favourite for Chinese labourers in the olden days thanks to the massive portions and tiny price.

But all this may become a thing of the past once the railway plans for Bangkok begin in the coming years, and landlords start raising prices or making plans for redevelopment of the land. Facing insufficient support from the government, these communities and their uniquely Thai-Chinese practices have already begun to disappear from the places they've resided in for centuries – and once they go, there may be no return. ♦ AG

BAAT-MAKING 101

These ancient alms bowls take up to three days to make in a traditional process dictated by Buddhist teachings



- 1 Artisans determine the size of the bowl by selecting the right size of sheet metal
- 2 The edges are serrated in order to fit together, like a jigsaw
- 3 The pieces are lined up, and then welded together
- 4 The bowl is hammered out from the inside
- 5 After polishing and varnishing, the *baat* is complete

For more about the photos in this article, see our contributor's review of the Sony α7R Mark III on page 1.



SEALING THE DEAL

Stamp of Authority

Inscribed in 2009 on UNESCO's List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity, this artistic engraving has for centuries authenticated the identity of China's emperors, businessmen and artisans

The Chinese seal – a mainstay in the country's arsenal of writing supplies – is truly a resilient piece of stationery.

So rarely do the fashions of centuries ago remain intact today that the seal and its relatively unchanged form make it a remarkable survivor of modern times, Sun Weizu remarks in the first chapter of his 2004 book *Chinese Seals: Carving Authority and Creating History*. For calligraphers and painters, the personalised device functions much like a signature – immediately identifying to experts and auction houses the works of different masters.

“The ancestry of Chinese seals has remained largely unchanged ‘in its basic form’ throughout the centuries”

Sun Weizu, author

Seal carving is considered one of the Chinese fine arts. Artisans were fluent in language and calligraphy, and combined this knowledge to create a symmetrical and aesthetically pleasing combination of characters, landscapes and decorative motifs (like birds and flowers) on canvases as tiny as 12 millimetres across. Sometimes carvings of lions and dragons topped the seal, which could be made out of semiprecious stones or gold for nobility.

CARVING HISTORY

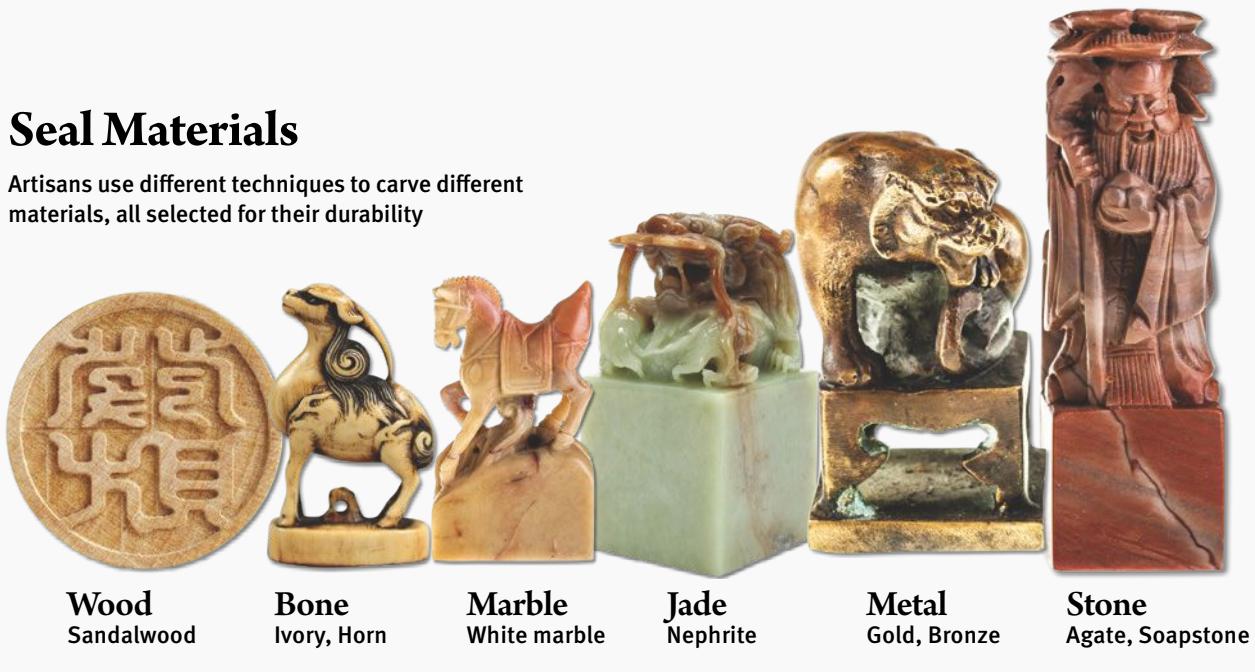
1600 BCE	221 BCE	7TH CENTURY OR LATER	14TH CENTURY OR LATER	1980S
● Primitive bronze seals are invented, with pictographic characters and simple patterns	● The first imperial jade seal is made for Emperor Qin Shi Huang after the unification of China	● The use of personal seals for non-official but important documents becomes common	● Personal seals grow popular among the masses, with artists using them to sign their work	● As handwritten signatures grow in popularity, seals fade from general use



PHOTO © WIKICOMMONS

Seal Materials

Artisans use different techniques to carve different materials, all selected for their durability



Wood
Sandalwood

Bone
Ivory, Horn

Marble
White marble

Jade
Nephrite

Metal
Gold, Bronze

Stone
Agate, Soapstone

FAR LEFT Artists and scholars who liked a particular artwork would stamp their seal on it, alongside appreciative reviews

LEFT Seal carving in the modern day



PHOTO © SHUTTERSTOCK

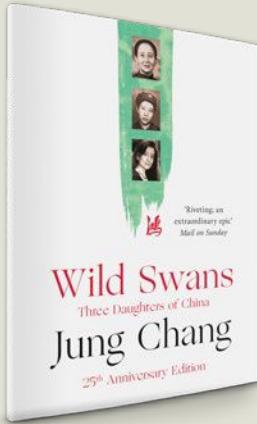
With such tiny details, artisans need steady hands and immense patience, for one wrong move could mean starting over.

A glimpse at the history of seals and seal engraving reveals just how little the practice has changed since its inception. Like their ancient counterparts, both professional and amateur seal carvers today employ largely the same steps in the process. First, a design is sketched on paper and transferred to a block of stone or other material. With special knives, they engrave the design into the stone, sanding it down.

It's then tested with commercial purple ink before being properly stamped and packed with a packet of red cinnabar paste.

Initially, only powerful figures in society bought and used seals, but the practice grew widespread for its utility in validating business, artistic and religious documents.

Though seals are less popular today, some businessmen still use them to authenticate the origin of commercial documents and correspondence – often alongside handwritten signatures for extra security. ♦ AG



PROPOSAL PROCESSES

Wife Material

Since its publication, *Wild Swans: Three Daughters of China* has sold over 13 million copies in 37 languages. The first chapter of this critically acclaimed memoir tells the story of Yu-fang, the jewel of a poor family in 20th-century provincial Manchuria, who – at 15 years old – becomes the concubine of a powerful warlord, thanks to the machinations of her father

Text Jung Chang

When she finished praying, my grandmother kowtowed three times to the Buddha. As she stood up she slightly lost her balance, which was easy to do with bound feet. She reached out to steady herself on her maid's arm. General Xue and her father had just begun to move forward. She blushed and bent her head, then turned and started to walk away, which was the right thing to do. Her father stepped forward and introduced her to the general. She curtsied, keeping her head lowered all the time.

As was fitting for a man in his position, the general did not say much about the meeting to Yang, who was a rather lowly subordinate, but my great-grandfather could see he was fascinated. The next step was to engineer a more direct encounter.

A couple of days later Yang, risking bankruptcy, rented the best theatre in town and put on a local opera, inviting General

Xue as the guest of honour. Like most Chinese theatres, it was built around a rectangular space open to the sky, with timber structures on three sides; the fourth side formed the stage, which was completely bare: it had no curtain and no sets. The seating area was more like a café than a theatre in the West. The men sat at tables in the open square, eating, drinking, and talking loudly throughout the performance. To the side, higher up, was the dress circle, where the ladies sat more demurely at smaller tables, with their maids standing behind them. My great-grandfather had arranged things so that his daughter was in a place where General Xue could see her easily.

This time she was much more dressed up than in the temple. She wore a heavily embroidered satin dress and jewellery in her hair. She was also displaying her natural vivacity and energy, laughing and chatting with her women friends. General Xue hardly looked at the stage.





Before the evening was over he had proposed – not to my grandmother, of course, but to her father. He did not offer marriage, only that my grandmother should become his concubine

After the show there was a traditional Chinese game called lantern-riddles. This took place in two separate halls, one for the men and one for the women. In each room were dozens of elaborate paper lanterns, stuck on which were a number of riddles in verse. The person who guessed the most answers won a prize. Among the men General Xue was the winner, naturally. Among the women, it was my grandmother.

Yang had now given General Xue a chance to appreciate his daughter's beauty and her intelligence. The final qualification was artistic talent. Two nights later he invited the general to his house for dinner. It was a clear, warm night, with a full moon – a classic setting for listening to the *qin*. After dinner, the men sat on the veranda and my grandmother was summoned to play in the courtyard. Sitting under a trellis, with the scent of syringa in the air, her performance enchanted General Xue. Later he was to tell her that her playing that evening in the moonlight had captured his heart. When my mother was born, he gave her the name Bao Qin, which means "Precious Zither".

Before the evening was over he had proposed – not to my grandmother, of course, but to her father. He did not offer marriage, only that my grandmother should become his concubine. But Yang had not expected anything else. The Xue family would have arranged a marriage for the general long before on the basis of social positions. In any case, the Yangs were too humble to provide a wife. But it was expected that a man like General Xue should take concubines. Wives were not for pleasure – that was what concubines were for. Concubines might acquire considerable power, but their social status was quite different

from that of a wife. A concubine was a kind of institutionalised mistress, acquired and discarded at will.

The first my grandmother knew of her impending liaison was when her mother broke the news to her a few days before the event. My grandmother bent her head and wept. She hated the idea of being a concubine, but her father had already made the decision, and it was unthinkable to oppose one's parents. To question a parental decision was considered "unfilial" – and to be unfilial was tantamount to treason. Even if she refused to consent to her father's wishes, she would not be taken seriously; her action would be interpreted as indicating that she wanted to stay with her parents. The only way to say no and be taken seriously was to commit suicide. My grandmother bit her lip and said nothing. In fact, there was nothing she could say. Even to say yes would be considered unladylike, as it would be taken to imply that she was eager to leave her parents.

Seeing how unhappy she was, her mother started telling her that this was the best match possible. Her husband had told her about General Xue's power: "In Peking they say, 'When General Xue stamps his foot, the whole city shakes.'" In fact, my grandmother had been rather taken with the general's handsome, martial demeanour. And she had been flattered by all the admiring words he had said about her to her father, which were now elaborated and embroidered upon. None of the men in Yixian were as impressive as the warlord general. At fifteen, she had no idea what being a concubine really meant, and thought she could win General Xue's love and lead a happy life. ♦ AG

ABOVE To appear attractive to men, Yu-fang, like many women of the time, practised foot binding and wore special shoes



FORMOSAN FOUNDATIONS

Island of Tongues

Researchers say one-fifth of the world's languages – including numerous Asian dialects – developed from the lingua franca of Taiwanese aborigines

Few will associate primarily Mandarin-speaking, Japanese-influenced Taiwan with the roots of vernaculars spoken by over 300 million people today. But based on archaeological excavations and modern linguistic analysis, researchers are increasingly attributing the small island nation as the proud birthplace of the over 1,200 languages forming the Austronesian language family, including Malay, Indonesian and Tagalog.

Drawing on evidence from linguistic studies, leading scholars from around the world are convinced that the Austronesian-speaking peoples dispersed from Taiwan

around 5,000 to 4,000 years ago, and that the island is the closest thing to an Austronesian homeland," said prominent Austronesian linguist Paul Li in a 2011 interview with newspaper *Taiwan Today*.

Austronesian is one of the biggest language families on the planet, with speakers across Asia, the Pacific, and Africa. It is split into two main branches: the Formosan languages and the Malayo-Polynesian languages.

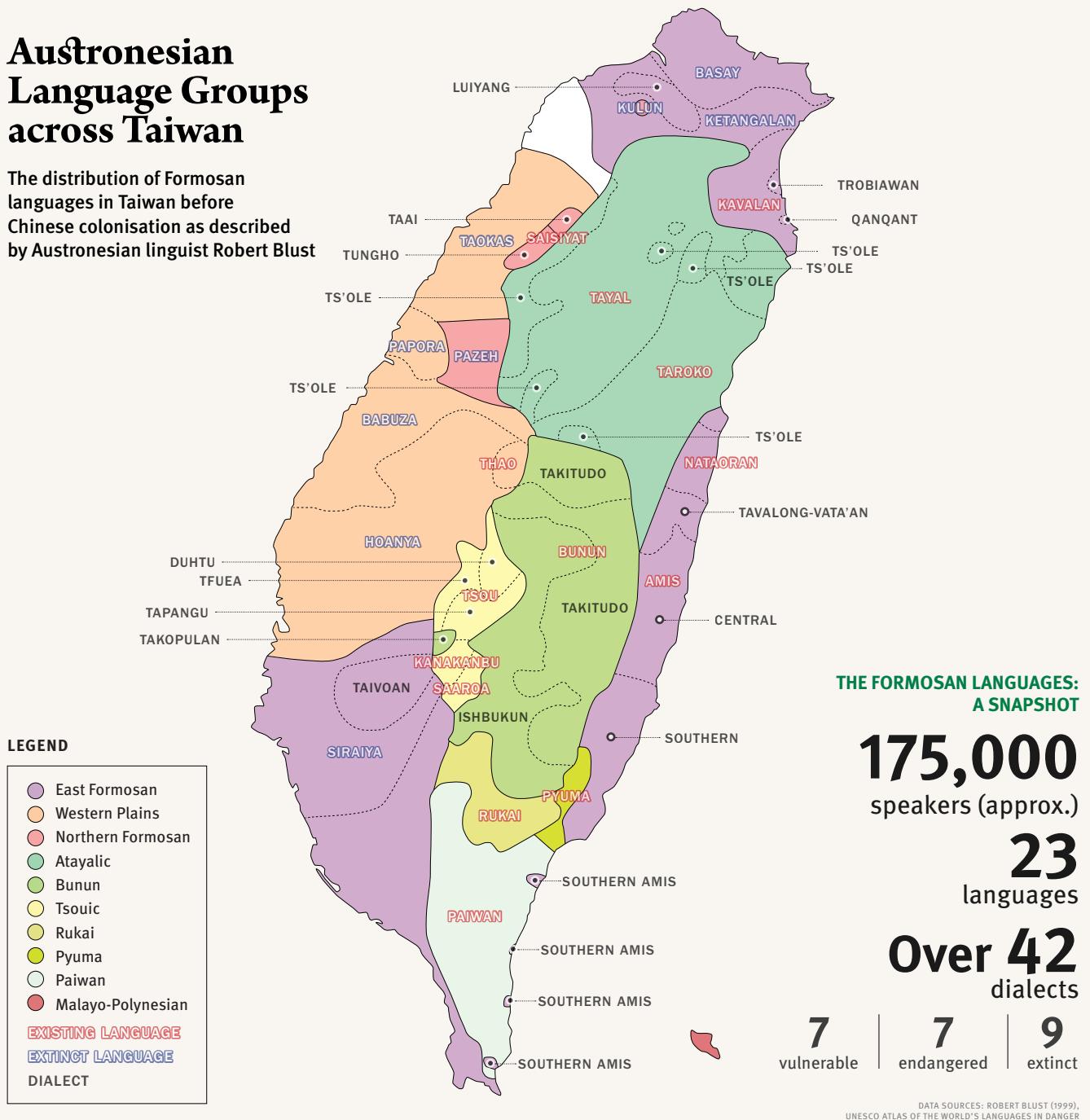
The Formosan languages are spoken by the people of Formosa (Taiwan's former name) and strongly resemble archaic Austronesian, which features words for things like rice, sugar cane,

BOTTOM A carving of aborigines dancing in traditional attire in the Taiwan Indigenous Peoples Cultural Park in Pintung county



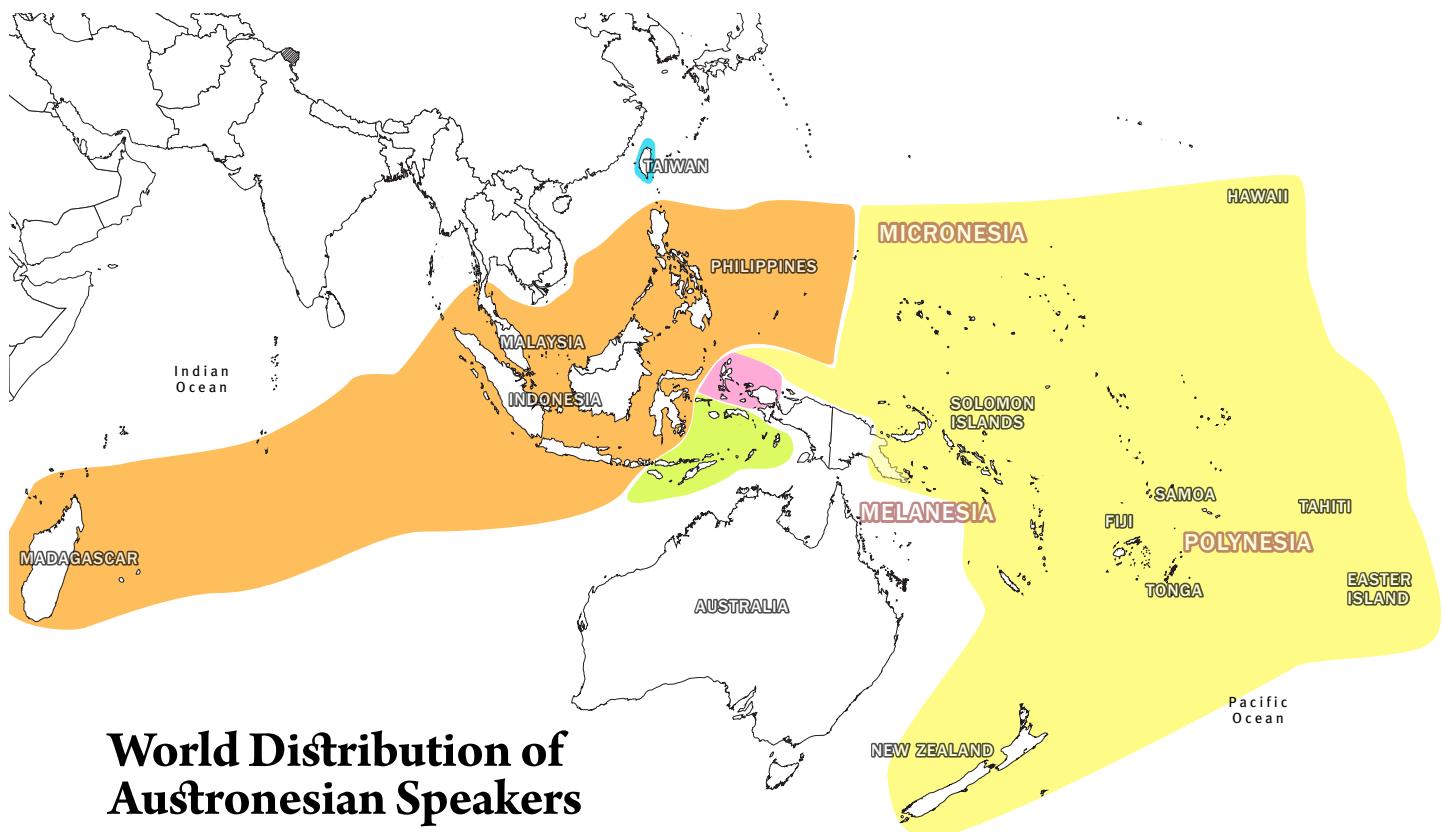
Austronesian Language Groups across Taiwan

The distribution of Formosan languages in Taiwan before Chinese colonisation as described by Austronesian linguist Robert Blust



TAIWAN TIMELINE





World Distribution of Austronesian Speakers

LEGEND

- Formosan
- Western Malayo-Polynesian
- Central Malayo-Polynesian
- South Halmahera-West New Guinea
- Oceanic

DATA SOURCE: GREENHILL, BLUST AND GRAY (2008)



PHOTO © SHUTTERSTOCK

LEFT The Amis harvest festival. The Amis are one of the largest Austronesian ethnic groups in Taiwan

FORMOSAN PHRASES

Kai bought a skirt.
Paiwan language
(*Icu a kun ni Kai.*)

What is this?
Tsou language
(*Cuma na eni?*)

I like this girl.
Puyuma language
(*Sagar ku kan dini na bu labu layan.*)

Dongi ate this taro.
Amis language
(*Kumaenan ni Dongi kuni a tali.*)

SOURCE: CHIH-CHEN JANE TANG

water buffalo, and canoes – matching Neolithic finds in Taiwan. Nine of the 10 Austronesian language branches are Formosan languages spoken exclusively in the mountainous state.

On the other hand, Malayo-Polynesian languages are spoken by peoples in Southeast Asia and Oceania – suggesting that their ancestors could have been early Taiwanese immigrants. This ties in with hypotheses by

historians that as the Formosan population expanded, Austronesians emigrated southward, sailing as far as Madagascar, Hawaii and New Zealand.

Today, all the Formosan languages are vulnerable to extinction. The remaining speakers live mostly in East Taiwan, and more than half have migrated from their traditional villages to the cities. ◆ AG

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OUT OF THE WOODS

Holy Hermit Healers

Ruesi have wandered the Thai wilderness for hundreds of years. All but forgotten, these “wizards of the forest” are today seeing a gradual comeback, as they work their magic for the devotee in need



At the crack of dawn, *ruesi* Ketzmunee begins his morning prayer routine, blessing the forest and the spirits around his new open-air forest home



Text and Photos Francis Wilmer

Hidden among the paddy fields of a remote Thai province lies the home of a wizard.

In a bungalow on the outskirts of a small farming village in Uttaradit in Northern Thailand lives Ketsmunee, one of the country's few remaining *ruesi*.

The translation of *ruesi* falls somewhere between "forest sage", "monk" and "wizard". A spiritual descendant of the *rishi* of India – who are known for writing the *Vedas*, the first scriptures that formed the foundation of Hinduism, and living lives dedicated to searching for enlightenment – Thai *ruesi* have practices tied to Hinduism and animism, though they are considered lay members of the Buddhist community.

Portrayed in ancient statues and paintings, *ruesi* were once sought out to heal the sick, protect people against evil, and foretell the future. But after Theravada Buddhism swept the country at the turn of the last millennium, their influence waned, and they gradually faded from mainstream spiritualism.

Today, rumours of black magic, curses and even murder haunt *ruesi* practices. Most Thais have never seen one in the flesh, only on

television, where they are typically portrayed in period dramas as menacing forest sorcerers with sinister powers. But Ketsmunee chuckles when asked about these characterisations.

"I don't watch television, but I am nothing like how they portray us," he says. "I just like to be alone – to focus on my meditation, to bless the world around me."

Traditionally, *ruesi* live an austere life in imitation of the Lord Buddha, so as to gain a deeper understanding of the universe. The priorities of each individual differ: Some act as healers while others do fortune-telling, perform blessings, or sell love potions. Ketsmunee chose to spend the past five years meditating in various caves, and only just returned to the modern world, where he splits his time between his house and the nearby forest.

Despite the tattoos, dreadlocks and tiger skins, Ketsmunee cuts a serene figure in the wild. Strolling through the forest, he gestures with his staff to various plants, fruits, roots and mushrooms, pointing out which are poisonous and which can be eaten or boiled into tea.

RUESI:
MYSTERIOUS FOREST RECLUSES

POPULATION
Under
100

LANGUAGE
ภาษาไทย
Thai

RELIGIONS
 
Hinduism,
Buddhism
and animism



RIGHT *Ruesi* Ketsmunee lived in caves for five years using just his simple travelling kit





ABOVE Ruesi Phuttavet in his living room. It is here that disciples come to seek blessings

RIGHT Ruesi Chaichatree displays a prophecy he has foreseen, written in Lanna, the northern Thai language

"I lived with this for all those years in the caves," he says, patting his small bag. "You can find whatever you need in Nature, and if I get sick, I can always just heal myself with herbs."

Further north, among the foothills of the Mae Wang district, lies the home of another *ruesi*: Chaichatree, who goes by the nickname "Boo" (shorthand for "grandfather"). The elder *ruesi* has a silver beard and his typical work consists of performing various acts of sorcery.

"Some people opened a Thai spa in Japan, but business wasn't great, so they called me," he recounts. "I wrote a spell for them and put it in a sacred candle. I burnt the candle and said a prayer for them. Just like that, customers started to come in, and the business survived."

Chaichatree claims his staff holds power from *cankama*, a form of walking meditation. The longer he walks with it, the greater the blessings he can perform.

"Magic is everywhere!" he declares. "You see that guy in the film *Harry Potter*? He's got

RUESI REIGN

12TH CENTURY BCE

The *Vedas*, written by the *rishi* of India, form the foundations of Hindu belief

7TH CENTURY BCE

Rishi are said to visit the Lord Buddha as a child, acting as his teachers

2TH CENTURY

Hindu beliefs and *rishi* practices make their way to Thailand, Cambodia and Laos, creating *ruesi*

10TH CENTURY

As Theravada Buddhism dominates Thailand, *ruesi* numbers and influence significantly wane

2018

Thanks to social media and reconnection with traditional beliefs, *ruesi* are regaining acceptance and popularity

a magic stick, right? What is that stick?
The same as a *ruesi*'s staff, of course!"

It is precisely these magic powers that have drawn increasing numbers in recent years to begin seeking out the *ruesi* again. In a quaint suburban housing estate in Chiang Mai's Maejo municipality, a gaggle of people sip tea and mingle over blaring Thai holy music on the front lawn of a detached two-storey house. This is the home of a third *ruesi*, Phuttavet Khemmatevo, and he prefers the city life.

Sitting in the living room amid Buddhist and Hindu statues, Phuttavet facilitates a

"You see that guy in the film Harry Potter? He's got a magic stick, right? What is that stick? The same as a *ruesi*'s staff, of course!"

Chaichatree, elder *ruesi*

THE BARE NECESSITIES

In his bag: Ketsmunee

Despite spending years isolated in the wild, *ruesi* require remarkably few belongings. We take a peek at Ketsmunee's old kit:



1. Two monk robes for cold weather
2. Beaded necklace
3. Blanket
4. Sleeping mat
5. Book of holy texts
6. Leopard print hat
7. Linen bag





"I had a few close calls out there – bombs exploding, like, right next to me – and I'm certain that amulet saved my life"

Kai, *ruesi* believer

wai khru, or master worship ceremony – a practice commonly conducted in schools and temples across the country, but here with a *ruesi* twist. His devotees have come not only to pay their respects, but also in search of blessings and spiritual fulfilment.

One by one, they enter the room and fall to their knees at his feet. A large golden crown, moulded into the face of a *ruesi* god, is lifted over their heads as Phuttavet mutters a blessing. While some politely proffer their thanks and move on, others erupt into an

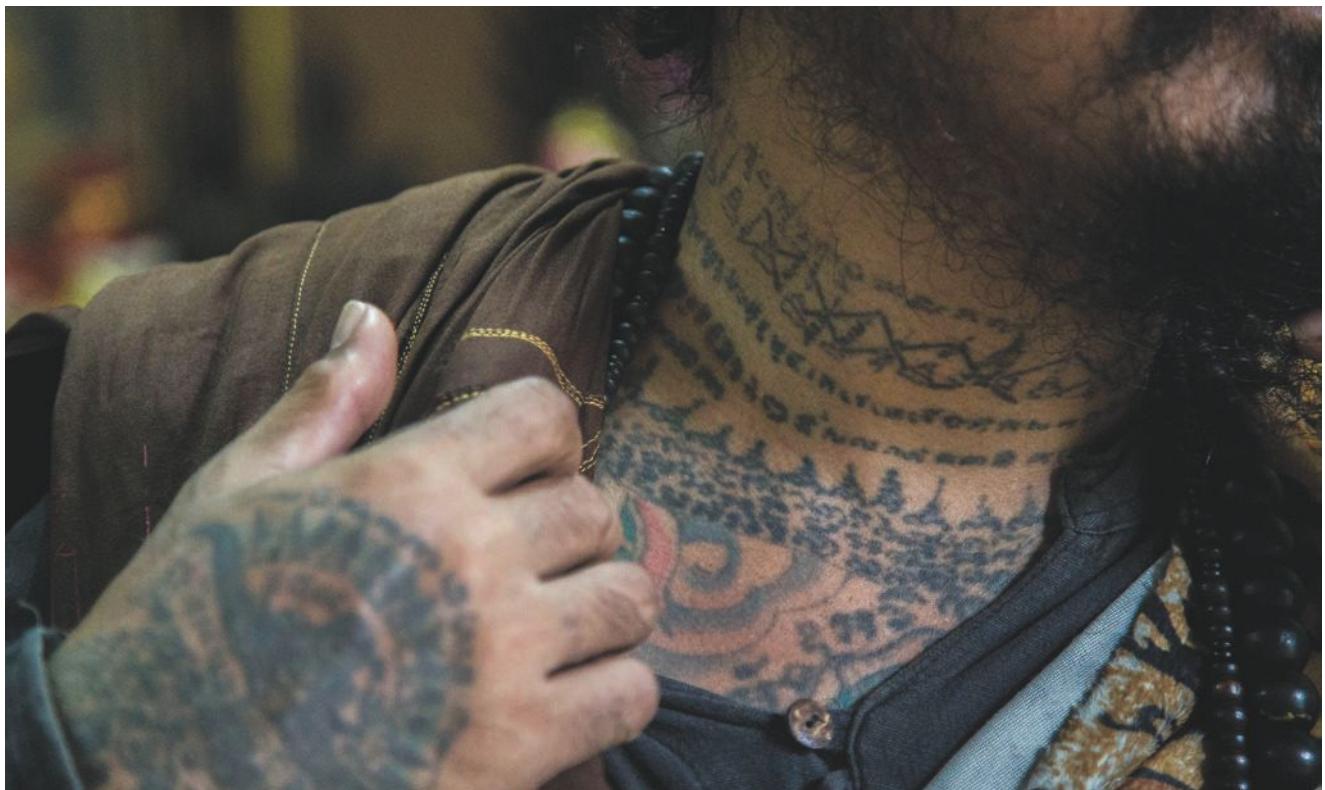
B BELOW Phuttavet prays over a disciple at a *wai khru* ceremony

uncontrollable frenzy. They howl and thrash about on the floor while assistants attempt to pin them down. "The mask unlocks the spirits inside of them, particularly if they have spirit tattoos (Sak Yant)," Phuttavet explains. "If they have a tattoo of a tiger, they will act like a tiger. This gives them strength and courage."

After the ceremony, an envelope makes its way around the crowd. As with monks, *ruesi* accept monetary donations, and Phuttavet has succeeded in capturing a niche but affluent market, for his worshippers ooze wealth and success – which they no doubt attribute to their piety. One such follower is Kai, an American-born Thai in his late 20s who faithfully makes a pilgrimage from California each year.

"I'm in the US Army, and before I was deployed to Afghanistan, I put on an amulet blessed by Phuttavet," he explains. "I had a few close calls out there – bombs exploding, like, right next to me – and I'm certain that amulet saved my life."





Estimates of how many *ruesi* exist in Thailand vary from as many as 100 to as few as 15. And after living in the shadows of the jungle for so many years, some of these hermits are beginning to adapt their practices to modern times.

Phuttavet, for one, has travelled internationally, speaks good English, owns three properties, and holds a master's degree in Thai from Chiang Mai University. His Facebook page boasts over 4,500 followers, and a fan page has even sprung up, managed by his disciples. Every few days, he posts Instagram images of tantalising amulets,

selfies while on pilgrimage, photos of himself receiving blessings from monks, and pictures of meetings with followers. Via social media and his online shop, he even sells charms, amulets and potions for every situation.

Ketmunee is also modernising his services. In 2013, with the help of a loyal disciple, he started a Facebook page, and now has over 3,000 friends. His posts are typically photos of himself alongside mystical amulets and quotes from Buddhist texts.

Phuttavet speculates that a new era of the *ruesi* is dawning thanks to technology, which is allowing more people to find out about the practice. "I receive messages from people asking me to train them (to become a *ruesi*)," he says. "Most of them are foreigners, actually, but some Thais, too." ♦ AG

ABOVE Ketmunee reveals a neck and torso heavily inked with enchanted Sak Yant tattoos

BELLOW LEFT Statues of ancient *ruesi* gods at a Buddhist temple in Chiang Mai's Mae Taeng district



FRANCIS WILMER is a writer and documentary producer based in Thailand and Myanmar. His work focuses on niche topics around identity, class and spiritualism, trying to bring coverage to overlooked regions and peoples. He is an editor for the Burmese media agency *Sakse* and has written for publications such as *The Diplomat*, *Southeast Asia Globe*, and the *Democratic Voice of Burma*.

NO FINAL FAREWELL

Back from the Dead

Eternal rest is a lifelong task for the indigenous people of South Sulawesi, who reunite to serve their dead relatives once every few years

Ne Duma Tata, 90, sits next to the bodies of his deceased wife, Ludia Rantebua (far right), and her sister, Maria Rantebua. Ludia passed away in 2010 at around the age of 70.







Risvan Patale weeps over the body of his recently-deceased mother, Esther. She must be offered food on a daily basis, because the family believe her spirit is still present and needs to eat





Text and Photos Claudio Sieber

RIGHT Relatives get rid of the insects on the body of Nene Datu, who died 35 years ago

BOTTOM RIGHT Torajan men move a coffin to a new graveyard during Ma'nene

Risvan Patale cries for his mummified mummy.

But the preservation is intentional. Esther Pasaru is considered a *toma kula*, a deceased person who hasn't yet been buried, according to the practices of the indigenous people of Indonesia's mountainous Tana Toraja Regency. From a young age, the members of this community learn to live alongside their dead in a practice known as Aluk To Dolo, or "Way of the Ancestors", placing food, water and cigarettes near the bodies of late relatives, whom they treat as merely ill.

For Patale's mother – who died but three days ago from a heart attack – the family makes the Torajan specialty: pork and rice cooked in bamboo, proffered with fresh flowers daily near her withered feet.

It may be several months – or even several decades – before her body will be buried, for a funeral in these mountains is quite the spectacle. Involving the slaughter of tens – sometimes up to hundreds – of water buffalo and the hiring of shamans to guide the spirits of the deceased from the village to heaven, one such production can cost wealthy families up to half a million US dollars. While they

slowly save up, the bones of the dead continue hanging out around the *tongkonan*, or ancestral house, with the odour of formalin used to mummify the body neutralised by dried plants and herbs.

Even after burial, Torajan bodies aren't consigned to the soil. Every few years, their well-preserved bones are taken out of stone graves by relatives for dutiful polishing, then clothed in updated fashions and carefully returned in a ritual known as Ma'nene. Family members hold feasts to honour the departed, sharing stories of their loved ones at mass reunions.

TORAJA:
INDONESIA'S MOUNTAIN PEOPLE

POPULATION
650,000

LANGUAGE
Toraja-Sa'dan and five other dialects from the Austronesian languages

RELIGIONS

Animism

"Cleaning the corpses is basically like cleaning a room. It's a precious event to honour our ancestors and to gather again"

Esram Jaya, Torajan





“It’s hard to keep the practices of our ancestors alive, since there are no written records of how to execute them. That there are 7,777 rituals combined doesn’t help”

Tato Dena, Torajan priest

“Cleaning the corpses is basically like cleaning a room,” says Esram Jaya, who returned from a mining job in Laos for the family’s Ma’nene ritual. “It’s a precious event to honour our ancestors and to gather again.”

According to archaeologists, Aluk To Dolo practices date back 900 years. One source of this bizarre tradition is a tale passed from generation to generation of Toraja: A man named Pong Rumasek was once hunting in the nearby hills when he encountered an abandoned corpse under a tree. After the kind Rumasek wrapped the skeleton in his own clothes and gave it a proper burial, he was blessed with luck and wealth for the remainder of his days. Since then, villagers believe that spirits reward them for acts of charity toward the dead.

Modern practices, like sending the elderly to retirement homes or outsourcing funeral care, will likely shock a typical Toraja. Yet these villagers are by no means unaffected by modern conventions: They use mobile phones, and their youth go to metropolitan Jakarta for studies. Many are beginning to voice unhappiness that these extravagant funerals saddle them with debt and

THE TORAJA: A HISTORY

19TH CENTURY

Austronesian immigrants migrate to Sulawesi and form villages. They move into mountainous areas to better protect themselves during wars with Muslim settlers

1906

The Dutch invade Sulawesi. Missionaries begin converting the Toraja to Christianity

1965

Indonesia achieves independence. Citizens must declare themselves one of five major religions: Hinduism, Christianity, Confucianism, Buddhism, and Islam

1969

In order to legally recognise Torajan beliefs, Aluk To Dolo is classified as a Hindu sect

1990

The Tana Toraja Regency becomes a tourist destination. The Toraja are mainly Christian



FAR LEFT Buffalo are slaughtered in a bamboo arena at a funeral in Lo'ko Uru. Some 800 guests will attend the five-day event

LEFT During Ma'nene season in Panggala village, Djim Sambara's family props up his re-dressed corpse next to a photo of him in military uniform

BELLOW Clara holds her dead sister, Arel, who died seven years ago at the age of six due to a fever

deprive them of pleasures like buying new motorbikes or going on holidays to nearby diving paradise Raja Ampat.

Says Tato Dena, a Torajan priest: "It's hard to keep the practices of our ancestors alive,



since there are no written records of how to execute them. That there are 7,777 rituals combined doesn't help."

Because Aluk To Dolo has never been recognised as an official religion by the Indonesian government, treaties signed in recent decades between Toraja and Christian priests allowing the preaching of the gospel in villages has led most of the population to convert, threatening the continuity of customs like having "weathermen" use their magic powers to keep the skies rain-free for specific funeral hours.

"I intended to hire a weatherman, but my family intervened, saying they prefer praying to Jesus," says 52-year-old Yohanis at a Toraja funeral for his father in the town of Sereale. "Unfortunately, they are getting too modern for such absurdities." ♦ AG

CLAUDIO SIEBER is currently wandering Southeast Asia. The emerging photojournalist has been featured in over 30 publications, including the *New York Post*, *Terra Mater*, *Geo* and *The Guardian*. He specialises in recording the traditions and lifestyles of various Asian cultures, and hopes his photos can create a more understanding and tolerant society.

To watch Claudio's video series on Aluk To Dolo, visit www.asiangeo.com.

TORAJA DEATH RITES

Every funeral follows the same four steps. Only buffalo numbers differ



① A temporary stadium is built



② There's singing, dancing, and an introduction of all attendees



③ Buffalo are slaughtered. The last breath of the first buffalo marks the person's official death



④ Burial in the grave



FEATURE | PERANG API

RENEWAL RITUAL

Baptism by Fire

**Sparks fly as the people of Bali see
their old wrongs go up in smoke
on New Year's Eve**





Text and Photos Lester V. Ledesma

Tonight, Nagi's locals are unusually riled up.

It's as hot as Hades in the typically sleepy village, and a massive bonfire of coconut husks and dried palm leaves crackles and hisses, its orange glow illuminating a tiny but crowded community square. Men are gathered around the blaze, clad in nothing but checkered sarongs, whooping and screaming with their hands in the air. Fists pound bare chests glistening with sweat.

It's almost Nyepi. It's time for the fire war.

Perang api is one tradition few Balinese celebrate, and fewer outsiders know about. While the practices associated with the Hindu New Year's Eve are well documented – a day of enforced silence, fasting and meditation – this little-known ritual takes place at 6pm in a handful of neighborhoods in central Bali on *pengrupukan*, the day preceding Nyepi.

LEFT Their bodies covered in sweat and ash, the men of Nagi village in central Bali start the customary Nyepi parade after concluding their ritual fire fights

**ISLAND OF THE GODS: HOW BALI CAME TO BE****20TH CENTURY BCE**

Bali is inhabited by migrating Austronesian Taiwanese peoples

14TH CENTURY

The Hindu Majapahit Empire of Java, which rules parts of Sumatra, Borneo, Sulawesi and Papua, founds a Balinese colony

15TH CENTURY

Majapahit scholars, artists, priests and musicians flee to Bali, transforming the community to a primarily Hindu one

16TH CENTURY

Bali's golden era of art and governance. It begins trade with Holland

17TH CENTURY

The Gelgel Kingdom rules Bali, but political chaos spells its demise



To demonstrate bravery and courage, a Nagi villager runs barefoot through a mound of red hot coals. This glowing pile will subsequently be the battleground for the ritual firefight

19TH CENTURY

The Klungkung Kingdom rises, but the region fragments into Bali's current confederation of kingdoms. Bali is slowly colonised by the Dutch

1942

The island is invaded by the Japanese during World War II

1946

Bali returns to Dutch rule and is included as an administrative district

1949

Indonesia wins independence from Dutch rule

1958

The Bali province is created. The capital is first Singaraja, then Denpasar



Fearing the work of evil spirits, locals performed an exorcism by throwing burning coconut husks at each other. Those hit by the sparks were believed to be cured

Perang api, literally “fire fight”, is said to have originated from the 16th century, when the Karangasem Regency was struck by a plague. Fearing the work of evil spirits, locals performed an exorcism by throwing burning coconut husks at each other. Those hit by the sparks were believed to be cured, thus cementing the beginnings of a time-honoured ritual in the area’s history.

These days, advocates of the practice no longer seek salvation from illness, but to symbolically banish wrongful deeds and negativity accumulated over the past year.

To the villagers, nothing could be more appealing than the prospect of getting branded by smoldering fruit. With nervous smiles on their faces, the men first take turns running through the embers to demonstrate their inner strength and ability to overcome fear. The blaze is extinguished, leaving behind a bed of red-hot husks. A Hindu priest sprinkles purified water on the people to protect them in the imminent battle. Then they’re split into two factions to square off.

A village elder holds up a loudspeaker. “Let the *perang api* begin!”

It’s chaos. War cries erupt in a free-for-all melee – and anything that moves is fair game. People pick up hunks of glowing coals and hurl their projectiles. Those caught in the crossfire suffer burn marks on their shirts and

RIGHT The *perang api* combatants square off, each of them throwing hunks of burning charcoal at each other

BELOW RIGHT A gamelan ensemble plays the music that accompanies this annual event

BELOW Too young to join in, village kids help collect the coconut husks that are burned to produce ammunition for the evening’s fire war





watery eyes – both from the momentary pain and the smoke. The air is thick with ash and bits of charcoal.

The soundtrack to all this commotion is a traditional *gamelan* ensemble, stationed a safe distance from the fray. The beats of the music intensify as the action grows frenzied. Combatants are enthusiastic but careful, and no serious injuries or quarrels erupt. (Even if accidents should occur, burns will be sprinkled with purified water and left to heal. No medication is provided.)

The fighting rages on for about an hour before the coals are spent. But it's not over.



Those caught in the crossfire suffer burn marks on their shirts and watery eyes – both from the momentary pain and the smoke

Sweating from the exertion, the tired men then drag massive *ogoh-ogohs* (demon effigies) onto sore shoulders, and herald the new year with a last hurrah of processions down the streets. By midnight, these statues too will be burning, along with the evil they symbolise, and the villagers will be ready to embrace the coming year purified by flame. ♦ AG

LESTER V. LEDESMA is an award-winning photojournalist whose work has been showcased in the Chobi Mela Festival of Light, the Singapore International Photography Festival, and publications like *CNN Travel*, *Hemispheres* and *Condé Nast Traveler*. Based in Singapore, he has covered Asia for over two decades, and continues to travel the region in search of topics involving local culture. He likes street food, cold beer, and a good story.

BALI: INDONESIAN PROVINCE



POPULATION
4.2
MILLION

LANGUAGE

ଓକ୍ତାମାନାମ୍ବି
Balinese

RELIGIONS

	Hinduism	84%
	Islam	13%
	Christianity	2%
	Buddhism	1%

DATA SOURCES: BALI ART AND CULTURE, MYSTIQUE EARTH, BALI TOUR, BALI GLORY



Bir Bahadur Shahi, one of the oldest Raute in the community, holds his little grandchild. Raute numbers have been rapidly dwindling in recent years, even as the tribe fights to remain independent from Nepalese society



MONKEY BUSINESS

Kings of the Dwindling Forest

Nepal's last hunting tribe subsists on primates as their main meal, a menu choice that's quickly slipping through their grasp



Text and Photos Ram Paudel

God said to set the screaming monkey free –

at least, that's what the Raute hunters believe. Though the men have gone to great lengths to capture the day's hard-won dinner, it is customary (and arguably rather forward-thinking) to release a male-female pair to ensure the langur population's sustainability. After all, it is to Dade Masto, the Raute's pagan god, that they owe the success of their hunt, and to whom they sacrifice a chick to pacify him for their primate hunting lest he let the sky fall down upon the Earth.

"If we don't keep God happy, he will say that monkeys are like our own children, and we can't kill and eat them," says Raute leader Mahin Bahadur Shahi. "That would be a disaster. If we can't hunt langurs, what will our people eat?"

Deity satisfied, the hunters walk the long route back to camp at the foot of the Himalayas. In the evening, they will distribute the pickings equally among the villagers. If a stranger arrives at mealtime, they hide their dinner: Outsiders must never lay eyes on it – nor see the Raute hunting – or it will mean immense bad luck on everyone's heads.

RIGHT Young Raute cut trees to make woodcrafts like bowls and trays. Males in the tribe learn to use tools and hunt monkeys, skills passed down the generations







Raj Bahadur Shahi, a Raute hunter,
poses in traditional clothing.



Kitap Shahi dons the colourful
jewellery typical of Raute women

**RAUTE:**
NEPAL'S LAST
NOMADS**POPULATION****150****LANGUAGE**

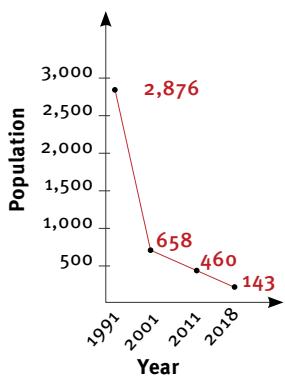
Raute, a Tibeto-Burman tongue

RELIGION

Animism

A DWINDLING POPULATION

Raute numbers are plummeting from forced relocation and sedentarisation



ABOVE A Raute settlement in an uncultivated forest meadow in Nepal's Deilekh district. Raute call these temporary camps *basti*



West Nepal's last hunter-gatherers still live in the wilderness, and for the most part subsist off the land. The exogamous tribe is split into four patrilineal clans, from which at least one man per family participates in the hunt – including boys as young as 12.

Often referred to as *ban ko raja* ("kings of the forest"), this small, closed society lives in huts made of branches, leaves and cloth. They hunt rhesus macaques, Assam macaques and Hanuman langurs, and make wooden household items from the timber of felled trees, which are exchanged for food from surrounding villages.

They hunt rhesus macaques, Assam macaques and Hanuman langurs, and make wooden household items from the timber of felled trees

Those who do manage to get grain and vegetables in exchange for their woodware are excluded from the day's meat spoils, since they already have food. But there is one exception.

TRIBAL BEGINNINGS**PRE 17TH CENTURY**

The Raute claim to be descended from a prince of the Sahi Thakuri kingdom

1981

The Nepal government attempts Raute sedentarisation. Some groups are relocated and no longer nomadic

1992

The community forest system prevents the nomadic Raute from cutting trees or harvesting forest plants

2009

Hunger and malnutrition rises in the tribe. Each Raute gets 1,000 rupees (about USD10) a month from the government

2016

The reticent Raute begin to interact with mainstream society. They speak Nepali when selling handmade craft items

SNEAKY SNARES

A Typical Monkey Hunt

What's the best way to trick a langur into becoming lunch? The tribe has an age-old method:

1. Hunters select a part of the forest well-populated with monkeys
 2. Using ashes, a shaman demarcates a certain area for hunting while chanting mantras. It is believed that monkeys within this boundary will fall into the nets
 3. Traps are laid strategically, propped up by trigger sticks
 4. The hunters divide into "screamers" and "herders". Screamers hide in the bushes and make strange calls that cause the monkeys to rush down from the trees. Herders run through the forest, driving the monkeys toward the nets by flapping their arms and trilling menacingly
 5. The panicked monkeys stampede into the nets.
- Any other captured animal is set free

TOOLS OF THE TRADE



Nets
for trapping monkeys



Axes
to kill captured prey



Sticks
to prop up traps



Knives
to gut the meat

DISSECTING DINNER

Spoils of War

After a successful hunt, the butchered animal is divvied up among specific social groups



Head
the hunter who killed
the first monkey



Body
other hunters



Tail
children



Heart/liver
elders, widows,
and the sick



Thigh
shamans



Raute Routes

The tribe hunts along monkey migration routes between the Siwalik Hills and the Himalayas





B BELOW Young girls pounding rice in handmade mortars. Rice is a major staple for the Raute, which they obtain from farmers in exchange for their woodcrafts

At harvest time, farmers owning nearby rice and corn fields offer a special deal to their hunter neighbours: Every monkey killed redeems a small sack of unhusked rice as thanks for guarding against a pack of plundering primates.

The success of securing such an arrangement depends on a farmer's luck, for

the Raute resettle every month or so along monkey migration routes. This trek takes them through a spectrum of terrain, from subtropical lowlands during the winter to mixed highlands in the monsoon season. Regardless of weather, hidden forest meadows and riverbanks are particularly favoured sites to drop anchor for a while.





“We say no to settlement, education and agriculture. We would rather die than give up our nomadic way of life”

Mahin Bahadur Shahi, Raute leader

The Raute have always been nomadic, and environmental knowledge is passed down orally – one open secret is how monkeys at the end of the rainy season have fat, delicious meat – but this primitive culture is now suffering a food crisis. Climate change has affected the rains that once watered the forest yams, berries and mushrooms with which they supplement their diet, and the monkeys they hunt are at risk of extinction.

Within the tribe, infant mortality and physical disability rates have climbed rapidly in recent years. Mothers often die in childbirth, and many Raute lack key vitamins

and proteins; the fact that using medicines violates the tribe’s ancient beliefs prevents modern help from reaching them.

The Nepalese government and human rights organisations have tried to offer the Raute plots of land on which to live and farm, and free education for their children. But the people resist assimilation, preferring to preserve their culture than be a part of a world they do not understand.

“We say no to settlement, education and agriculture. We would rather die than give up our nomadic way of life,” says leader Mahin.

Adds a hunter, Bir Bahadur: “God gives us all the monkeys that come into our nets.” ♦ AG

ABOVE Kapil Shahi prepares a meal for her family at home

RAM PAUDEL is a Nepalese photographer based in Germany. He has a degree in photography and media from Bielefeld University, and specialises in documentary photography. His work has been exhibited six times, and he has been featured in numerous publications and media websites. In 2015, he was shortlisted as a finalist for the *Photographer's Forum* photography contest.



HIGHLIGHTS

SINGAPORE

800 Young Writers Groomed at All In! Festival 2018

The writing and publishing industry in Singapore received a boost this March with the 10th All In! Young Writers Festival, an annual event that seeks to groom aspiring writers aged 13 to 25 aiming for careers in publishing, broadcasting, creative writing, and journalism.

Almost 800 youth from various schools were taught and mentored by a wide array of writing mentors and industry players – including filmmaker Saleem Hadi, novelist Samantha De Silva, and playwright T. Neshma – through seminars, training sessions and workshops to better understand the writing industry in Asia.

Besides facilitating contact between young writers and industry professionals, the festival also provides a platform for young writers to showcase their work locally and regionally through a series of writing competition, with categories including fiction, short stories, essays, and film.

The *ASIAN Geographic* Hot Soup School Challenge 2019 will be held in conjunction with All In! 2019 to encourage young people to read



PHOTO © SINGAPORE BOOK COUNCIL AND BEN CHIA

geographic publications and improve their general knowledge on the region.

As a media partner of the All In! Young Writer's Festival 2018, *ASIAN Geographic* will be publishing the winning entry of the festival's short fiction competition in a subsequent issue. Stay tuned!

ABOVE Speakers at the All In! Festival

RIGHT Souq Waqif in Doha, Qatar

CAMBODIA

Phnom Penh Welcomes New Skateboarding School for Youth

Young people in the Cambodian capital Phnom Penh now have a place to test out their wheels with the city's new Skate School, comprising a 500-square-metre skate park, a classroom, a library, and a large green space. Launched earlier this year by non-profit Skateistan – an organisation that works to empower youth through skateboarding and educational opportunities – the new facility will benefit children in the area, with a particular focus on girls and youth living with disabilities. The new Skate School was opened with performances by international and local female skaters including Sky Brown, Mimi Knoop, and Kouy "Tin" Chansangva.

Skateistan is working with multiple partner organisations in the city to integrate into the community and provide a safe space for local children to learn and play for years to come.



PHOTO © JEREMY MEEK

The organisation has been operating in the country since 2011, and currently has 240 beneficiaries in Phnom Penh, just over half of which are girls.

ABOVE The opening ceremony of Phnom Penh's Skate School



PHOTO © QATAR TOURISM AUTHORITY

QATAR

Visa-Free Entry to Qatar Now Available for Citizens of 80 Countries

Citizens of 80 countries – including China, Singapore, Japan, India and Indonesia – will now be able to enter Qatar visa-free and stay for up to 60 days, the Qatari embassy announced in August last year.

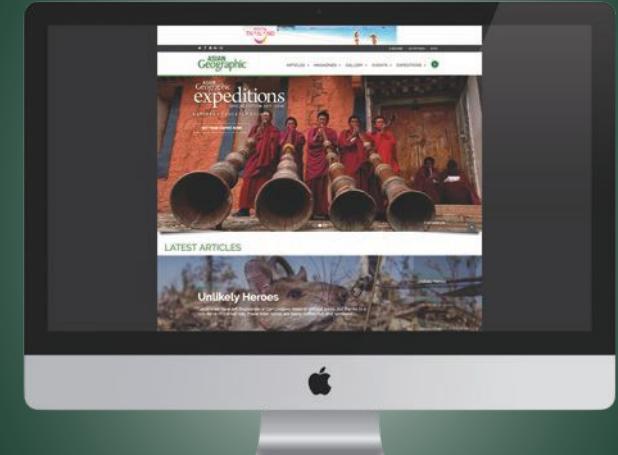
To give tourists a better understanding of what to expect when visiting the country, the Arab state has published a guide to Qatari culture and traditions, such as pearl diving and folk dancing.

Visitors can expect to see local falconers and their birds hunt down the houbara bustard – a bird that migrates south across Qatar – during the winter hunting season, and discover more about the oysters that grow in the waters around the Qatar Peninsula, which is said to produce some of the world's finest pearls. Today, locals no longer harvest these oysters given the booming artificial pearl industry, but in the past, pearl diving was a common livelihood for Qataris.

Another cultural highlight is the *arda*, a synchronised folk dance performed by men at weddings to the beat of handheld drums. Performers still carry swords and wear cross-belts in a nod to its history as a war dance. Visitors will also be treated to warm Qatari hospitality in *majlis* – places set aside for welcoming visitors with food and drink – where they will be served *kahwa*, tiny cups of coffee brewed with cardamom and served from a quaint-looking coffee pot.

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TENDER MELODIES

Music to Her Ears

With sophisticated social proceedings typical of subdued Filipino society, gallant gentlemen once wooed their women with sweet songs

A typical courtship in modern Metro Manila might feature texting as much as any other smartphone-loving Asian city, but its older predecessor plays out much more like the romantic music videos today's youth peruse eagerly on YouTube.

Still in practice a few generations ago, the Filipino ritual of *harana* takes its rhythm from Spanish *habanera* dance music, and its roots from the traditionally restrained response of a coy Filipina towards her beau.

In an undeniably passionate scene, a man will ready himself and his guitar at night under

BELOW The *haranistas* of the film *Harana* (2012) recording on set

RIGHT A photographic print captioned:
Where softly sighs of love the light guitar – a Visayan-Filipino serenade

“We’re going to record them and immortalise them. So that the next generation will realise that there was once a time when romance flourished through *harana*”

Benito Bautista, director, *Harana*



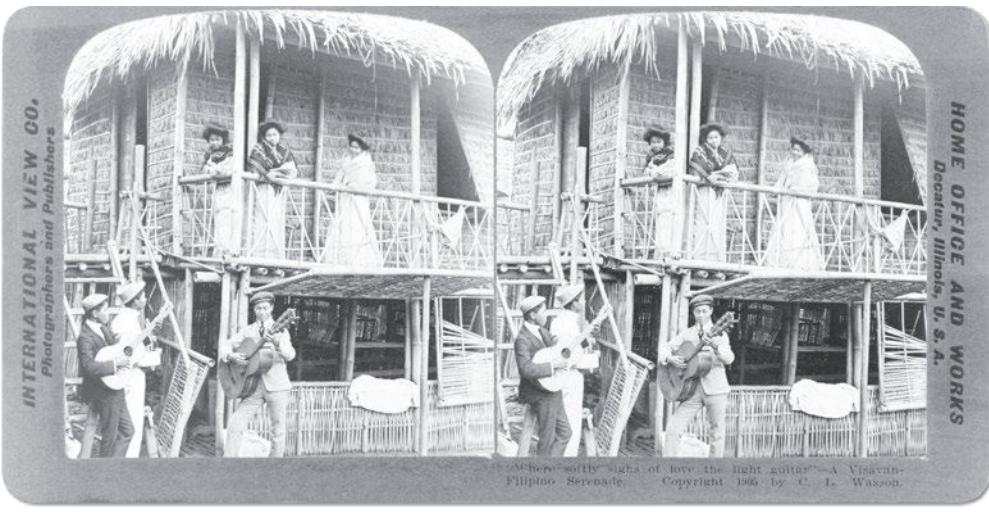


PHOTO © C.L. WASSON

the bedroom window of the woman he desires, accompanied by a number of friends and professional musicians, called *harananistas*, for support. Using a customary set of songs, the troubadour then serenades his ladylove for the entire neighbourhood to hear, bolstered by his entourage.

The lyrics of typical *harana* songs use archaic Tagalog. Beginning with a gentle strumming of the guitar as a prelude to the oncoming nocturne, the man addresses the woman directly. Through his impassioned tunes, he may ask her if she is asleep, or appeal for her to look out of the window.

Should the window stay shut, the rejected suitor will leave, but if the object of his affections shows herself and listens to the ballad, she may either respond with a few lines of her own, or invite him into the house, where he then presents gifts to the family as a symbol of his matrimonial intentions. Despite his success, the suitor has yet to seal the deal – it is not uncommon to require several rounds

of *harana* to prove a supplicant's persistence to a discerning recipient.

Another occasion for the ritual is when women from other villages or cities visit, and men organise a *harana* session to catch a glimpse of the new arrivals and introduce themselves with chaste formality.

This vanishing “serenade of fervent love, tongue-tied of naivety”, as described in the poem *Hoy, Pinoy, Bangon Na!* (*Hey, Filipino, Rise Up!*) by Filipino poet and novelist Gumercindo Rafanan has been immortalised in its namesake, award-winning film *Harana* (2012), which garnered critical acclaim in the international film festival circuit. Based on the experiences of its Filipino director and cast, including acclaimed musician Florante Aguilar and septuagenarian *harananistas* Celestino Aniel, Romeo Bergunio and Felipe Alonzo, the meta-cinema piece asks society the same question it does of its protagonist: Will *harana* vanish into tomorrow’s woefully silent night? ♦ AG

SONG SETS

Traditional *harana* sessions follow a structured protocol consisting of five stages. Each stage has a designated set of songs



Set 1: Arrival

Songs announce the suitor's presence



Set 2: Courting

Songs declare admiration for the woman



Set 3: Response

The woman sings back lines imbued with meaning: either reciprocity, uncertainty or disinterest



Set 4: Reaction

If rejected, the suitor's songs are about heartbreak



Set 5: Departure

Songs bid farewell, showing how unwilling the suitor is to leave

HARANA HISTORY

1500S OR BEFORE Mindanao locals use <i>kapanirong</i> serenades as a way for men and women to get introduced	1600S Under Spanish rule, the guitar is introduced to the Philippines. <i>Harana</i> songs develop from Spanish-Mexican music and indigenous music	1800S <i>Harana</i> rituals reach peak popularity and use in Filipino society	1898 Western notions of romance become popular. <i>Harana</i> is now practised mostly in rural villages of remote provinces	1970 <i>Harana</i> traditions have all but faded with modern courtship
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INTANGIBLE VALUE

Precious Conventions

Mongolia boasts a unique blend of traditions born of the country's varied environments: the steppe, the desert, and the city. We look at three iconic practices with UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage status





A caravan of nomads in Mongolia's
Uvs province

Text Lim Jun Xi

Howling winds constantly tear across the Gobi.

Its winters are among Earth's coldest, and the massive summer dust storms offer scant respite. Nothing much grows on these barren plains – but, like other desert communities, the nomads that regularly migrate through this area and across the steppe of the north have discovered the best way to cope with the lack of food and constantly shifting sands: the two-humped Bactrian camel, a hallmark of Mongolian life.

With their naturally wide soles and legendary endurance for low water, food and temperature levels, every camel is as precious as family to nomads. Apart from transport, they provide milk rich in protein and calcium, which features in steaming cups of *suutei tsai*, a salty local milk tea. Milk can also be made into butter and cheese – whose long shelf life is invaluable on arduous migrations far from towns and cities. In fact, Mongols need their camels so much they rarely slaughter them, preferring to dine on the meat of goats, sheep, and horses. And to add to their list of charming qualities, the fluffy ungulates are also said by herders to have the softest hearts.

RIGHT Sunset in Mongolia. Pictured is a yurt, the traditional home for nomads

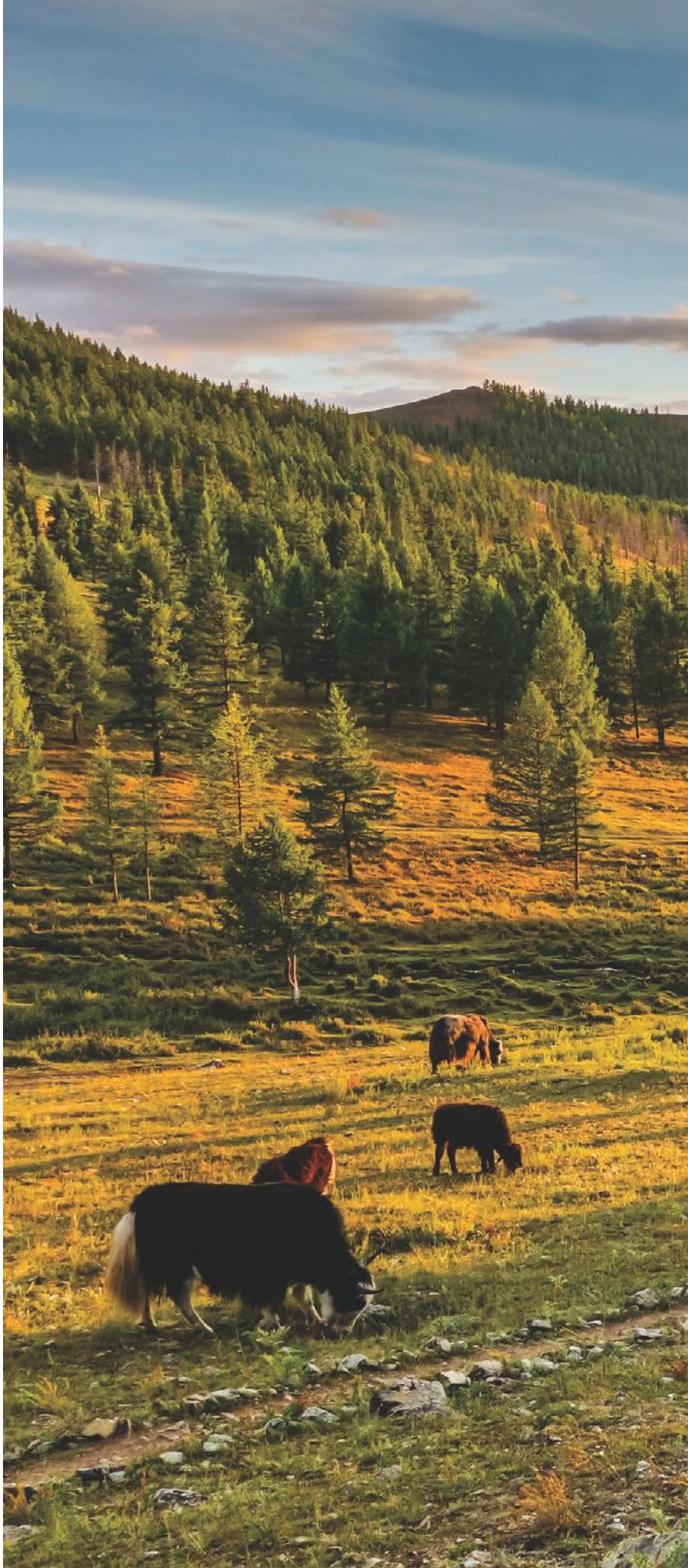






PHOTO © SHUTTERSTOCK



EXPERIENCE CAMEL COAXING

WHEN

The weather is most bearable in summer, between June and September

WHERE

Camel coaxing is a highly spontaneous event, but the highest chances of running into one are in Bayanlig District in Bayankhongor Province

HOW

From Bayankhongor Airport, take a bus or taxi to Bayanlig District. Travel permits may be required

But camels aren't completely desert-proof, and females only give birth to one calf every second year (after a 13-month pregnancy) to cope with the harsh conditions. This severely limits their numbers. There is the additional risk of losing mother or baby during labour; even if both survive, the exhausted female might reject her calf, and it will die.

To save as many mother-calf pairs as possible, the community engages in a curious, centuries-old ritual called camel coaxing, which begins at dusk or dawn. Hoping for a bereaved female to foster an orphan or reconcile a calf with its mother, everyone dresses up in traditional garb and sits in a circle around the pair. Once the sun touches the horizon, a musician strums a *morin khuur*, or horsehead fiddle, and the herders begin chanting a *khöös* song, containing petitions to the spirits of Nature. Camel milk may also be proffered to the gods.

Initially, the female camel can lash out at the calf violently, spitting and biting.

To save as many mother-calf pairs as possible, the community engages in a curious, centuries-old ritual

Observing her behaviour, the herders then change the *khöös* tune, weaving in poetry and song, or mimicking the sound of camels running and calling. These incantations continue for up to 12 hours, by which time the camel pair, and watching audience, are weeping with emotion. Adult and calf are henceforth bonded. Herders say that this practice embodies the importance of patience in developing relationships.

Despite the tenderness of this ritual, Mongols were once feared for their savage temperament, with no better representative than the warlord Genghis Khan, who in 1206 brought the Eurasian continent to its



PHOTO © 123RF

knees and formed the largest contiguous empire in history. Marching to invasions far from home, Khan's elite horseback archers found themselves bored at night, and began flicking pieces of horn at small sheep bones to maintain the dexterity of their bow fingers. The practice caught on in camp, and over time rules were laid out, creating one of the country's best sources of entertainment: knucklebone shooting.

Today, players use a domino-like ivory tablet in a wooden bracket to knock down a stack of 30 animal knucklebones on a wooden platform five metres away. The fallen bones clatter down into a hole and are counted – the more bones, the better – while half the watching crowd roars in approval, and the other yells in disappointment.

Such a sight is common throughout Mongolia, and everyone from children to adults participates. Elderly players are allowed to shoot with a crossbow-like instrument, called a *havchaakhai*, to put them on an even footing with fitter competitors. Accompanying the game are the communal *borjigon* chants: Much like football cheers, the style and tone of these differ based on the outcome of the shot.



EXPERIENCE KNUCKLEBONE SHOOTING

WHEN

Mid-July, during the Naadam Festival

WHERE

National Sports Stadium in Ulaanbaatar

HOW

From Chinggis Khaan International Airport, take a bus to the stadium



PHOTO © WIKICOMMONS

FAR LEFT A Bactrian camel rests in front of its owner's yurt

TOP A young woman in traditional dress during the Naadam Festival in Ulaanbaatar

LEFT Children play with animal knucklebones

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FAR LEFT An 18th-century document containing the Mongolian script

LEFT Inside a Mongolian yurt in the Bayan-Olgii province

But even the losers don't take things too hard, since the game is less of a competition and more of an excuse for a rowdy gathering.

Despite the Mongols' reputation as a warlike people – and their popular games being derived from precisely such pursuits – their sophisticated side shines through in Mongolian calligraphy, a handwriting technique that delineates the classical Mongolian script, Hudum Mongol Bichig, in vertical lines on paper made of mulberry bark. The characters are formed using a brush and consist of 90 letters connected vertically by continuous strokes to create words. This calligraphy often adorns stationery on special

occasions, such as official invitations and love letters, as well as old Mongolian emblems, coins and stamps.

Created in the 7th century, Hudum Mongol Bichig is the world's only vertical script written from left to right. Used widely until the forceful introduction of Cyrillic by the Soviet Union on Outer Mongolia, it is dying out today – and along with it the calligraphy with which it is inscribed. To save the art, three middle-aged scholars are voluntarily training young calligraphers, but mastery takes years of disciplined practice, a reality that tests the patience of youngsters.

Though the Gobi is harsh, progress is still harsher, and Mongolia is seeing many customs, like camel coaxing and calligraphy, enter UNESCO's List of Intangible Cultural Heritage in Need of Urgent Safeguarding as they fade from use. But the nomadic lifestyle is finding ways to survive, and for now, those who come across a caravan of nomads in the desert can still expect to be offered a warm welcome, shelter in a yurt, and a cup of salty tea made with camel's milk. ♦ AG

Though the Gobi is harsh, progress is still harsher, and Mongolia is seeing many customs in need of urgent safeguarding as they fade from use



EXPERIENCE MONGOLIAN CALLIGRAPHY

WHEN
Year-round

WHERE
The 13th Century Camp, which lets visitors experience traditional life during the rule of Genghis Khan

HOW
From Chinggis Khaan International Airport or Ulaanbaatar railway station, drive 2 hours to Erdene sum, Tuv province



Craftsmen in Chiang Mai
making silverware



CRAFTY KINGDOM

Made in Chiang Mai

Chiang Mai was once a centre of knowledge, architecture and commerce, and attracted settlers who brought with them handicrafts like silverware, umbrellas and woodcarvings

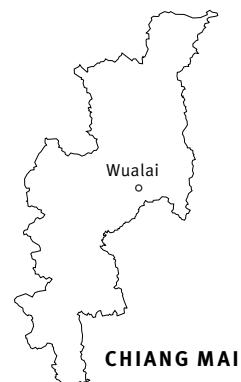
Text and Photos
Tourism Authority of Thailand

Silverware-Making

Wualai's beautiful silverware originates from the time King Mangrai established Chiang Mai in the 13th century as the capital of the Lanna Kingdom. After negotiating with the city of Bagan to bring Burmese craftsmen to Chiang Mai to teach local townspeople the artistry of silver-crafting, the city's local silverware industry was created and the skills have since been carried down through the generations.

Almost every house had a small factory, and people bought silver from Chinese merchants in Chiang Mai's downtown to forge silverware for daily use and for sale: bowls, paddle trays, and the like. Men moulded and forged the silver, while women carved and sold the finished pieces.

As trade with different areas progressed, the raw material for silverware pieces grew varied – from Burmese rupees to coins from China's autonomous region of Xishuangbanna Dai. Today, silver accessories and decorations are also popular, featuring prominently on the roofs of temples like Wat Sri Suphan – also known as the Silver Temple.



EXPERIENCE SILVERWARE-MAKING

WHEN
9am–5pm daily

WHERE
Wualai Walking Street,
Wualai village

HOW
From Chiang Mai International Airport, it's a 15-minute taxi ride



EXPERIENCE UMBRELLA-MAKING

WHEN
8.30am–5pm daily

WHERE
Bo Sang village,
San Kamphaeng Road

HOW
From Chiang Mai
International Airport, it's a
30-minute taxi ride

Umbrella-Making

In Thailand, umbrellas are an important symbol of royalty. Thai monarchs sit on thrones under nine-tiered umbrellas, with the tiers representing the eight points of the compass and the Buddhist concept of protection from suffering and harm.

Thai umbrellas were said to have originated from a monk called Phra Intha, who travelled to Myanmar and discovered people making oiled umbrellas using mulberry bark, which kept people dry as well as cool. Impressed, the monk took samples back to his home of Bo Sang village and taught the villagers how to make them. The people then added artistic flourishes to the umbrellas – painting typical Thai symbols like elephants and rice fields – and the industry grew as umbrella-making provided people with a source of income during the rainy season.

Thai umbrellas were said to have originated from a monk called Phra Intha, who travelled to Myanmar

Bo Sang remains the centre of Chiang Mai's handmade umbrella production. Set up in 1941 by the village craftsmen, the Bo Sang Umbrella Making Cooperative is dedicated to maintaining the traditions and craftsmanship of the trade. These umbrellas are so vital to the local economy, they're celebrated in a three-day umbrella festival every January: the Bo Sang Umbrella and Sankampaeng Handicraft Festival, which sees the streets strung with the colourful *sa* umbrellas.



RIGHT Women paint umbrellas with Thai motifs in Chiang Mai



PHOTO © SHUTTERSTOCK

Woodcarving

Thai woodcarving, called Kruang Mai Cham Lak, is considered one of the country's traditional art forms. Done in an ancient artistic style, carvings are divided into three types: bas-relief, deep-relief and round-relief. Bas-relief has flat carvings only on the front of the wood, with few curves. Deep-relief carvings have three dimensions: depth, width, and height. Examples of round-relief carvings include Buddha sculptures, which have been carved on every side. Since wood decays easily compared to cement or brick, Thai wood art is very rare, and a work can take years to complete, requiring high levels of patience and artistic skill by the carver. Today, skilled craftsmen are rarely found, and few are willing to become disciples.

Thai wood art is very rare, and a work can take years to complete, requiring high levels of patience

Baan Tawai village is a renowned source of woodcarving products in Chiang Mai. Craftsmen with over 40 years of experience meticulously hand-carve these wooden sculptures; the village has exported so many that it has been named "the woodcarving village". To showcase the woodcarvings and support this semi-rural area, Baan Tawai was named one of the OTOP Tourism Villages of Thailand featuring local crafts. ♦ AG



EXPERIENCE WOODCARVING

WHEN
8am–5pm daily

WHERE
Baan Tawai village,
90 Moo 2, Baan Tawai

HOW
From Chiang Mai International Airport, it's a 40-minute taxi ride

UNDERWATER WORLD

Diving in Paradise

Malaysia boasts some of the planet's finest dive sites, and its pristine waters are rich in marine life

Text and Photos Tourism Malaysia

Pulau Sipadan

Lying just off the northeast coast of Borneo is Sipadan, Malaysia's only oceanic island. This magical isle was made famous by renowned French oceanographer, Jacques-Yves Cousteau, in his documentary *Borneo: The Ghost of the*

Sea Turtle. But healthy numbers of green turtles are by no means the only creatures you'll find here: Sipadan offers prolific marine life of all shapes and sizes.

Those with the Cavern Diver certification can explore the same mysteries that Cousteau and his crew did almost 30 years ago at Turtle Cavern. Inside lies a macabre chamber of skeletons belonging to turtles and dolphins that got lost in the labyrinth of tunnels, became disorientated and drowned.

Elsewhere, rare and peculiar fish species call Sipadan's corals home, including porcupine pufferfish, clown triggerfish, unicornfish and Moorish idols. Giant moray eels lurk in their grottos, observing the traffic going past, while huge gorgonian sea fans protrude like the plume of a proud peacock. Hundreds of fearsome-looking barracudas sometimes form a grey wall from the sheer weight of their numbers. Bumphead parrotfish often rumble past in bison-like hordes. A night dive may

— EXPERIENCE **PULAU SIPADAN**

WHEN

All year round, but visibility is best from April to August

WHERE

Off the east coast of Sabah

HOW

From Kuala Lumpur, take a flight to Tawau Airport, and then arrange a boat ride from nearby Pulau Mabul

BELOW Diving among schools of fish at Pulau Sipadan





PHOTO © SHUTTERSTOCK

yield a chance encounter with these giant fish: Bumpheads weave a transparent cocoon before they sleep to keep their scent from predators, and this nocturnal sight is as impressive as that in the daytime.

Batfish, Moorish idols, hawkfish, groupers and coral trout are other common inhabitants, as are the resident whitetip reef sharks and grey reef sharks. Leaffish and the odd-looking crocodilefish might also be spotted. Corals crowd the reef in a riot of colour: Large black corals and barrel sponges vie for attention with gigantic soft tree corals, as well as anemones and their playful clownfish.

The Islands of Johor

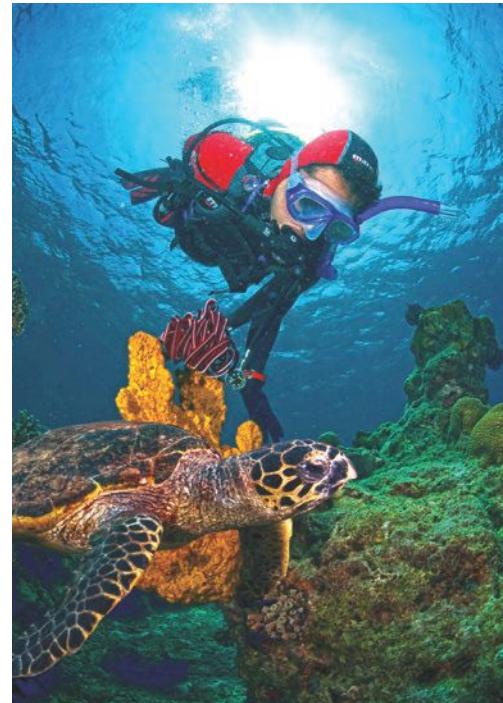
The southern state of Johor is blessed with beautiful islands located far from the mainland. Pulau Aur boasts pristine deep waters teeming with pelagic fish, while Pulau Lang offers sightings of green turtles, bumphead parrotfish and blue-spotted stingrays, a common inhabitant of the Malaysian coast. The corals in this area shelter a colourful variety of reef fish, cephalopods and crustaceans, as well as the beautiful but elusive Spanish dancer nudibranch.

Adventurous visitors will want to seek out the Zero wreck located south of Aur. Thickly encrusted with corals, this sunken

Japanese fighter plane is home to teeming marine life like the comical dogface pufferfish, which prefers to swim solo and attracts plenty of attention for its elongated face and box-like body.

ABOVE Corals off the coast of Sipadan Island

BETWEEN A diver has a close encounter with a sea turtle in the waters of Pulau Aur



EXPERIENCE THE ISLANDS OF JOHOR

WHEN
March to October

WHERE
Johor's east coast

HOW
From Mersing town, take a speedboat for about two hours

RIGHT Pulau Tenggol in Trengganu offers excellent snorkelling amid coral gardens

EXPERIENCE TURTLE ISLANDS PARK

WHEN

August to September

WHERE

Northern Borneo

HOW

Take a flight from Kota Kinabalu to Sandakan, and then hop on the only ferry from Sabah Park Jetty

EXPERIENCE TERENGGANU

WHEN

Year round but avoid the monsoon season from October to February

WHERE

East coast of Peninsular Malaysia

HOW

Fly to Sultan Mahmud Airport, which serves the city of Kuala Terengganu. All the islands require boat rides from the mainland: Pulau Perhentian Besar from Kuala Besut Jetty, Pulau Lang Tengah and Pulau Kapas from Merang Jetty, and Pulau Tenggol from Kuala Dungun Jetty



Turtle Islands Park

Lying in the Sulu Sea off the northern coast of Borneo, Turtle Islands Park is a cluster of three islands – Selingan, Bakungan Kecil, and Gulisan – that are home to green and hawksbill turtles. Only the largest island, Selingan, is open to visitors, who have the opportunity to catch sight of these rare and endangered turtles when they come ashore to lay eggs.

Terengganu

Hailed as the “Gem of the East Coast”, Terengganu boasts a long coastline of

aquamarine waters fringed by white powdery sand. Off Pulau Perhentian Besar are clear blue waters ideal for diving and snorkelling, while secluded Pulau Lang Tengah offers a peaceful experience and 15 stunning dive sites within a 10-minute boat ride from each other.

The farthest island from the mainland, Pulau Tenggol is where you’ll find mature coral gardens thanks to the nutrient-rich waters of the well-sheltered bay, while Pulau Kapas is home to a variety of both hard and soft corals rich in marine life. The island is also known for squid fishing at certain times of the year. ♦ AG





DIVING IN MALAYSIA

Travel Tips

Tourism Malaysia's newest campaign, Visit Malaysia 2020, is aligned with the World Tourism Organization's message, "Travel.Enjoy.Respect", which encourages tourists to show consideration for the destinations they visit. In light of this, observe the following guidelines:



Marine Life

Many marine animals like turtles, eels and rays typically avoid contact with divers. Often, attacks arise out of fear, so refrain from touching any animals even though they may be within reach. As reef creatures are easily stressed, attempts to touch animals can also disrupt feeding or mating patterns and drive them away from certain sites.



Conservation

Snorkelling or diving must be done very carefully as reefs are fragile and easily damaged. Avoid brushing or scraping corals so as not disturb the thin membranes that protect them and ensure their survival. If chartering a boat, make sure that the operator does not anchor within marine park perimeters, as anchors cause serious damage to reefs. Refrain from littering and do not take home dead corals, as they still play an important role in the ecosystem.



Clothing

In general, casual, light cotton clothing like T-shirts and shorts are recommended. Nudity is prohibited. No formal wear is expected in restaurants. Be properly attired when visiting villages, towns and religious sites.



Malaysia's Dive Sites

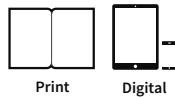
Numerous islands dotting the Malaysian coast are suitable for snorkelling and diving



PHOTO © SHUTTERSTOCK

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Visit www.asiangeo.com/hot-soup-school-challenge for more information



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Thinking of My Brothers on the Double Ninth Festival

By Wang Wei (translated by Feng Huazhan)

All alone in a strange land,
How I long for my folks on this festive day!
I imagine my brothers climb up a hill, dogwood on heads,
And all except me merrily go their way.

九月九日 忆山东兄弟

王维

独在异乡为异客，
每逢佳节倍思亲。
遥知兄弟登高处，
遍插茱萸少一人。

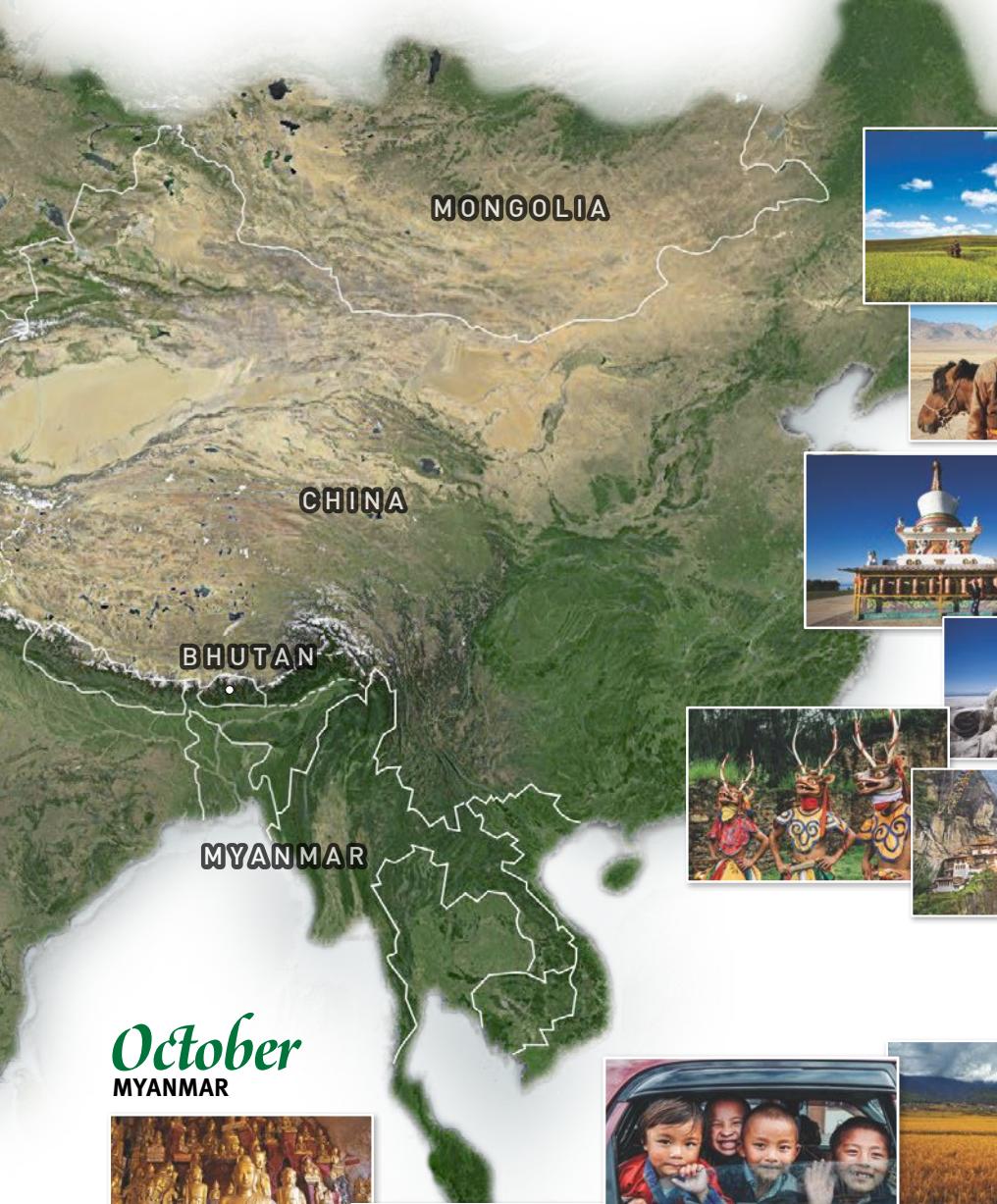
WANG WEI (699–759) was a famous Chinese poet from the Tang Dynasty. *Thinking of My Brothers on the Double Ninth Festival* is one of his best-known works, written when he was just 17 years old. The poem speaks of a lonely traveller's homesickness, amplified tenfold on the Double Ninth Festival, when he envisions his family in Shanxi engaging in the traditional ascent up Mount Hua without him. On this holiday, observed on the ninth day of the ninth month in the Chinese calendar, people climb to high places while wearing a sprig of dogwood (*Cornus officinalis*) in their hair to ward off evil.



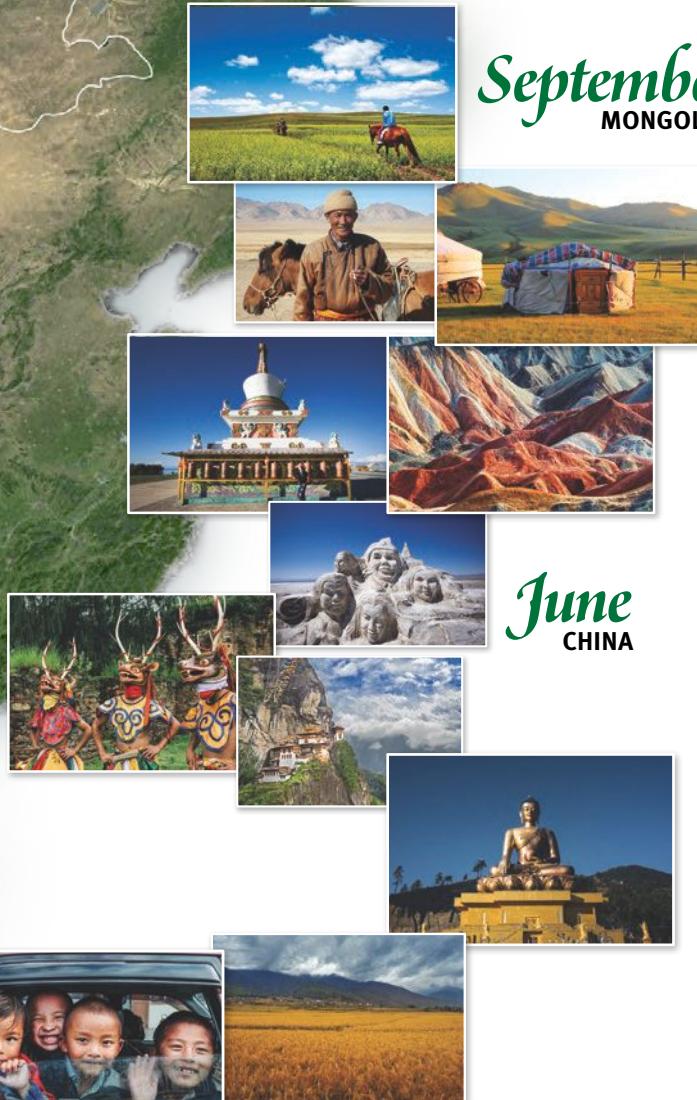
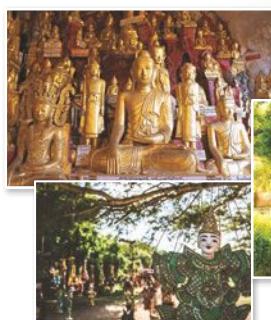


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