



Into the Unknown

FROM MYSTERIOUS HANGING COFFINS TO THE SOURCE OF THE YANGTZE, EXPLORER **WONG HOW-MAN** TELLS YSABELLE CHEUNG ABOUT DISCOVERING THE WORLD'S HIDDEN TREASURES

EVERYONE REMEMBERS that troublesome kid at the back of the class who just can't sit still. Although judging from the way Wong How-man turned out, pesky troublemakers could very well be world-acclaimed explorers in the making. "The teacher definitely kept an eye on me," Wong says, chuckling to himself. "I wasn't a special student. I was just defiant and curious. You show me a three-year-old kid – I'll show you an explorer. It wasn't and still isn't easy to rein me in."

Wong was born and raised in Hong Kong and, now in his early 60s, embraces the title of 'China's most accomplished living explorer', as bestowed upon him by *Time* magazine in its 2002 selection of Asian heroes. In his decades-long career as an intrepid explorer and photojournalist for *National Geographic*, Wong has discovered the original natural source of the Yangtze, Mekong and Yellow rivers, written several tomes on his travels, and founded and managed the China Exploration and Research Society (CERS), through which he has led numerous expeditions focused on the conservation and research of rural Chinese areas. Wong says that his career grew organically after graduating from the University of Wisconsin with a degree in journalism and art. "I prefer writing as it's more challenging but the visual arts are more natural to me. Think with the head, feel with the heart: that's my motto." He joined *National Geographic* shortly after graduation. "Actually, when I was first introduced as an 'explorer' by my colleagues, I was embarrassed," he confesses. "It didn't feel like a real career."

Fully settled into his role as a modern-day Gulliver, he is still firm in his views about the meaning of 'exploration'. "It's all about context," he says. "Explorers discovering something for the first time isn't important – it's how we interpret it. In all of our trips, we follow up our discoveries and findings with conservation and research."

Wong set up CERS 25 years ago and operates from a studio in the tiny village of Hok Tsui on the south-eastern tip of Hong Kong Island. Removed from the high-rise buildings and smog, Wong spends his days monitoring the various sites CERS protects in rural pockets of Asia, such as a Tibetan nunnery in Yunnan. Memories of past expeditions are strewn around the studio, in photographs and maps, plus a giant freezer containing every canister of film recording Wong's travels from 1985 to the present. Wong is currently working on a series of photographs for *National Geographic*; a whiteboard of colourful snaps mark his recent journeys to Tibet. The journey he's best known for, however, was the one to trace the original source of the Yangtze River.

In 1985, Wong and *National Geographic* led a team of explorers on an 18-month expedition that began in Shanghai and ended up at a tiny trickling spring 6, 207km away. "Chinese people have a saying: when drinking water, think about the source. To be able to drink from the original source of the Yangtze..." Wong trails off, then comments further: "It was a very quiet moment. After such altitude, and days of riding in the heavy snow with nowhere to rest except for in our little tents, we all needed a quiet moment to ourselves. No one jumps for joy after reaching the top of Everest."

But, as it transpired, they had got it wrong. In June 2005, Wong made another startling discovery, southwest of Qinghai province. The original source of the Yangtze River was actually more than a kilometre from the source found in 1985. With a team of 19 men, 26 horses, nine yaks

AT A GLANCE

BOOKWORM
Wong's 1998 photo book *From Manchuria to Tibet* won the prestigious Lowell Thomas Travel Journalism Gold Award

GLOBAL WARNING
"There's no point in educating youngsters about conservation if you don't emphasise the importance of doing things differently"

ANCIENT ART
CERS' collection of ethnographic objects on minority nationalities is the most comprehensive in the world



“Preserving culture is more important than shoving people into concrete houses”

and seven Tibetan guides, Wong marked the Duo Chao Neng tributary as the true original source of the Yangtze River.

He has since gone on to discover the original source of the Mekong and Yellow rivers and has retired from his regular duties at *National Geographic*, instead focusing on CERS and personal photography.

So has China's most accomplished explorer ever got lost? “We’ve never been lost, but a year or so ago, we were separated from three people in an expedition because of a huge snowstorm,” Wong says of the fateful trip to find the source of the Salween River in Gansu province in 2011. “We hadn’t anticipated that in the middle of summer. I couldn’t let myself worry. Worry just adds negativity to the formula. This was the first time anything that major had happened in all my years of exploring.” Fortunately, they found all three team members relatively unharmed. But exploration undoubtedly has its dangers. In 2004, Wong recorded an award-winning documentary investi-

gating the mysterious hanging coffin rituals of the Bo people in south-western China. The coffins, which date back 400 years, are wedged in cliff faces hundreds of metres up; Wong and his team emulated the Bo people by pulling themselves up to the hanging coffins, digging out skulls and balancing precariously on the tiny crevices.

Then there are the moral quandaries that Wong and his team face. As an example, Wong mentions the 2007 Hongshui village project in Hainan, when he arrived just before the villagers’ straw houses were going to be demolished to make way for government approved concrete buildings. The CERS team managed to persuade the officials to preserve some of the houses. “Preserving culture is more important than just shoving people into concrete houses,” he says. “We have to ask ourselves: do we have the right philosophy and mind frame to not interfere?”

Despite facing such complex issues, Wong is focused in his work, tackling each conservation and preservation project exactly like he would a river, inspecting various tributaries and streams to find the best, though not necessarily the most conventional, way from A to Z.

“I always try to remind myself of one thing,” Wong says. “All rivers have many sources. There’s the scientific source, the political source recognised by the officials, and the traditional source honoured by the Tibetans. They’re all equally important. I like to keep an open mind; That’s how I see the world.”

WORLD VIEWS

Wong How-man in his Hok Tsui CERS studio with an array of his photographs

