

# “There are Beasts!”

The Relationship between Humans and Elephants in Xishuangbanna

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## Introduction

In Jinghong, the capital city of Xishuangbanna Dai Autonomous Prefecture, elephants are everywhere. Unlike some Southeast Asian cities, however, where live domestic elephants roam the streets, these are depictions of elephants. On a walk through the city, one might see a city park lined with statues of elephants in playful, rearing poses, stylized elephants standing stolidly in the midst of a busy traffic intersection, motorcycles and taxis whizzing past, or a gold-leafed mosaic of elephants adorning the outside of an upscale hotel. The various images may delight the eyes of tourists to Xishuangbanna, but they also have a deeper significance. The multitude of elephant images in Jinghong is a testimony to the importance of the animals in the region's history, traditional culture, and natural landscape. Because of this importance, the government uses elephants as symbols of Xishuangbanna in order to feed a rapidly growing tourist industry; this is manifested in the images spread across Jinghong. To the prefecture government, elephants are a crucial part of the region – they are endangered animals that merit the highest-level government protection as well as useful tourist attractions that help to rake in billions of yuan each year in the tourism business. Thus, elephants appear in tourist literature and public architecture, are put on display in the Wild Elephant Valley tourist park, and are vigilantly protected in the three giant nature reserves home to most of China's 200-250 wild Asian elephants.

However, in rural villages across Xishuangbanna, far from bureau offices in Jinghong, the presence of elephants takes on a much different meaning. Here, night after night, elephants are prone to wander from the nearby nature reserves into village cropland, eating their fill of corn or bananas and in the process creating mounting economic losses for local farmers. In addition, elephants may on occasion seriously injure or even kill a villager who stays out too late or gets

too close. Elephants have traditionally been considered lucky, and have long played a significant role in Xishuangbanna's history and culture, but the frequent conflicts between people and elephants have led to a complicated and problematic relationship between the two in and around affected villages. In response to such problems, the government pays out money to affected villagers and, along with two NGOs, has undertaken a variety of projects designed to prevent elephant incursions. But the amount of money is small, the projects often have mixed results, and the scale of the problem so large that the majority of villagers must deal with the problem on their own. In contrast to the high value that the government places on elephant protection, the relationship between farmers and elephants is stuck in a state of continuous conflict.

For my independent study project, intrigued by the presence of a tiny but nevertheless important population of elephants in a faraway corner of southwestern China, I traveled to Xishuangbanna for a month to try to understand something of the interactions between people and elephants in the region. This would presumably be a relationship based on the use of elephants for tourism, the importance of elephants in local culture, and the crop destruction that I already knew was a significant problem involving elephants, among other things. What I found over the course of the month is that this relationship was often complex and difficult to comprehend, and perhaps most importantly, it varied between groups of people. I came to see that government officials had a very different perspective on elephants than did poor villagers. However, it was also important not to simplify this difference into a black-and-white contrast between victimized villagers and a neglectful government, as I was initially prone to do when I began my research. By the end, I had learned that the relationship between people and elephants was more complicated and dynamic than I had first thought, varying according to the nature of the interactions in each different context. Despite their tiny population size, the presence of

elephants in China, particularly in a region marked in its intensive agricultural land use, has led to fascinating if often antagonistic interactions between these animals and their human neighbors.

In the following pages, I will first examine the history of elephants in China and Xishuangbanna, along with the traditional place of elephants in Dai culture, in order to situate elephants in their cultural and historical context within China. I will then discuss the current use of elephants for tourism purposes, analyzing the elephant images in Jinghong architecture, the use of elephants in tourist literature, and the Wild Elephant Valley as a tourist site that revolves around elephants. Following this, I will give some basic background information on the life history and population status of China's elephants as well as information about the nature reserves in which they make their home. I will then discuss the conflicts between humans and elephants, including human threats to elephants as well as the personal harm and crop destruction that elephants cause to humans. Afterwards, I will describe the government response to the problem and various attempts to mitigate the conflicts, evaluating the success or failure of each program. Finally, I will give a subjective account of my visit to a village affected by elephants, and attempt to sum up my experience in the final pages.

## Elephants in Chinese History and Culture

As documented by Mark Elvin in his seminal environmental history of China, *The Retreat of the Elephants*, elephants at one time inhabited the majority of present-day China. Based on the discovery of elephant skeletons and mentions of elephants on ancient oracle bones, Elvin argues that four thousand years ago, elephants lived in China's northwest, northeast, and west in addition to the southern and southwestern regions. Furthermore, as early as the seventh

century B.C., ivory was a common trade product in China, and elephants were used intermittently for warfare and ceremonial purposes in ancient dynasties. After establishing the historically wide range of elephants in China, however, Elvin goes on to describe the gradual retreat of the animals into the south and southwest. He ascribes this partly to climate change, but also to habitat loss, as Chinese farmers advanced in the elephants' wake and cleared the natural forest to plant crops. After 1000 B.C., elephants were no longer found north of the Huai River; by 1000 A.D. they were confined to the south of China; and after 1500 A.D. they were mostly found only in the southwest.<sup>1</sup> This process has culminated in the tiny number of elephants remaining in China today, isolated in pockets of forest habitat in far southern Yunnan.

Despite this withdrawal, however, elephants have played a periodic, important role in China. Even more so, Xishuangbanna is the only region that has been continuously inhabited by the animals, and thus elephants have figured prominently in local history and culture. As recently as 1953, when Xishuangbanna was still ruled by the Dai royal family previous to the Communist takeover, elephants served as a symbol of the power of the royal family. I was told by a government expert in minority history, himself Dai, that when rulers rode elephants, they would be higher up than their subjects and thus were symbolically higher in status and power. After the beginning of Communist rule, however, this practice was discontinued due to its less than egalitarian nature. In addition to this association with royalty and power, the historian also told me of elephants' importance in agricultural labor. As is still true in many areas of Southeast Asia today, elephants were formerly used in Xishuangbanna to transport rice and logs, serving as powerful animal laborers to make work easier for human farmers.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Mark Elvin, *The Retreat of the Elephants: An Environmental History of China* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 9.

<sup>2</sup> Government minority historian, interview by author, Jinghong, Xishuangbanna, 5/12/09.

Elephants thus played a significant role in daily life as recently as half a century ago, but they were also important in religion and culture, something that remains true today. For the Dai people, elephants have always been symbols of luck and good fortune. My contacts in Jinghong, a couple who owned an English school, showed me the wooden elephant figurine that sat in the hallway of their school in order to bring good luck; I later saw similar figurines of all shapes and sizes being sold at tourist shops across Jinghong.<sup>3</sup> In addition, the minority historian told me of a traditional, annual Dai ceremony honoring elephants. He said this ceremony is still occasionally performed today in villages that consider it important and listed off several names of places where it still takes place, albeit with the use of an elephant figure made of bamboo rather than a real elephant.<sup>4</sup> Elephants also may play a part in the Dai Water-Splashing Festival that celebrates the Dai New Year –a friend witnessed an elephant playing a prominent, ceremonial role in the imitation Water-Splashing Festival held daily for tourists in Xishuangbanna’s Dai Culture Park. Part of the central role of elephants may stem from the fact that the Dai are predominantly Buddhist and that elephants are important symbols in Buddhism. Particularly, I was told several times that white elephants are considered especially lucky by the Dai people, and this is consonant with the Buddhist veneration of white elephants, which is due to the legend that the Buddha was born out of his mother’s side after a white elephant appeared to her in a dream.<sup>5</sup> In general, it is clear that elephants remain important religious and cultural symbols for the Dai people and are still occasionally used in Dai ceremonies today.

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<sup>3</sup> Julia and Michael, personal communication, 5/12/09.

<sup>4</sup> Government historian, interview 5/12/09.

<sup>5</sup> ElefantAsia, “Birth of the Buddha,” <http://www.elefantasia.org/spip.php?article87&lang=en>.

# The Elephant: A Modern-Day Symbol of Xishuangbanna

## I. Public Architecture in Jinghong

With the established context of elephants as historically prominent in Xishuangbanna, I turned to examining the present-day symbolic value of elephants as used in the tourist industry. This research took a variety of forms, but I first looked at the most obvious example – the appearance of elephants in the public architecture of Jinghong. As previously mentioned, the city of Jinghong is dotted with an impressive number and variety of images of elephants. Wanting to know the meaning and purpose behind their existence, I conducted an informal survey of the placement and design of the images. I discovered that they were almost all located in the central area of the city and usually within public spaces or spaces associated with the tourism industry. For example, elephant statues were placed in the center of several traffic circles at the heart of the city. Large, prominent elephant statues stood outside of several upscale hotels; likewise, motifs featuring elephants often decorated the outside of large buildings such as hotels, banks, or apartment buildings. Several public parks or walkways were filled with elephant statues in various poses, some in a naturalistic style and others shown with ceremonial trappings and riders. In several other parks, elephants were depicted as part of a large motif, often on segments of a wall or a fence, that included other images typically associated with Xishuangbanna, such as peacocks or sarong-clad Dai women in various poses. Elephants adorned the stage of a Dai dancing show in a local tourist park and the entranceway to a street full of tourist shops. Once on the outskirts of the city, however, I saw very few elephant images of any kind.

Following this tour, I concluded that the pattern and style of these images are a significant indicator of their purpose. Their central location and prominent place in public spaces, hotels, and tourist attractions helped to confirm my suspicion that they were designed for

outsiders' eyes and meant to convey an image of not just Jinghong, but Xishuangbanna as a whole. This image is one of an exoticized land possessing both wild jungles and picturesque minority cultures. Elephants tended to be depicted either as naturalistic, calling to mind the natural tropical beauty of the region, or in ceremonial dress, sometimes with human riders, likely meant to be suggestive of Dai traditional culture. Particularly given the frequent combination of elephants, peacocks, and Dai women, it seemed as though in order to promote Xishuangbanna, its capital had been peppered with images that were drawn from the region's history, culture, and environment and now remade for the eyes of modern tourists. In this process, elephants served as one of the most common symbols.

## II. The Growing Tourism Industry in Xishuangbanna

My above conclusions are based primarily on observation, but my belief that the elephant images were mainly for the purpose of tourism was supported by the fact that I heard much about the increasing importance of tourism in Xishuangbanna during my stay. One Jinghong resident described how the city was in the process of being entirely rebuilt for tourism purposes in order to regain the spotlight from the northwestern tourist hotspots of Lijiang and Dali; I had already known that several parks and the new, flashy bridge had only been built in the past several years. According to a local government official, tourism to Xishuangbanna didn't truly begin until after the 1980s, when the requirement to apply for a special border-area travel certificate was discontinued, but it has become more and more important in the two subsequent decades. Recently, the number of tourists has increased every year.<sup>6</sup> As for specific numbers, when a friend and I copied and translated them out of a government manual of statistics, we had to check and recheck to make sure we'd gotten the right number of zeros. In 2008, according to this booklet, a staggering 62.4 million tourists visited Xishuangbanna, a 24.1% increase from 2007.

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<sup>6</sup> Government historian, interview 5/12/09.

The vast majority, all but 11.3% of these, were domestic Chinese tourists. Given these large numbers, the prefecture government has a significant economic interest in promoting the tourism industry, and I found out the government had hired a private company to come in and create several tourist parks across Xishuangbanna, which included the Dai Culture Park as well as the Wild Elephant Valley. The government official I spoke to proudly told me Xishuangbanna now had 5 or 10 Grade AAAA tourist parks compared to zero in the past, and explained that Xishuangbanna relies on two types of tourism, ecological tourism and minority tourism.<sup>7</sup> The information I gathered convinced me that tourism is an extremely high priority for the prefecture government, one that drives many of its initiatives and decisions and provides a context for the symbolic use of elephant images across Jinghong.

### III. Tourist Literature and Popular Perception

Another arena in which elephant images are similarly used to promote tourism is that of tourist literature. For example, websites featuring guides to Xishuangbanna's attractions invariably mention the elephants living in the prefecture. They are usually mentioned in one of two ways: either as part of a list of the bountiful tropical flora and fauna to be found in Xishuangbanna's forests, or as an attraction within the Wild Elephant Valley. For the former, the specific location of elephants is usually left unsaid and simply described as the forest; though elephants live in three different locations around the prefecture, the Wild Elephant Valley is promoted as *the* place to go to see the animals. The use of elephants as a tourist attraction revolves entirely around this single park; in the words of one hotel booking website, the park is "the only place in Xishuangbanna to marvel at these giant animals." Though this statement initially seemed odd to me, knowing as I did that elephants were in fact spread out across quite a bit of the region, the assumptions behind it became clearer as I traveled around Xishuangbanna.

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<sup>7</sup> Government historian, interview 5/12/09.

While traveling, I increasingly noticed a kind of duality in the public perception of elephants. This was particularly noticeable in the southern town of Mengla, where local elephants tended to be seen as dangerous and to be feared, but those in the Wild Elephant Valley were viewed as benign tourist attractions. Mengla is not far from the Mengla and Shangyong Nature Reserves, both home to a number of elephants, but locals invariably advised me to go to the Wild Elephant Valley when I asked about the location of the animals. One rickshaw driver, when pressed, finally told me that there were indeed elephants around Mengla, but when you see them, you're afraid and run away. To the locals, it must have seemed incomprehensible that anyone would seek out the elephants in the immediate area, who create problems by frequently destroying crops; instead, the safe, normal location to view the animals was the Wild Elephant Valley. The same animal that was treated in one context as a nonthreatening, magnificent symbol of Xishuangbanna seemed to be viewed as a dangerous pest in the Mengla region. Some townspeople I spoke with did not even know of the nearby existence of elephants, though they told me repeatedly that I should visit the Wild Elephant Valley – an interesting phenomenon, but one that certainly posed obstacles to my research. In tourist literature as well as popular perception, the single location of the Wild Elephant Valley was clearly the focal point of elephant-based tourism in Xishuangbanna. Elephants anywhere else in the prefecture were relegated to brief mentions in literature, and their presence either ignored or feared by locals in the area.

#### IV. A Visit to the Wild Elephant Valley

As virtually every piece of tourist information about Xishuangbanna promotes the Wild Elephant Valley as the one location in the prefecture to see elephants, I decided that I should go to see the park for myself. I had hoped that the visit might give me more information about the

elephants themselves. However, what my visit illuminated the most were the ways in which the elephants in the park were put on display for tourist eyes as well as how the tourists themselves perceived the elephants. Interestingly, viewing the elephants seemed to be only a small part of the park experience; it was a carefully constructed, general “exoticism” that took center stage, suggesting that elephants themselves are less important to the tourism business than what they symbolize. In order to describe the full Wild Elephant Valley experience, in the following section I will give a brief account of my visit to and observations at the park.

The Wild Elephant Valley lies at the edge of the Mengyang Nature Reserve and is easily accessible from Jinghong, less than an hour away by bus or car. It seemed to be a popular attraction – I arrived at the park on the Saturday of the Labor Day holiday to find throngs of domestic tourists crowding the park. The first sights to greet my eyes after getting off the bus were a series of statues of romping elephants, a large bus parking lot and guesthouse, and a row of vendors’ stalls displaying the usual tourist goods – colorful skirts, *hulusi* musical instruments, and, something unique but more inexplicable, T-shirts adorned with pictures of elephants that proclaimed “Northern Thailand Jungle Tour.” I paid the entrance fee, discounted to 40 yuan for students from the pricy original 65, and then entered the park. I certainly hadn’t expected to see an elephant immediately, but one stood beside the path on a short length of chain next to a sign announcing that one could ride around on its back and get a picture taken for 200 yuan. After a shocked glance, I bypassed this opportunity and headed to the elephant “performance,” where I found the rest of my fellow tourists. Several hundred people crowded the stands ringing a central dirt arena where five elephants and their trainers stood awaiting the beginning of the show. Once the performance began, a series of circus-style tricks ensued, as the elephants kicked around a soccer ball, “danced” to music, walked across a balance beam, and more as the crowd took

pictures and gasped or laughed appreciatively at each trick. Meanwhile, the viewers could enjoy Xishuangbanna-style snacks of skewers of meat, fresh fruit, or whole coconuts to drink out of, all served by hovering waiters who would also give back massages for an additional fee. Following the show, audience members surged into the ring to get pictures taken riding on an elephant's back, being cradled by two intertwined trunks, or standing next to the patiently waiting elephants and flashing a V for victory sign. Before long, however, everyone trickled out and the snarling trainers led the elephants back to their small cages in the rear.

The performance had been quite an experience, but I soon discovered that there were a variety of other attractions on display inside the park. In the central tourist area, the Xishuangbanna-themed sights to be seen included a miniature zoo of reptiles, a butterfly house, an enclosure with various exotic birds, and baby monkeys being carried around by staff members, at the ready for pictures with tourists. Minority dances were being performed on a nearby stage; as I walked by, a group of longhaired men and women in skimpy leopard-print outfits, supposedly of the Wa minority, whirled their hair to a rhythmic beat. More than just elephants, the park seemed designed to sell the entire image of an exotic Xishuangbanna, with “wild” animals as well as exotic minorities on display. Few people paid close attention to the nearby informative signs about elephants or the elephant museum farther down the path; similarly, most tourists seemed to skip the forest pathway in favor of the cable car, and so I was nearly alone as I walked through the rainforest. Alone, that is, besides the large clumps of tourists led by sarong-clad female guides with megaphones. The path was lined with signs warning about the danger from elephants and forbidding passage later than 6 pm at night; guards were stationed at periodic intervals in case of approaching elephants.

As I walked farther, I saw a large crowd of tourists in front of me, all gazing into the forest. I hurried up and then gasped as I caught a glimpse of the tawny, moving hides of wild elephants through the trees. The group of animals moved forward into the river and stood bathing as the tourists lined the cement walkway overhead and held their cameras high to get a snapshot of the animals – me included this time, my analytical perspective having dissolved in the excitement of seeing the elephants. I remained to watch the animals I would be studying for the next few weeks, but most tourists moved on after a few moments of taking pictures. The elephants were the star attractions of the park, but it seemed that a brief glimpse was sufficient when combined with a tour of the park's other attractions.

I returned to Jinghong pleased to have seen the elephants; however, this feeling was slightly dampened when I heard later on that the reserve staff often put salt into the river, at a location conveniently located under the tourist walkway, and this is why the elephants frequently come to this particular spot. Though disappointing, this news only served to erase any last doubts I might have had about the nature of the park. The Wild Elephant Valley did have a scientific-sounding museum on the Asian elephant, and research on elephant behavior had often been conducted there, but it was clear that the primary purpose of the park was to entertain tourists with a showcase of the exotic animals and people of Xishuangbanna. Wild elephants, marketed as the reason to visit the park, were in reality only a secondary attraction. After visiting the Wild Elephant Valley, the purpose behind the use of elephants, whether symbolic or real, for tourism purposes became clearer to me. Elephants, as statues on the streets of Jinghong, in pictures on tourist websites, or kicking soccer balls at the Wild Elephant Valley show, are simply tools to promote a particular vision of Xishuangbanna: that of a tropical paradise with both mysterious natural wonders and an exotic native culture. Conveniently, elephants can play a part in both

visions. Due to their importance in Dai history and culture along with their presence in Xishuangbanna's forests, they can be used in both ecological and minority tourism; perhaps this is a primary reason why elephants are such important symbols for the government. However, for those who do not benefit from the tourist industry, the presence of elephants can be much more problematic. In the following sections of my paper, I will move away from elephants' use in the tourist industry and begin to give a context for the real-life interactions between elephants and people.

### The Situation of Elephants in China

There are two species of elephant in the world today, the African elephant (though it has recently been discovered that this group may actually be made up of two distinct species) and the Asian elephant. China's elephants, unsurprisingly, belong to the Asian elephant species, or *Elephas maximus*. The two species share a common ancestor, one of a variety of elephant-like animals that inhabited the earth millions of years ago, but can be easily distinguished. Asian elephants are smaller, have differently-shaped and smaller ears, and have flatter foreheads, among a variety of other differences.<sup>8</sup> Asian elephants are also much less numerous than African elephants, with a total population of only about one tenth of the total African elephant population. The Asian elephant itself is classified into three different subspecies, the Indian elephant, the Sumatran elephant, and the Sri Lankan elephant; the Indian elephant is by far the most numerous of the three, and the subspecies that is present in China. Asian elephants number about 25,600-32,750 in total and live in forest habitats in regions including India, Southeast Asia,

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<sup>8</sup> International Fund for Animal Welfare, "Asian Elephant," [http://www.ifaw.org/ifaw\\_international/save\\_animals/elephants/asian\\_elephant.php](http://www.ifaw.org/ifaw_international/save_animals/elephants/asian_elephant.php).

and the Malay Archipelago.<sup>9</sup> Formerly, elephants were present in much greater numbers and inhabited a much larger range across Asia: according the International Fund for Animal Welfare, even since the beginning of the twentieth century, elephant populations have declined almost 97% across Asia. Now, elephant habitat has been reduced and fragmented by climate change as well as increased human population and impact. The WWF states that Asian elephant populations are so scattered that there are fewer than ten populations of more than 1,000 individuals in a contiguous area. As a result, the Asian elephant was declared an endangered species in 1977 by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources (IUCN).<sup>10</sup>

Asian elephants need a specific type of habitat in order to thrive. The typical environment preferred by elephants is warm and moist, without steep slopes and with plenty of access to water sources. Due to their morphology, elephants have difficulty getting rid of excess heat, and thus it is important that they stay out of direct sunlight and remain near water.<sup>11</sup> As elephants need to eat an average of 150 kilograms of food per day to sustain their large bodies, much of the day is spent eating. Their diet is made up of a large variety of plants: grasses, tree bark, roots, leaves, small stems, bamboos, palms, and some cultivated crops like bananas, rice, corn, and sugarcane. Elephants are highly social animals and usually form small groups headed by a matriarchal female; males typically leave the group upon reaching maturity.<sup>12</sup> Reproduction is slow, with the gestation period lasting 22 months, the longest of any mammal on Earth; this

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<sup>9</sup> World Wildlife Fund, "Species Fact Sheet: Asian Elephant," [http://assets.panda.org/downloads/asian\\_elephant\\_factsheet2006.pdf](http://assets.panda.org/downloads/asian_elephant_factsheet2006.pdf).

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Elvin, *The Retreat of the Elephants*, 12.

<sup>12</sup> World Wildlife Fund, "Asian Elephants – Ecology & Habitat," [http://www.panda.org/what\\_we\\_do/endangered\\_species/endangered\\_species\\_list/elephants/asian\\_elephants/asianeleph\\_ecology\\_habitat/](http://www.panda.org/what_we_do/endangered_species/endangered_species_list/elephants/asian_elephants/asianeleph_ecology_habitat/).

when combined with elephants' poor adaptability to altered environments helps to explain why their range has been so drastically reduced across Asia and China.<sup>13</sup>

In China, the population of elephants is tiny relative to many other Asian countries; specific estimates vary but generally agree on a sum total of about 200-250 individuals. However, this population has increased over the course of the last several decades, and seems to still be gradually increasing today, attributed by government officials to a 1998 hunting ban, natural increase, and immigration from Laos. China's elephants, all located in southern Yunnan province, are distributed between five different nature reserves. The largest number, approximately 150, reside in Mengyang Nature Preserve (home to the Wild Elephant Valley) in the center of Xishuangbanna Prefecture. About 100 more elephants are distributed between Mengla and Shangyong Nature Preserves in southern Xishuangbanna, where elephants occasionally move back and forth between these reserves and the adjacent Laotian territory.<sup>14</sup> In southern Simao prefecture, a group of 11 elephants live in the Nanping nature reserve and 18-23 elephants live in Nangunhe reserve in Lincang prefecture to the northwest of Simao, on the border with Myanmar. Small groups of elephants have also been reported in the past in Ximeng in Simao prefecture.<sup>15</sup>

#### Nature Reserves

Thus, three large nature reserves in Xishuangbanna are home to all but a few of China's elephants. Mengyang, Mengla, and Shangyong Nature Reserves were first established in 1958, not long after the Communist Revolution, and, according to a nature reserve official, were set up in order to preserve the region's wild plants and animals. The three are part of a prefecture-wide

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<sup>13</sup> Elvin, *The Retreat of the Elephants*, 12.

<sup>14</sup> Asian Elephant Museum, Wild Elephant Valley, visited 5/2/09.

<sup>15</sup> Li Zhang, "Current Conservation Status and Research Progress on Asian Elephants in China," *Gajah* 27 (2007), 35-41.

system of five nature reserves that now has a total land area of 242,510 hectares, or 12.68% of Xishuangbanna's land. The reserves were enlarged in 1988, and the Nature Reserve Management Bureau was established in the same year.<sup>16</sup> Today, this bureau is responsible for the majority of research done on China's elephants as well as most of the efforts to address the problem of human and elephant conflict. Little to no independent scientific research is conducted outside of the bureau's auspices, and thus I was often directed back to the government bureau when seeking to interview other researchers or organizations. The central management bureau for the prefecture is located on a hill looking out over Jinghong; the slogan "Man and Nature in Harmony" is prominently featured on one of the front buildings, and a large staff occupies several different buildings. The importance of elephants is obvious even from outward appearances: a large mural of elephants decorates the outside of one building, and the uniform of the employees is a simple "XSBN" for Xishuangbanna alongside a small depiction of an elephant. There are similar bureaus, if not as large, spread across the prefecture, in addition to small guard stations on the borders of the reserves that I saw several times while traveling. It was clear from the size of the bureau that the nature reserves, as well as the elephants within them, are a high priority for the government.

However, the government has also had to deal with the people that formerly lived, or still live, within the boundaries of the nature reserve. The government has periodically relocated residents outside of the reserves, such as in 1988 when 1,120 people were moved at government expense. Despite this, there are still 114 villages inside the reserves, home to 20,200 people, and another 144 near reserve boundaries, inhabited by another 32,000 people.<sup>17</sup> In a conversation with a Nature Reserve Bureau official, he explained to me that the government has been trying to

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<sup>16</sup> Asian Elephant Museum, visit 5/2/09.

<sup>17</sup> "Haven For Asian Elephant," *China Daily*, February 28, 2003.

relocate the villagers, but that some villagers who have lived in the area for a long time were allowed to remain. Unable to move everyone out, the government has instead established strict controls over human land use in the reserves. The official told me that villagers are only allowed to plant crops on land that they have historically farmed, never on new land. In addition, it is forbidden to cut down trees in the reserves, and if a tree must be cut, a new one should be planted in its place.<sup>18</sup> I learned from various other sources that firearms are also banned within nature reserves, a restriction that began ten years ago when the government confiscated all guns from villagers living in or near the reserves. A longtime Jinghong resident who guides treks in Xishuangbanna, however, informed me that though the government forbids guns, villagers often make their own and hide them in the forest when police come to inspect, since they are needed in order to hunt food animals like deer and boar.<sup>19</sup> While traveling, I had noticed that every reserve is conspicuously posted with signs announcing its presence and forbidding the use of fire, cutting trees, and firearms. However, the guide's comment raised questions as to what degree these regulations were obeyed as well as how much tension existed between government officials and villagers over the strict restrictions within the reserves.

## Human and Elephant Conflicts

### I. Human Threats to Elephants

Government restrictions also extend to elephants, as the government has issued tightly enforced rules forbidding the harming or killing of the animals. The result has been that unlike in many other countries harboring elephants, humans in China pose few immediate threats to elephants, with gradual habitat loss as the one exception. Many villagers might have good reason

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<sup>18</sup> Nature Reserve Management Bureau official, interview by author, Jinghong, Xishuangbanna, 5/5/09.

<sup>19</sup> Jinghong guide, personal communication, 5/11/09.

to resent elephants that frequently destroy crops, but for the most part, rules against harming the animals seem to be carefully obeyed due to the threat of punishment. The local guide told me of two specific incidences of disobedience to the laws. Two years ago, after elephants destroyed young rubber trees in Jinuoshan, a man shot an elephant and was put in jail. The more serious incident occurred about fifteen years ago when sixteen elephants were killed for their ivory in China and as a result, the five main perpetrators were executed after being caught.<sup>20</sup> Harsh punishments such as these seem to deter most of the potential violence against elephants; when I pressed a government official to tell me a little bit about current threats to elephants, he simply replied that since people in Xishuangbanna obey the rules, there are no threats now. I was initially taken aback at this reply, but his statement seems to be valid: injury to Chinese elephants for whatever purpose – defense, revenge, for the ivory trade – has been relatively rare. Illegal elephant killings for ivory have plagued many countries where elephants live, particularly in Africa since African elephants have longer tusks that are shared by both sexes, but though China has a large ivory black market, China's elephants themselves are not significantly threatened by the trade.

The largest remaining threat that humans pose to elephants, then, is that of habitat loss, long the most significant factor in the decrease in elephant populations throughout Asia. In Xishuangbanna, forest cover has dwindled rapidly in the past several decades, isolating the elephant populations and likely playing a part in the region's frequent human and elephant conflicts. Land within the nature reserves is protected, but these patches of native forest have become more and more isolated in recent decades. Beginning in the 1950s, when the new government began to heavily promote rubber cultivation, large amounts of land across Xishuangbanna were converted into lucrative rubber plantations, so much so that the percentage

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

of forested land in the prefecture decreased from over 60% in the 1950s to just over 30% in the late 1970s.<sup>21</sup> On the contrary, according to one source, rubber plantations now cover 20% of Xishuangbanna's land.<sup>22</sup> As a result, elephant habitat has become increasingly restricted and isolated. This has had an impact on migration and genetic exchange between populations; several of the smallest elephant herds have extremely low genetic diversity. Some experts believe as well that diminished habitat has led to more encounters between humans and elephants in recent decades.<sup>23</sup>

## II. Elephant Threats to Humans

If humans pose few immediate risks to China's elephants today, the reverse is far from true. Xishuangbanna's land is a complicated, changing mosaic of farmland and forest, and particularly given the ongoing destruction of forests, there are many places in this mosaic where humans and elephants overlap. Often, such encounters carry disastrous consequences for local farmers. There are two main threats that elephants pose to humans in Xishuangbanna. The first is direct harm from an elephant attack, since elephants can easily injure or kill humans if they are so inclined. However, this is a relatively rare occurrence. The more common problem, and one of significant proportions in Xishuangbanna, is that of crop destruction caused by wild elephants, which often leads to crippling economic losses for affected farmers. The government is legally obliged to reimburse villagers for both personal harm and crop destruction; however, the amounts are often so low as to be nearly negligible. In the following section, I will examine the threats that elephants pose to humans as well as the various efforts that have been made to mitigate these threats and their degrees of success.

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<sup>21</sup> "Elephants: Revered Icon or Dangerous Threat?" *China Daily*, June 7, 2006.

<sup>22</sup> Jane Qiu, "Where the Rubber Meets the Garden," *Nature* 457 (2009), 247.

<sup>23</sup> Zhang, "Current Conservation Status," 37.

Injuries or deaths resulting from elephant attacks have occurred on a fairly regular basis over the past several decades in Xishuangbanna. Though the numbers do not come close to a country like India, where the much larger number and greater range of elephants leads to an annual average of 200 elephant-inflicted deaths, incidents involving elephants in China result in 2 to 4 human deaths each year. The number of people injured per year is certainly greater than this; for example, from about 2000 to 2003, 49 people were injured by elephants compared to 9 killed.<sup>24</sup> The majority of encounters with elephants are peaceful, as elephants usually do not pose a serious threat when encountered in groups, but lone bull elephants can be much more aggressive and dangerous. Occasionally, one rogue elephant or a small group of elephants will remain in an area for a long period of time and become a pest animal, posing a serious threat to both villagers and their crops. This has happened, for example, in the Dadugang region near Mengyang Nature Preserve in 2005, resulting in at least one death. Though reasons for aggression are unclear, many locals believe that elephants, due to their exceptionally good memories, take revenge for human actions such as the accidental trapping of young elephants or ongoing forest clearance.<sup>25</sup> If not revenge, then the simple shrinking of elephant habitat may also explain an increased number of encounters leading to human injury or death.

Personal harm from elephants is certainly a problem in Xishuangbanna and one that often garners attention in news media, but crop destruction is a much more common threat posed by elephants. In some villages within or nearby nature reserves, this is a daily issue, as elephants may come to feed on crops as often as every evening. Statistics help to give some idea of the dimensions of the problem in Xishuangbanna: in 2001 alone, 7,885,000 square kilometers of

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<sup>24</sup> “Haven For Asian Elephant,” 2/28/03.

<sup>25</sup> “Elephants: Revered Icon or Dangerous Threat?” 6/7/06.

crops were destroyed by elephants, amounting to an economic loss of \$2.35 million.<sup>26</sup> More recently, elephants destroyed crops belonging to 12,000 different households in 578 villages in 2005.<sup>27</sup> Also, the problem seems to have worsened over the last fifteen years – in 1993, elephants destroyed 5,000 rubber trees, but in 2001, the number was up to 365,200, according to one article.<sup>28</sup> Another article gave a specific profile for Dadugang village, saying that from 2001-2005, 762,050 kilograms of rice, 242,860 kilograms of corn, 1,891 tons of sugarcane, and 82,310 tea plants were destroyed by elephants.<sup>29</sup> These are all simply numbers, but what they add up to are devastating losses for thousands of Xishuangbanna’s farmers.

### III. Government Reimbursement

Under China’s Law on Wild Animal Conservation, the government is legally required to provide compensation for damages incurred by government-protected animals such as elephants. This includes personal harm as well as crop destruction. Due to the large scale of elephant-incurred damages and Xishuangbanna’s relatively poor economic status, however, it is difficult if not impossible to come up with the full amount of money. In one example cited by China Daily, a villager whose mother was killed by an elephant received 12,000 yuan in compensation, but the funeral by itself cost 14,000 yuan.<sup>30</sup> This payment was clearly not sufficient to compensate for the woman’s death; however, amounts of money given out for crop destruction are much smaller still. One government official I spoke with admitted that the reimbursement money was not enough, and said that for every kilometer of crops destroyed, the government only gives farmers five jiao.<sup>31</sup> One article also reported that from 1991-2001, elephants caused 60.49 million yuan

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<sup>26</sup> “Haven For Asian Elephant,” 2/28/03.

<sup>27</sup> “China’s Elephants Now Have ‘Dinner Halls,’” Xinhua News Service, July 2, 2006.

<sup>28</sup> “Haven For Asian Elephant,” 2/28/03.

<sup>29</sup> “Elephants: Revered Icon or Dangerous Threat?” 6/7/06.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Nature Reserve official, 5/5/09.

worth of damage, while the government only paid back about 10% of this figure, 6.14 million yuan.<sup>32</sup> Since 2005, the amount of reimbursement money has increased: after the Yunnan provincial government began allocating 4 million yuan per year towards the problem, payments increased by about 20 times to a yearly average of 5 million yuan. However, this is still only enough to cover about 30% of farmers' losses.<sup>33</sup>

Thus, it seems as though the government lacks the resources, the willpower, or both to compensate fully for the damage that elephants cause, despite their legal obligation to do so. However, I did witness one situation in which the government went out of its way to prevent human injury from elephants – this was upon my visit to the Wild Elephant Valley tourist park. There was a series of three incidents of elephant-inflicted injury or death in the first half of 2008, and the first of these involved a solo American traveler who was seriously injured after encountering four elephants in the forest.<sup>34</sup> This incident resulted in national and even international publicity, and the negative attention galvanized the government into immediate action. Facing a threat to its lucrative tourism industry, the government increased a variety of security precautions in the park in an almost paranoid effort to prevent further attacks on tourists. This increased attention to safety was readily apparent upon my visit to the park about a year after the incidents. Previously, I had heard that it was possible to go on a ten-hour guided hike through the forest; now, this had been discontinued due to safety concerns. Similarly, the canopy treehouses that one could normally pay over 200 yuan to stay in for the night seemed to be temporarily closed due to the danger that elephants might push on the walkway supports. All over the park were signs warning of the presence of elephants and guards to ensure that no tourists would be harmed if elephants did in fact appear. Compared with my visits to villages

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<sup>32</sup> “Welfare of People and Wildlife: How to Balance?” *China Daily*, October 13, 2003.

<sup>33</sup> “Elephants: Revered Icon or Dangerous Threat?” 6/7/06.

<sup>34</sup> Dinah Gardner, “China’s Threatened Elephants Turn Into Killers,” *The Independent*, October 26, 2008.

where elephants pose a daily threat but government presence is minimal, the near-obsessive concern for safety in the park was a striking contrast. It may be too cynical to attribute this solely to the government's attention to profits from tourism, but it also seems unlikely that this is not at least a major consideration.

#### IV. Conflict Mitigation: Projects

The reimbursement money for crop destruction and personal injury may not be sufficient, but there have also been other methods besides monetary reimbursement used to prevent conflicts. These have taken the form of an assortment of projects over the last fifteen years, undertaken by the government, NGOs, or both and designed to stop elephants from entering villages and causing problems – some have been much more successful than others. The earliest project I heard about was initiated by the World Wildlife Fund in 1991, when the organization funded the installation of solar-powered electric fences in 24 villages in Xishuangbanna. Though results were varied between villages, in a number of locations, the elephants soon learned how to pull out the posts of the fence and bypass the obstacle. There were also maintenance problems with the solar-powered devices, and thus the project was discontinued in 1996.<sup>35</sup> When I contacted WWF to ask them about this project, they no longer even recalled working in the area. Since this rather failed experiment, however, there have been several other projects. The Nature Reserve Bureau itself has been responsible for a number of different tactics to prevent conflicts. The first of these was a project to dig a nine-kilometer trench around an affected village to bar the passage of elephants. The Bureau spent \$45,780 on the effort, but the trench was partially filled in after the next year's rainy season and became useless.<sup>36</sup> More recently, the government began a project to build "dinner halls" of food crops such as bananas and sugarcane that are

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<sup>35</sup> "Haven For Asian Elephant," 2/28/03.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

grown specifically for the elephants and placed at stations within the reserves. An article reports that this project has had “mixed results.”<sup>37</sup> The Bureau is also engaged in an ongoing effort to convince villagers to switch crops to those that the elephants will not eat, such as tea plants or rubber trees. When I spoke to the official from the Nature Reserve Bureau, he explained that the government tries to create a “balance of laws” through these various methods of conflict prevention.<sup>38</sup> The final project, and the one that has been most widely acclaimed as successful, was spearheaded by the International Fund for Animal Welfare and began in 2000 in Simao prefecture. After a herd of five elephants continually caused significant damage to nearby villages, IFAW, working with the Simao Forestry Bureau, invested an initial \$175,000 to create a micro-credit loan system in seven villages. Farmers used small loans from a village fund to provide capital for switching crops from those that elephants prefer to alternative crops or livestock, and the project, combined with aspects of environmental education and community development, lasted an initial three years, from 2000-2003.<sup>39</sup> The project was successful enough to be rewarded with a grant of \$48,000 from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service; IFAW claims on their website that as a result of their work, many families successfully switched crops and became more accepting of the local elephants. Since the conclusion of the first phase of the project, IFAW has remained involved in the area, though they informed me over the phone from their Beijing office that they are currently restructuring and at the moment do not have an active project.

A number of the projects described above have enjoyed a degree of success, but all of them combined have still done relatively little to solve such a widespread problem. Even if projects like these have been established in a number of trial villages, this means that there are

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<sup>37</sup> “China’s Elephants Now Have ‘Dinner Halls,’” 7/2/06.

<sup>38</sup> Nature Reserve official, 5/5/09.

<sup>39</sup> “Haven For Asian Elephant,” 2/28/03.

still dozens or even hundreds of villages that have received little to no help. The relatively successful IFAW micro-credit project was carried out in an area with only five elephants, a tiny fraction of China's total number. The majority of villagers, then, must deal with the problem on their own on a daily basis, barred from taking action against the elephants by government laws but receiving little or no assistance from the government. As this contradiction became increasingly clear over the course of my research, I knew that I was still missing a critical piece of information: what villagers themselves thought of the elephants and their depredations. Thus, I went in search of affected villagers to talk to; near the end of the month, I was finally successful. What follows is an account of my visit and some of my conclusions after finally witnessing the problem of crop destruction firsthand.

#### V. A Village Visit

I had traveled to towns near Mengla previously and asked about the presence of elephants only to receive a headshake and a “*mei you*” followed by a suggestion to visit the Wild Elephant Valley. Thus, it was encouraging when I sat down next to a group of men sitting at small tables at a shop in the village of Guanping, near the Wild Elephant Valley, briefly explained what I was doing, and asked once again if there were elephants around. This time, one man immediately said “*you*” with a quick nod, while elbowing his friend. As the friend looked down at the table, saying nothing, the first man turned back to me to announce that elephants often came to this man's house. Meanwhile, the garrulous shop owner began explaining to me that there were many elephants around and that they come every day, “*tian tian dou you.*” I was amazed, having known that the problem was a frequent one but never that it occurred as often as every day. I asked if the government gave them money for this and the shopkeeper paused, then told me, “*yi shao dian,*” or a little bit, pinching his fingers together to demonstrate the insignificance of the

amount. Now the quiet friend spoke up, telling me that it was only about 1% of what was destroyed. They told me that elephants usually come in the evening and eat crops such as corn; meanwhile, the shopkeeper began to repeat, “*hai pa!*” over and over – we’re afraid, we’re afraid. When I inquired what the villagers did if elephants came, wanting to find out if they took any preventive measures of their own, the man simply gestured with his arms, saying, “We run away!” I laughed, and they were chuckling as well, but the problem was, of course, a serious one. Then they directed me to a village one kilometer down the road where elephants often came, unlike this village on the side of the highway.

Upon entering the next village, I could see why human and elephant conflict might occur: houses and buildings lined one side of the road, while across from them a sign that announced “Xishuangbanna National Nature Reserve” fronted a wall of dense forest vegetation. Small fields of corn and other crops lay in front of the reserve. Though elephants were clearly a problem here, after meeting a friendly group of Chinese men who told me more about the damage, I was taken to a third village ten kilometers up into the hills. Here, my new friends assured me, elephants came every evening to eat the crops. During the entire bumpy truck ride, one of the men continually warned me not to carelessly walk around in the evening, as I might encounter elephants on the road and it would not be safe. Only after he had my repeated consent to this did he help to arrange that I would stay at his friend’s house in the village for the night. The village was made up a small collection of houses on a hill above terraced fields of mostly corn, rice, and tea, while farther up on the hill was the border of the nature reserve, the tangled mass of trees making the divide easily apparent. As we drove in, one of the men pointed to the cornfields where he said the elephants came every night to eat, declaring, “That’s human and elephant conflict [*ren xiang chong tu*].”

My host in the village soon took me to visit another family, and as we sat eating small green mangos and jackfruit, they discussed the elephant problem, pointing to one man who seemed to have particularly suffered the consequences of the crop damage. This man told me how elephants come to eat corn in the fields, gesturing to the drying orange corn spread out over the cement yard to emphasize his point. When he and my host abruptly got up and motioned to me to follow, I obediently trailed them out into the fields with no idea where we were headed. Suddenly, however, he stopped and pointed to a spot on the ground, and I looked downward to see a number of huge circular depressions in the mud among the fallen cornstalks – elephant footprints. “Take pictures!” they told me. When we walked a little farther, one of them told me how the elephants would come to eat the corn, and then after they were full – I didn’t catch the rest, but I followed his pointing finger to gaze into a giant muddy depression. I gathered that elephants had bathed in the mud at this spot, a characteristic behavior of the animals. While I was still looking at this in amazement, the two men waved goodbye and departed to work in the fields for the afternoon; I walked back through the muddy fields.

That night, my host told me he would take me to see the elephants if they came to the fields as they often did after dark. However, it seemed that on this night, it was not to be – instead, silence blanketed the night-shrouded village, broken only by the incessant buzz of insects circling the ceiling lights. Nevertheless, my stay left me with quite a bit to think about. Though I’d been fascinated to see evidence of the real-life damage caused by elephants, what struck me the most was the nonchalance of the men as they showed me the site of the destruction. During my visit, I hadn’t seen anyone express anger toward the elephants – fear, perhaps, but mostly a kind of unconcern. Perhaps with such limited power to prevent the destruction, these villagers had learned simply to accept it as a fact of life. In addition, they

seemed almost proud that the village had elephants, leading me to muse on the complicated relationship with an animal that is highly valued and given the highest level of government protection but that simultaneously has the power to cause such effortless damage to human enterprises. Certainly, the villagers did not seem to be the bitter, resentful victims of both the elephants and the government that I'd begun to picture in my head. I still believed that the government was guilty of a degree of neglect toward the elephant-inflicted problems of such people, but after visiting the village, I realized that the villagers themselves might not think in this way. For them, it seemed more important to focus on the problem at hand and what could or could not be done about it than to blame a faraway, abstract entity.

The village deserved a longer stay to explore this attitude further, but unfortunately my time had begun to run short. So it was that early the next morning I found myself in the passenger seat of my host's truck, riding back to Guanping and jouncing up and down with each bump of the dirt road. I looked back at the village once more – the sun had not quite risen over the mountains, and dusky shadows lingered over the small homes, the fields of crops, and the tangled forest above them on the hillside. The month had nearly come to an end, and thus soon I would return to Kunming; not long after that, all of us would leave China to head back to the United States. In the coming whirl of international travel, goodbyes, and hellos, it would be easy to forget about what I had seen over the past several months. However, in this remote village in the mountains of far southwestern China, the elephants would keep coming every night and the villagers would keep replanting their crops, and the conflict would continue regardless of notice from the outside world. I'd come to Xishuangbanna to understand the relationship between humans and elephants; I would leave having grasped only a small piece of the complex interactions that take place daily across the prefecture and involve thousands of farmers, tourists,

and bureau officials along with about two hundred Asian elephants. The only certainty I had found is that the elephants, despite their miniscule numbers, had always had and would continue to have an outsized importance in this land of tourism, intensive agriculture, and pockets of rainforest. With a sudden jolt, we rounded a bend in the road, and the small village disappeared from sight.

## Bibliography

### Texts

In general, there are a huge number of articles regarding human and elephant conflicts in various academic journals, most of them involving cases in Africa or India. While I looked at many briefly to gain perspective on China's situation, the scope of my project was not broad enough to compare cases and thus I decided to leave them out of my paper.

Asian Elephant Museum, run by Xishuangbanna National Nature Reserve Management Bureau and located within the Wild Elephant Valley, visit 5/2/09.

*China Daily*, various articles on specific incidents involving elephants.

"China's Elephants Now Have 'Dinner Halls.'" *Xinhua News Service*, July 2, 2006.

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Zhang, Li. "Current Conservation Status and Research Progress on Asian Elephants in China." *Gajah* 27 (2007), 35-41.

Zhang, Li. "New Challenges Facing Traditional Nature Reserves: Asian Elephant (*Elephas maximus*) Conservation in China." *Integrative Zoology* 1 (2006), 179-187.

Helpful websites with information on Asian elephants:

ElefantAsia, [www.elefantasia.org](http://www.elefantasia.org)

International Fund for Animal Welfare, [www.ifaw.org](http://www.ifaw.org)

World Wildlife Fund, [www.wwf.org](http://www.wwf.org)

BBC Wildfacts website, [www.bbc.co.uk/nature/wildfacts/factfiles/178.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/nature/wildfacts/factfiles/178.shtml)

## Resource Persons

Advisor: Though I lacked anyone to advise me specifically in regard to my topic, Julia (Chinese name Liu Suan), the director of the Mekong Foreign Language School, provided me with the most guidance and translation help, and thus she was the closest person I had to an actual advisor.

Other contacts:

- Michael, Julia's husband, who was also friendly and helpful to all four of us in Jinghong and helped to provide guidance
- Guides at local Western cafes, specifically Mr. Rush at Mei Mei Café and Ai Xing at the Banna Café, who can be extremely useful for information on local history and logistics
- Mr. Dong Yonghua at the XSBN National Nature Reserve Management Bureau, who answered many of my questions about elephants and nature reserves; there are also many other relevant people to talk to at this bureau. In particular, I heard of one man, named Mr. Luo Aidong or Roger, who could speak fluent English and had done a lot of research on the topic, though I never got the chance to talk with him.
- Professor Zhang Li at Beijing Normal University, who has done perhaps the most work of anyone on elephants in China, though I only talked with him briefly on the phone.
- Staff of IFAW office in Beijing – though they were unable to give me any information at the time, they are the primary NGO that has been involved with this issue.
- Staff of WWF office in Beijing; in particular, a man named Chris Chaplin kindly answered my emails and gave me some helpful information.
- Yu Jin, Vice General Secretary of CPPCC and the sister of Yu La at the Nationalities Museum – though we did not ask her any specific interview question, she was quite welcoming and could potentially be of help to future students.
- Government minority historian at the CPPCC building – gave us useful information on minority traditions
- Tourism Bureau: unsuccessful attempt to conduct an interview, as they simply directed us elsewhere
- Forestry Bureau: refused to talk to foreigners.

## Itinerary

4/27: Return to Kunming from field excursion  
4/29: Evening bus to Jinghong, 167 yuan  
5/2: Day trip to Wild Elephant Valley  
5/7-5/9: Trip to Mandian village  
5/13-5/15: Trip to Mengla region  
    5/13: To Mengman town  
    5/14: To Mengban town  
5/21-5/22: Trip to Guanping and nearby villages  
5/24: Evening bus back to Kunming, 197 yuan

The majority of my days were spent in Jinghong, the capital city of Xishuangbanna. While there, I contacted people, conducted interviews, conducted internet research, took photos of elephant images, and began writing my paper. For the rest of my time, I took a series of short trips to other areas of the prefecture, including the Wild Elephant Valley, Mandian village, the Mengla region, and Guanping village. I had few problems with travel throughout Xishuangbanna, as the local bus system was quite straightforward, inexpensive, and convenient.

## Reflections

My ISP had many frustrating moments, and often I couldn't help but feel that my project had in some ways been a failure. Though I was very committed to and interested in my topic, I ended up only being able to do a small fraction of the research I'd been hoping to do over the course of the month. This was mostly due to my utter lack of anyone to guide me through my project. I was thankful to have Julia and Michael, the English-teaching couple who enthusiastically helped us whenever we asked them to (and sometimes when we didn't want them to), but found no one who could help me with the content of my specific project. Thus, I felt like I never gained the insider access that is so essential to conducting research in China. Two government bureaus refused to talk to me because I was a foreigner, and several researchers and NGO staff courteously avoided my queries by suggesting I find someone elsewhere to interview. In addition to not getting the interviews I wanted, I didn't manage to learn the names of specific villages to go to until near the end of my ISP. Whereas I had hoped to visit several different villages and stay a couple days in each to get a variety of different perspectives, in the end I only spent a single night in a single village that had been affected by elephants – better than nothing, but so much less than I had hoped for. While my difficulties, naturally, also taught me a lot, I felt that they also prevented me from having many interesting experiences and learning much more about my topic. I wished that the long days I spent in Jinghong trying to find people to talk to had instead been spent witnessing the issues for myself and talking with villagers who had been directly affected.

All of that being said, there were some successes over the course of the month. Firstly, I picked what turned out to be a fascinating topic and one that I discovered was in fact relevant to thousands of people in Xishuangbanna. I learned a surprisingly large amount simply by combining the various bits and pieces of information and observation that I had gathered. In addition, I became much more comfortable traveling on my own, and by the end of the month

the thought of walking into a village unannounced and explaining what I was doing was significantly less terrifying. This was an empowering feeling, particularly after I finally succeeded in finding a village affected by elephants, staying overnight, and talking to people there about the problem. Another major positive was an increased comfort with my language skills, particularly in the area of listening comprehension; this made the language barrier not quite so insurmountable as I had feared. In the end, perhaps it was unrealistic to imagine that I could do a thorough study of such a complicated situation in only a month, when it took me three weeks to find even a single village to visit. I still feel as though I could have accomplished more than I did, but the project was also a lesson in the complexity of my topic and the patience needed to do the kind of research I wanted to do.

### Suggestions for Future ISPs

I would first like to say that I fervently hope someone will pick up where I left off and study human/elephant conflicts more in depth, as this problem is both interesting and deserving of more attention. With a foundation of knowledge from my project, a future student could perhaps more easily find the appropriate people to talk to and villages to visit. Also, literally any of the specific topics I touch on in my paper could likely become projects of their own.

Other ideas:

- The tourism industry in Xishuangbanna or the redevelopment of Jinghong for tourist purposes
- A study of rubber as a commodity in Xishuangbanna
- A study of the impact of Han migration into Xishuangbanna on the prefecture
- An examination of the relationship of the Dai minority to other minority groups within Xishuangbanna
- A project on the jade store owners in Jinghong, who are all either Burmese or Pakistani (we never really knew) and who seem to form a subculture of their own within the city
- The culture of street food vendors, anywhere in China