



SCKPP 2016

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A personal recollection of some of the days on the first Chinese SCKPP, South China Karst Plain Project in 2016.



N.O.W. DIVE

Thursday 9-Sept. 2016 UTD Cave exploration China. SCKPP South China Karst Plain Project.

Ben Bos Wu Ming area

From Bananas to laundry to pristine caves.



The first day of dive day of the expedition. We spent all day yesterday waiting for most of our luggage and setting up a rudimentary plan for the



expedition. Teams were getting to know one another and AG held a seminar on cave exploration. The support team was getting some dry runs in.

Today we were heading to a location given to us by a local representative of the tourism board of this area called Wu Ming. But after a long drive we found ourselves in amidst banana fields as far as the eye could see.

No caves here, we drove around and starting to use our common sense, looked at a map and headed to the lowest part on the map between 2 mountain ridges. We were now at a plateau. There was a bigger chance of finding cave lower down.



We contacted the dive center where our Chinese instructor had rented 44 80cf aluminum cylinders and a weights for all 14 divers. To see if they had received the same information. They did, and they had com to the same conclusion as us. They on the other hand, had heard a rumor a while back from a local resident that there was clear water coming out of the mountain, not far from where we deduced on the map the caves might be. So we were both heading to the same"ish" location.

After about an hour in the bus with one of our local instructors talking on and off on the phone with the dive center girl who's was driving around with the tanks and weights, we were about to give up. It was almost noon and we had not found water yet.

The phone rang again, the girl had found the site. Spirits lifted right away and we were all like kids on our way to a candy store. Upon arrival to the site we immediately noticed the crystal clear water pouring out of a hole in the wall and feeding a big lake.

It took AG about 4 nanoseconds to take off his shirt and jump in to have a look. He got a strange look from the woman doing her laundry at the steps leading into the water.



AG came up with a big smile on his face. The truck with tanks was backed up to the cave, and we started to unload.

The little platform seemed to be ideal for setting up and



the first team consisting of Jason Park, Chew Po Chang and AG set off to explore. Jeff Seckendorf and myself (Ben Bos), set out to film the surroundings of the entry and looked for potential places for a cave-diver warning sign.



After about 50 minutes AG and the rest of the team came back from their initial dive. And were very excited. They had found 2 main tunnels and laid in about 60m of exploration line. Jeff and myself also found this junction of the two tunnels, and decided this was also a good spot to put in the warning sign. We

discussed this with the rest of the group and they agreed that this was a good placement. Now AG, Sergi Perez and Juan Naval went in to explore some more. Jeff Seckendorf, Jason Park and I went in with the sign. After the sign was put in we went for a look in the right side tunnel which had a very low ceiling. We could just fit. But our head was touching the ceiling and our chest the floor. I could see light shining from the left side further ahead and deduced that this must be from AG and the rest that were on their way back. We took a look in the left side tunnel and found a rock with the letters END scribed into them. Obviously there





were other divers who had made it this far. This was about 30 meters into the cave. Also past this point the left tunnel became much lower and was definitely, side mount only.

When Jason Jeff and myself exited we were discussing the cave and comparing the observations we had made. We could all agree that this cave had huge potential for further exploration.

Lunchtime. Max Wang arrived with lunch, delicious noodles with chicken "I think", served in the 26c warm

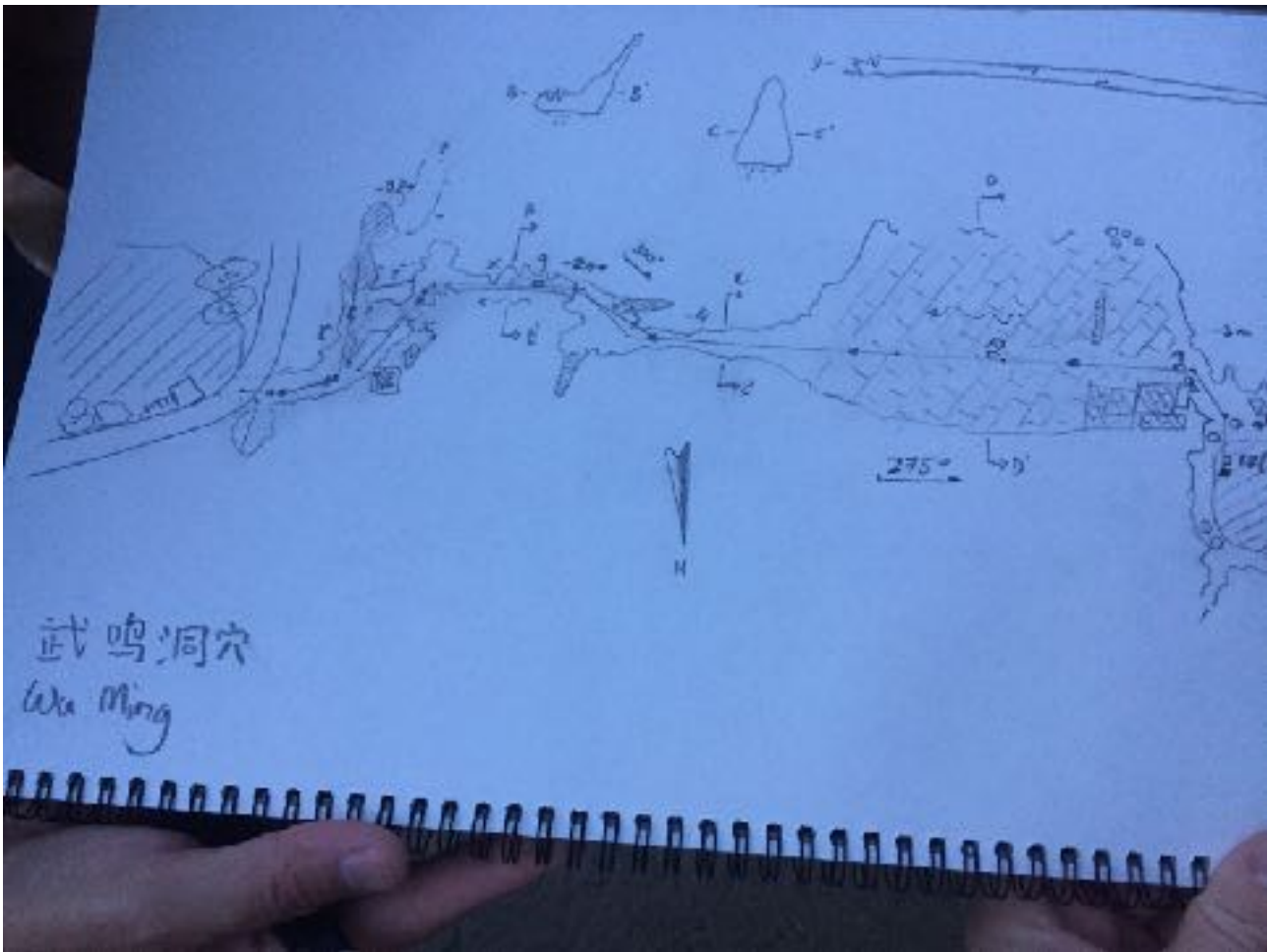
water from the cave. Definitely a first for me eating Chinese food, in China, in the cave entrance.

I was just finished with my noodles as AG, Juan and Sergi came back. They had also made the same conclusion. This cave is amazing! AG asked what we thought and I agreed this was a great start to our expedition. I told him about the lights I could see that I assumed were theirs. This got him excited and he called out to the support team to come with 4 new tanks. This was one of the benefits of us all wearing the UTD-Z system for these dives. Down the stairs they came with 2 tanks for AG and 2 for me.



We took off our used tanks, plugged in the QC6 of our new tanks, while going through the S.A.D.D.D.D. dive plan. Off we went. We quickly reached the junction. We took the left tunnel and found the narrow passage way with started as a horizontal narrow passage maybe 50cm high. And then it went into a upright narrow passage maybe 70cm wide. We pushed through and yes, we had found the right tunnel and doing so created a circuit. Also we reached the furthest into the cave for that day. About 100m.

When we came back out Sergi and Juan decided to give this one more try, and pushed further from where we left the last arrow. Much further. They pushed the cave to about 200 meters.



This drawing was made by Sergi Perez, an artist if you ask me. Wow what a day, The other teams managed to survey the first part of the cave and placed in a main line for training purposes.

We are all very excited for what is to come in the next days.

Sunday 11-sept.-2016 UTD Cave exploration China. SCKPP South China Karst Plain Project.

Ben Bos Skeleton cave

The Du An area caves.

We set out in the morning and headed to the DuAn area where some previous teams did quite some exploration, in 2011 and 2012. The dive center in DuAn had some rudimentary maps on the wall and although these caves looked very interesting, they did not match the criteria for the caves we set out to find.

Our main goal was to get a local cave diving community set up to start exploring their own backyard. And so we wanted to find caves that were suitable for training and tourism, while at the same time also were unexplored and un surveyed. So the local divers involved in the exploration project get a chance to learn how to set up these type of exploration dives.



Below Sergi Perez there is 80m of water

When we arrived at the first few dive sites we were a bit disappointed. What used to be clear water karst windows, now were, because of heavy rain, muddy pools, with low visibility. The ones we did find were to deep.

below, you see Juan Naval looking into very clear water, but we learned from the maps that this cave goes down to 60m.



So no luck again. This time instead of letting the local guy from the dive center try his best to get us to sites he thought were suitable, we decided to use the team's know-how and ability to read the environment to make educated guesses on where caves might be. Also the fact that we learned earlier on this expedition that the local inhabitants use the pools by the caves, and clean water that flows out, as "swimming pools" and "laundry stations". So when we asked them, with the help from our Mandarin speaking team members they started pointing us in the right direction.

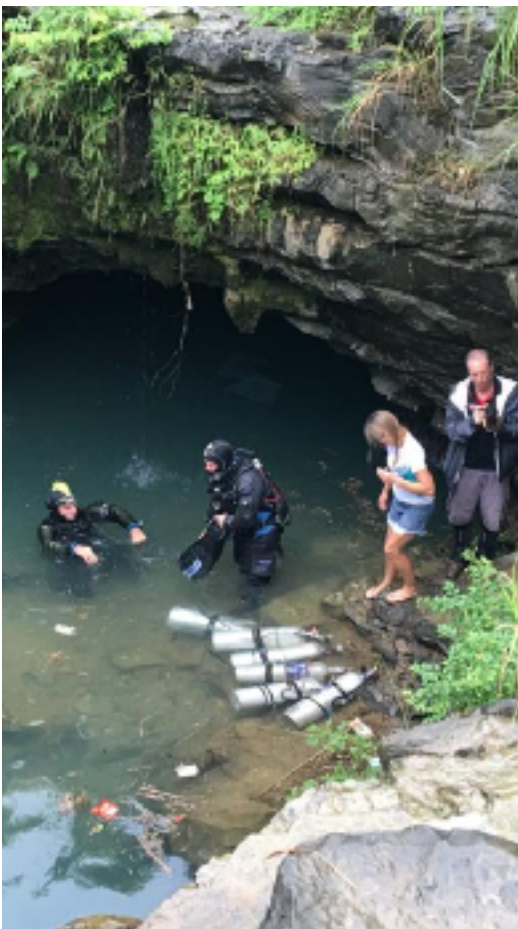
Now we were getting somewhere, the dive guide from the dive center was taken out of the picture, and the team was now scouting these cracks and sinkholes pointed out by the locals. Quickly we found some good leads and split up into two teams. One team consisting of AG, Juan Naval and Jason Park set out to explore a huge cave that was located inside a big dry cave behind a cornfield. The other team consisting of Sergi Perez, Poh Chang Chew, and myself (Ben Bos). We found a sink hole that looked like it was part of 2 other connecting holes.



The ridge in the bottom of the sinkholes is clearly visible.

We got a plan together and prepared the gear and climbed our way down this hole. We had

some if not to say allot of interest from the local people, we paid some of them for the inconvenience we might cause them and in return, they started helping us with carrying the cylinders and other stuff. Some of them were even more exited then we were.



Sergi Perez and Ben Bos, getting ready.

First we decided to se if we could check out the left side and connected that to the other hole. This turned out to be a dead end. Then we turned right and discovered the cave dropping down to about 11 meters and was reasonably wide. About 3 to 4 meters at the widest, and 1m at the narrowest point. We laid about 45 meters of line and tied off. The visibility of the cave varied between two meters and zero.



Sergi Perez, checking under a ledge for leads inside the cave.

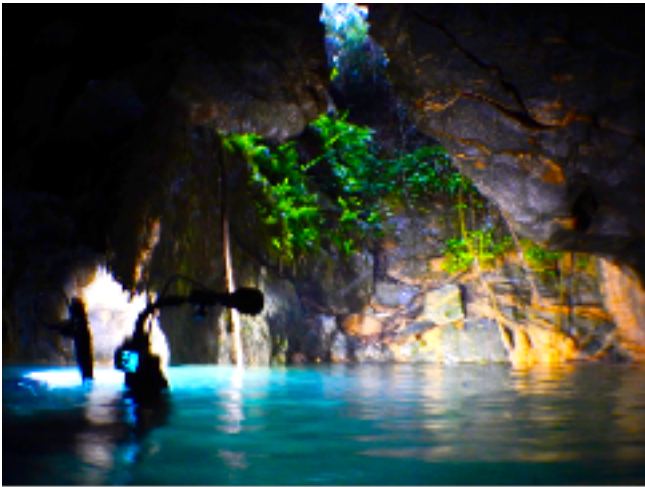
We found a lot of debris and trash. We could also see by the formations that there used to be a very high flow in these caves, but there was absolutely no movement now. We headed back and when we reached about 1/3rd of the line back we decided to make a jump down to see if we could find the other hole that was supposed to be in the sugar cane field. We checked our gas, and went down. The visibility went down and we reached the bottom at 18 meters. Then the bottom sloped up again, we reached a restriction of about 80cm high, pushed through, and continued up. Shallower and shallower we found some more debris and some animal remains. Some poor animal had probably fallen into the hole in the field, and drowned.



Poh Chang Chew, video documenting the dive.

We got into a narrow chimney up and got shallower and shallower, until we finally reached the surface. We laid about 70 meters of line from the T junction we created with the jump from our first line. Here we found ourselves in the middle of another sinkhole, the one in

the field. It was a beautiful sight, with growth of some plants on the walls and thick vines coming down into the hole.



Time and gas limits were reached and we had to turn back. Our last tie-off point just before we surfaced was at three meters. On the way down, I had trouble equalizing, so the team resurfaced and waited for me to solve my ears. There was no way I was going to be able to climb out of that hole. So using all the tricks in the book, I got my ears to work with us. We descended, but when I reached eight meters my right ear blocked-up again.

I signaled the team that I would swim as close to the ceiling of the cave as possible, whilst keeping an eye out on their lights some meters below me. Using my light they could see my position. But after swimming for about three minutes i reached a ledge in the ceiling that sloped down. So I had to descend. I decided to try to wedge my head into a small crevasse that was a little bit higher and, YES i hear the welcome sound of crackle and pop in my ears. I could go down again. My ears were fine the rest of the dive.

We exited the cave in darkness the whole dive took almost 90 minutes, so when we surfaced the sun had set, so it was pitch dark. The surface support team and locals did a great job of helping us out of the water and climbing out of the sinkhole.



It was a dive of mixed feelings:
GREAT: no person has ever been here before, we believe to be the first
SAD: Allot of trash in the cave
DISAPPOINTED: OK for training but, not so good for tourism
EXCITING: To explore, and find our way to a hole in the middle of a field.

After the dives, and after both teams finished with packing all their gear back into the truck. The locals had cooked a dinner for us. Unbelievable hospitality! They cooked a local meal for the whole team, in all about 15 people. They even brought out their own moonshine liquor.



Monday 12 September 2016 UTD Cave Exploration China. SCKPP South China Karst Plain Project.

Ben Bos Nong Chi Spring

The Du An Area Caves Part 2

Today we did not move out of the Du An area. We decided to look around some more, even though so far we had noticed that the majority of these caves are very deep.

The team split up. One team stayed in the local village to dive and survey a cave called Tai Yang Hu (Sun Lake).



Tai Yang Hu, Sun Lake

In the meantime AG, Sergi Perez, Kelvin Yu, Xie Yan, and myself (Ben Bos) got into a pickup truck and, armed with shorts, fins, and a small light, we set out to find some springs and do some quick free diving scout dives. The local dive center guide came with us.



Kelvin Yu, our local UTD instructor, guiding the driver.

After driving around for about two hours and jumping in several springs, we had no luck. All of a sudden Sergi Perez pointed to a factory. We found it was a water bottling factory, so there must be near a spring, right?? Sure enough, we found it behind the factory. There were two pools and Sergi jumped in. After some free dives he noticed the walls on all sides drop straight down.



Sergi Perez in the background, AG showing me the other pool on the GPS map.

I decided to jump in the other one, to see if they were connected. I dove down the wall between the two pools and found the arch that connected them, but otherwise the wall also dropped straight down. In the mean time Kelvin Yu and Xie Yan found out that these pools have apparently been dove before by divers in 2012. They reported that they went down at least 60 meters.



AG looking for the source of the spring.

AG and I did not want to take 'no' for an answer and started to follow the stream we found behind the second pool to what ever source it came from. After about a 10-minute hike through the Chinese jungle, using my Jetfins as a machete, while being eaten alive by mosquitos, we found that the stream just disappeared under the ground. You might ask, "isn't that just what we were looking for?" But we are not Smurfs, so unless we turned blue and wear white hats we could not fit.

Back on the road again, on our way to find lunch, Kelvin Yu asked the driver for directions and we ended up at a roadside restaurant that served a really nice Chinese lunch. After lunch we were about ready to call it a day, but decided to have one more look at a site suggested by the dive center guide.

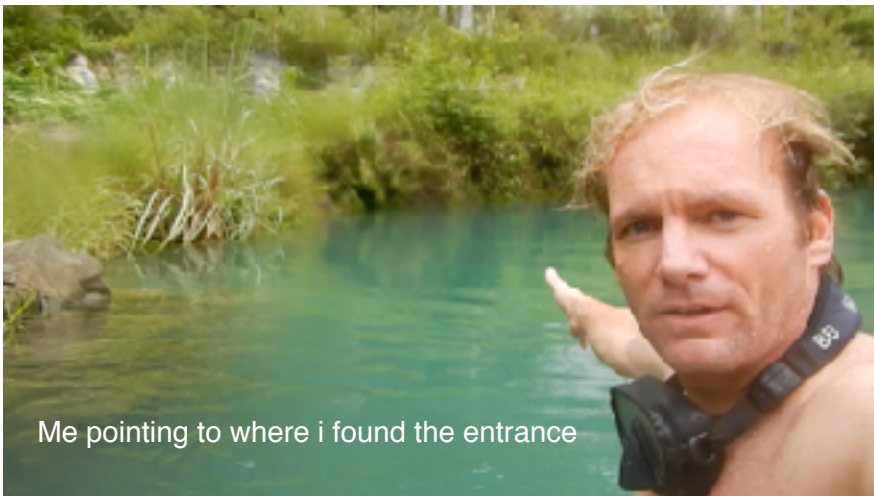


The team discusses a plan of attack

We ended up driving through a small town, and when we saw a woman carrying a bucket with laundry, we all looked at each other, smiled, and without saying a word gave the underwater handsignal for, "go that way!!"

We had learned that this was a good sign, because the locals use the springs for washing and recreation. Before we knew it we were looking at a pool with a nice amount of flow and steps descending under the light blue water. All of sudden the dive guide recognizes the site and tells us there were some French divers that have been here, and reported the depth of this cave to be around 80 meters. But judging the flow of the cave that was

creating the boiling water like effect on the surface there was no way that pool went straight down.



Me pointing to where i found the entrance

I went in the water and swam to the center of the area with the flow. I took a couple of breaths and dove down. At six meters I found an arch that could be the roof of the entrance to the cave. I swam towards the wall and noticed on my

right the steps continued even further down. After catching my breath on the surface I felt excited, and went down again this time following the wall at the edge of the steps. At nine meters I found the entrance. I had to hang onto the steps, so I was not pushed up by the flow coming out of the cave and as an upside down rock climber I continued to 12 meters. This was looking good. We have a lead!!

While we were getting dressed, the local kids were very interested.



Going down and fighting the current

I can only imagine what they must think of us. These crazy people wither weird equipment, disappearing under the water.

On this dive we decided to take stage bottles, so we would have more gas with us. We could use half of the stage bottle on the way in, Stage it on the line, and continue on.

On the way back we would pick up the bottle again and use the rest on the way out. This way we keep maximum amount of gas in our main bottles to deal with eventual emergencies.

One by one the team submerges into the milky pool, and follow the steps down. Sergi Perez ties of the primary exploration reel, gives the circular OK signal with his light, I reply with the same signal, then relaying it to AG who follows close behind me. I am busy taking notes on the tie off points, in order to do a rough survey of the cave. I note, depth, heading, features that stand out, and distance between ties. Beforehand we knotted the exploration reel every 3 meters, so underwater i could count the knots between ties. This way we can afterwards draw a stick-figure drawing of the cave. AG is video documenting the cave.

Soon the cave starts narrowing and begins to drop down. There is a strange kind of algae that grows on the rocks which make them slippery, and difficult to tie our line to. But Sergi did a great job on finding suitable tie-off points. Here we really benefitted from team-exploration. As the 2nd diver on the line I light up the tie-of points for Sergi, this way he can work more efficiently and I check the tie, and signal it to AG behind me. All communication is relayed back and forth, so all team members know what is going on.

We dropped our stage bottles as planned, and continued our exploration. After a short while the cave went down and became narrower. I could see Sergi making a tie-off, already knowing he wanted to descend down a tunnel I could see below us. We crawled into this narrow tunnel one by one, but after about seven meters straight down we hit our maximum depth of 30 meters for this dive. It was too narrow to turn around, so we backed out, upside down, feet first until we reached a wider part and could wriggle our way back around. I now faced AG who started to turn around. He was also carrying the camera setup, with lights on wide arms. I recollect a quote by Bruce Lee, about a teapot and the water inside. And how the water must become one with the teapot by becoming the teapot. We had to become one with the cave, and turn on all our senses on high. Well all apart from vision because the visibility had now gone down to a few centimeters.

We followed our ties back to our staged bottles and switched back to them. On the way out i double-checked my surveyed points and helped Sergi with undoing the drop-ties. We soon reached the exit of the cave. The visibility had cleared up a bit to about two meters. The exit went out at an upwards angle, this meant we had to be careful to not shoot past our decompressions stops. Our first stop was at 12 meters, here the flow was still reasonable. But when we reached the nine meter stop we could see the steps again, and we had to hang on them upside down. We had a good time, because AG started playing with the different light settings on his big video lights. We completed our decompression while goofing around in red, UV, and blue light. On a more serious note, we realized that the UV setting for cave diving was really good. The UV made the line and arrows brightened up like a white t-shirt under blacklight in a club.

A successful and fun dive, definitely one cave i would like to get back to because one of the locals that was looking at us when we came out. He explained that along the ridge about six kilometers along the mountain there is another karst window. According to the topography this could very well be true! Until next time.

Tuesday 13-sept.-2016 UTD Cave exploration China. SCKPP South China Karst Plain Project.

Ben Bos White Dragon Cave

Back to the Wu Ming area.

Today we are moving back to the Wu Ming area, where we had such a successful day on the 3rd day of this expedition that we decided to give that area one more go, before we all have to go home again. Another five hours in “The bus”.



This bus was becoming our second home. Everyone had sort of found a fixed seat which began to get adorned with personalized items such as sunglasses and bottles of water combined with rudimentary drawings of caves on pieces of ripped out wet notes(a note pad we can bring under water). The driver, we called Lightning Panda, did such an amazing job of relentlessly driving us from site to site.



Upon our arrival at the site, we immediately saw the clear water we encountered earlier at the other cave in this area. Again the locals were swimming and washing their laundry. The pool, where we clearly could see a strong flow coming out of the cave, was being fed by another pool up in the hill. Well that sounded interesting, so we all went for a look.



What we found was amazing, a giant room, with a lake, not a pool. It was maybe 40 meter across and 60 meters wide. But no apparent spring feeding this monster. I get why the locals call this whole dragon cave, you could easily fit a dragon in here.



The whole team got excited, we had a great opportunity to do some good surveying here. The cave have been explored before, so they are not virgin caves but, We did not know if the spring by the road could be traversed into the big lake that was feeding it.



The plan:

Team one: Sergi Peres, Ben Bos, and Jason Park.

Goal: find out if we could traverse the spring to the lake, and put in a primary line. Then survey the line and explore interesting points.

Team two: AG, Juan Naval, and Poh Chang Chew. Goal: find the spring feeding the main lake.

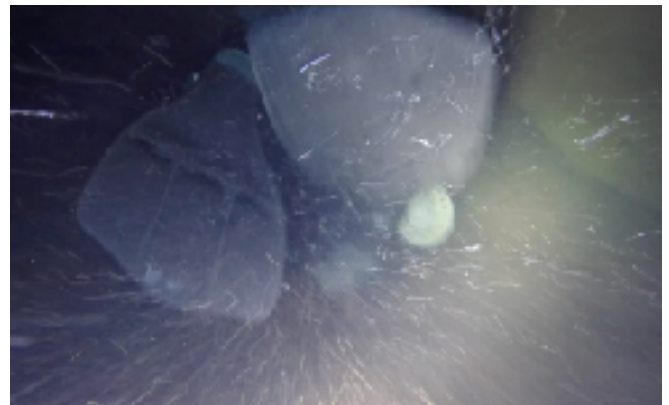
Team 3: Kelvin, Adam, and Ray. Goal: Circumnavigate and map the lake.

Other goals: Put in the warning sign and explore other leads.

We had to wait a bit for the car with all the dive gear because it got pulled over by the police at a check point. Sometimes we get reminded that we are in a very controlled country. All bags were apparently checked and inspected. Meanwhile at the dive site, the teams began preparing and forming their dive plan.

As soon as the car arrived everyone sprung into action. Our plan was simple, get in at the spring and swim our way up the, and see if we can traverse the cave. Easier said than done.

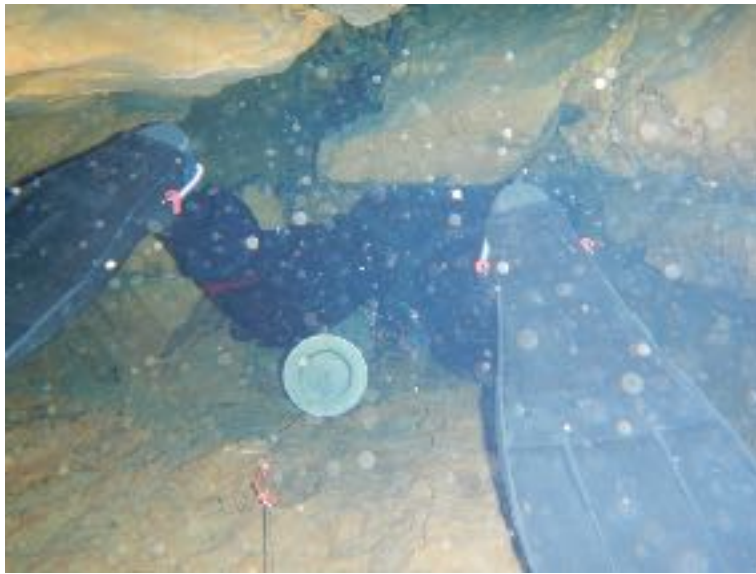
The current was extremely strong at the entrance. We had to claw from rock to rock while bracing with our heels on the ceiling of the cave to get in. Rocks easily 70 cm across tumble over as soon as we grabbed them. Sergi put in the tie, while I supported Sergi from behind, I will not go into details on how :-). We finally pushed through the narrowest part and the flow started to slow down. We could see there had been divers here before, but judging by the condition of the lines, it looked like a long time ago.



They did a great job. They had even put a sign in. But the sign was broken off at one corner and was flaring in the current like a flag in the wind. On a later dive we took it out together with the old line. AG and Juan put in a new sign. But this time facing into the current to warn diver of the syphon from the big lake.

We figured that the risk was greater of divers being pulled into the cave, when they get to close to the strong flow leading from the lake to the spring pool.

Back to our first exploration dive. When we pushed further, we saw a giant boulder in the middle of our way, blocking it. We looked around, and just before we thought "dead end".



We hung still a moment to see if we could feel the flow. There was still a tiny bit. We took one more look, and found a way around it. The cave from here went a great deal wider end after a short swim, we finally arrived in the lake. And found ourselves looking up at the great dome above us.



After we looked around in the great dome, at some amazing structures we headed back down the flow, this time surveying the cave, putting in a permanent main line and retrieving the exploration line together with the old line. Sergi Perez was putting in the main line,

I (Ben Bos) was surveying the tie-offs by, noting depth, Direction into and away from the tie off, and making note of the features that stood out.

Jason Park had the hardest job, he managed to retrieve our exploration line, and at the same time the old worn down line that we had found in the cave. So imagine, fighting a current, managing one reel and one spool, while reeling in two lines. It looked like both his hands had 17 fingers.



Just before we set of on this dive, to put in the new main line, survey and cleanup. We noticed another line going down. It pointed just past the the area we came out of on the 1st exploration dive. During lunch we asked the other team if they had seen that line, but they had focussed on the opposite side og the great lake, so they did not see it. So after lunch we decided to scout that line and see if it would lead to the source of the lake. We could see that this line was also reasonably old.



Ben Bos, surveying the line, counting the knots.

We followed the line from where we found it on the previous dive. After we “jumped”, several times. (a cave diver term for going off the main line with a spool or small reel to explore away from that main line). We checked out some interesting spots but we could not find an area with flow. We pushed ourselves as far as we could fit into these holes, picked up some fine silt between 2 fingers, and dropped it to see if it would move in the current. But we could not fin the spring.

The other team was also unsuccessful in finding the source of the lake. Those big set of steps leading down into the lake, were put in there to support a water pump station, so they might have covered it up by accident. In any case a nice project for future SCKPP (South China Karst Plain Project) expeditions.

