

“Eagle-Hunting” in Kyrgyzstan



by Ir. Chin Mee Poon

I can still vividly recall the eagle-hunting demonstration that I had witnessed in Kyrgyzstan. If an image of eagles being hunted appears in your mind now, you ought to erase that image. Why? It is because eagle-hunting is not hunting for eagles! It is a hunting activity with eagles for animals such as rabbits, foxes, and sometimes even wolves! And these eagle-hunters in Kyrgyzstan are known as *berkutchi*.

Kyrgyzstan is a Central Asian country located just west of Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region of China. When the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) disintegrated in 1991, Kyrgyzstan, together with Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan and 9 other Soviet Socialist Republics, broke away from Russia to become independent states. However, 10 of those former Soviet Republics have decided to rejoin Russia, thus forming the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). Subsequently, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan and Afghanistan are now known as the Central Asian states.

With an area of 198,500 sq km, Kyrgyzstan is quite a small land-locked country noted for its towering mountains, eagle-hunting and nomadic yurts. The Kyrgyz people came from Siberia to this land about 400 years ago and are still largely nomadic. Since its independence 21 years ago, Kyrgyzstan has evolved as the freest republic in Central Asia and tourism is now an important revenue generator. It is the only Central Asian country that Malaysians can visit without a visa.

My wife and I, along with two of our travelling buddies, came to the little village of Bokonbayevo close to the southern bank of Lake Issyk-Köl which is quite a large lake in the eastern part of Kyrgyzstan. It was early November 2011 and the village is located about 1,800m above sea level. It was cold.

Talgar, a good-looking middle-aged *berkutchi*, came to our home-stay in a station-wagon. We followed him into the mountains which were about 10 minutes drive away. He had a golden eagle with him. It was an 8-year-old female eagle, named Tumara. He found her when she was still an eaglet in a nest not far from the village. He brought her up and trained her to hunt.

Though eagles are born with the instinct to hunt, as her master, Talgar had to train her to develop an intimate bond between them, so that she would hunt for him and would be willing to exchange her kill for a reward. In 12 years' time, when Tumara reaches 20 years of age, Talgar would release her to the wild so that she could find a mate and nest. Golden eagles have a life expectancy of 50 years and these eagle pairs stay together for life and a male eagle is smaller in size than a female.

In the mountains, Talgar took out a white rabbit from his car and set it free. He then walked up a slope with Tumara blindfolded in a leather hood. When the hood was removed, Tumara took off from Talgar's arm and swooped down at lightning speed and grabbed the rabbit with her powerful talons. She held the rabbit to the ground and started to cry. Talgar came over, squatted beside the bird and lifted up the dead rabbit. It was then that Tumara started to devour the rabbit. The whole rabbit was torn apart and swallowed in just a few minutes. Only the head and intestines were discarded. It was an unforgettable sight.

Talgar told us that an eagle-hunting competition is held in that part of Kyrgyzstan every year and Tumara was the champion in the last competition as she was the first golden eagle to kill a fox. Eagle-hunting in its various forms including falconry and hunting with raptors such as kites, hawks, goshawks, etc, is a centuries-old tradition passed down from one generation to another, and it is practised in many countries besides Kyrgyzstan, such as Kazakhstan, Mongolia, Middle East and some South American countries. ■

