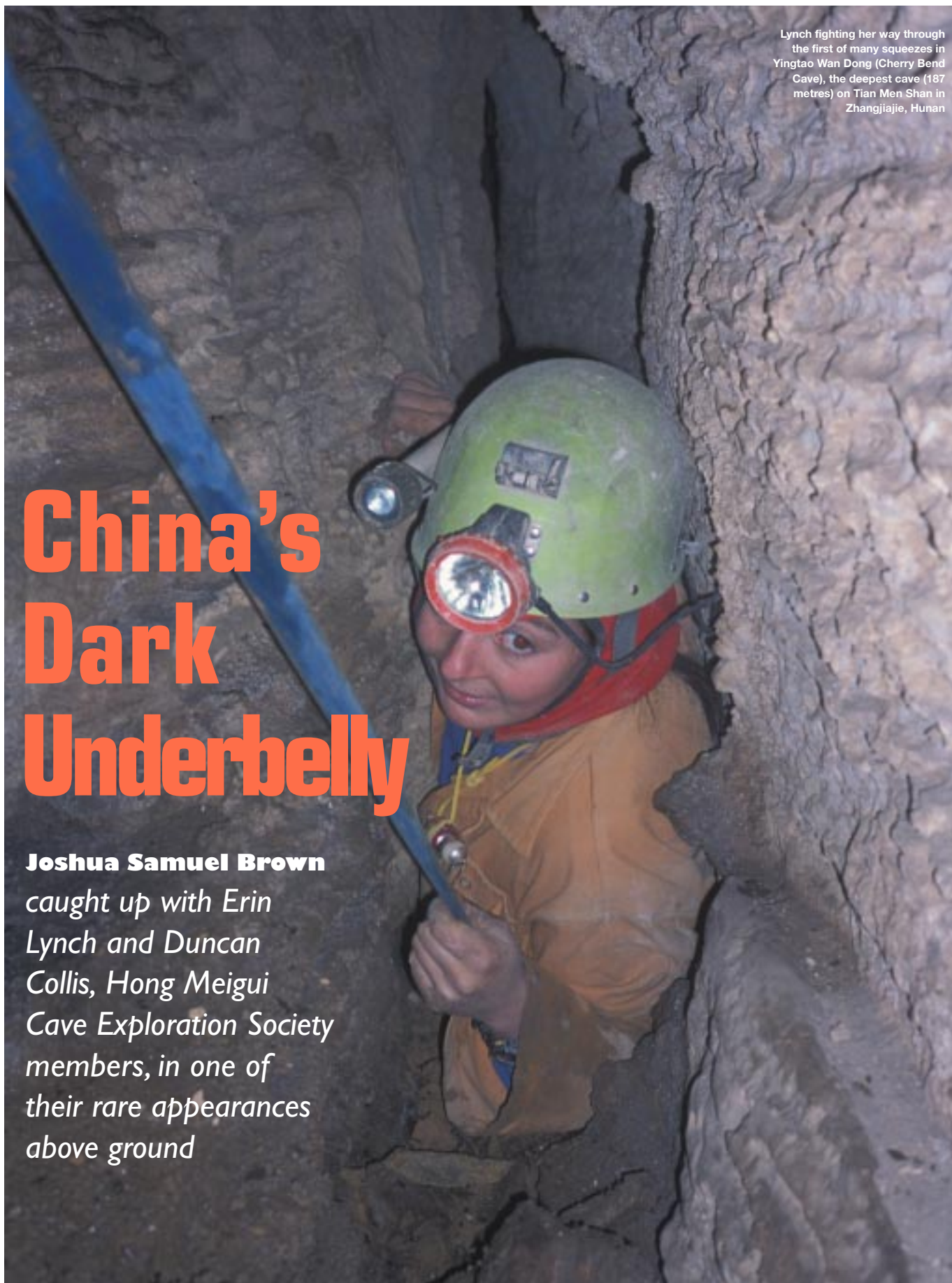


Lynch fighting her way through the first of many squeezes in Yingtao Wan Dong (Cherry Bend Cave), the deepest cave (187 metres) on Tian Men Shan in Zhangjiajie, Hunan

China's Dark Underbelly

Joshua Samuel Brown
caught up with Erin Lynch and Duncan Collis, Hong Meigui Cave Exploration Society members, in one of their rare appearances above ground



Collis emerging from She Dong (Snake Cave) on Tian Men Shan in Zhangjiajie, Hunan



Did you come to China to go caving, or did you get into it while in China?

Duncan Collis: We came to China specifically for the purpose of caving. It was Erin who came to China first, with a couple of friends, and I came out about a year later.

Erin Lynch: I applied for and won a Durfee adventure grant to spend a year caving in China. I came in 2001 and liked it so much I didn't leave.

Why is China such an excellent place for caving?

DC: China still has a huge number of large, unexplored caves. Caves in the United Kingdom are rubbish in comparison, and the chances of finding an unexplored one are nil. In the past year we've been into some huge places, including one cave that was so big, we nearly missed a 30-metre-wide side passage, and another cave which starts with an enormous shaft that drops 500 metres in two big steps.

Has the local or central government supported your endeavours?

EL: We've often been supported and encouraged by tourism officials in China, as foreigners involved in serious caving always seems to be newsworthy and they see it as a good way to generate publicity.

It seems as if there are more and more "show" caves ("wild" caves that have been opened up for tourists) appearing around China, especially in Guangxi province. Is this happening elsewhere, and do you have any strong opinions on these places?

DC: China's tourism industry seems to be really taking off, and show cave development is happening in many places across the country. It saddens me to see show caves which have been insensitively developed, causing unnecessary damage to the cave. On the other hand, I think good show caves are a way for ordinary people to see some of the amazing formations that can be found in caves without having to be very adventurous.



A very muddy Lynch in Yunnan's Niu Bizi Dong (Cow Nose Cave) near Shilin

Collis hammering in an anchor in Liu Chi Ao Kou Xia Dong (Six Chi Depression Lower Cave), a 100-metre deep cave in Tian Xing, Chongqing



Collis in San Wang Dong (Third Great Cave) in a small village near Wulong, Chongqing

I'd certainly rather see a show cave where visitors can look at cave formations in their natural setting, than to see caves which have had all their formations chiselled out so that they can be sold.

Hong Meigui has helped to find and map out wild caves that were then turned into show caves. Do you ever have any regrets about this?

DC: In the past, we've surveyed caves for developers, and I don't feel bad about that. There are plenty of Chinese cave surveyors for whom that sort of thing is their day-to-day job, so if we refused to survey the cave then a Chinese surveyor would do it instead, and the cave would still get developed.

A different matter though would be if we explored a previously unexplored cave, and found that it was really beautiful, with big passages that could be opened up for tourists by doing a bit of blasting. Obviously, something like that could make us some money if we were to get in touch with a tourism company and help them develop it, or we could keep quiet and leave the cave in peace. So far, we haven't found ourselves faced with that situation.

Like most cavers, though, we are keen on the principle of cave conservation; having as little impact as possible on the caves we explore. That would prohibit us from calling in the cave developers – even though the cash would come in handy!



Collis using "SRT" to reach the entrance to Guan Yin Dong (Guan Yin Cave) in the cliffs around Tian Men Shan in Zhangjiajie, Hunan



Rich Gerrish, a caver from Hong Kong, in the colossal Da Dong (Big Cave) in Zhangjiajie, Hunan

Do you think that caving, as an activity, can ever be made “accessible to the masses” without destroying the mystery and adventure of the hobby?

DC: Fortunately, “the masses” mostly don’t want to go caving. For most people, visiting a show cave is enough. There are companies that lead groups of people through wild caves, and the caves they visit certainly suffer as a result, but usually they stick to a few caves that are easy and that the guides are familiar with.

Are there any clubs in China that will teach novices the fundamentals of caving, and if so, what are your professional takes on these organisations?

DC: There are several outdoor clubs in China which go caving, although they mostly seem interested in other activities such as mountaineering and climbing. We know a guy in Hong Kong, Fred Yeung, who does training courses, who’s qualified as an industrial roped access trainer – the techniques are very similar to those used in caving. He’s a good bloke who came on one of our expeditions last year. Check out his website at www.dimensionsaccess.com.

Is HMG looking for new members? If so, what sort of skill set would one have to possess, and how should people contact you?

DC: Hong Meigui is always happy to hear from experienced cavers interested in caving in China. We’ve even taken a few people caving who had no experience, but it’s not often possible – many of the caves we explore require some fairly technical rope-work or other caving skills; we simply don’t have the resources to act as a caving school. Really, we’d rather be exploring!

What sort of a shopping list would you recommend for a caver who’s determined to get out there?

DC: The most important thing is something you can’t buy: common sense.

EL: At a minimum, everyone who goes caving should have three lights, some decent batteries and a helmet.

What’s the technical term for a caving enthusiast? “Spelunker?”

EL: No! Not spelunker...in the United States’ caving community, the term “spelunker” refers to cavers who don’t follow basic safety procedures such as carrying three sources of light, wearing a helmet and always having a buddy. Speleology is the scientific study of caves, so we’re speleologists. You can call us cavers, too!

