

CHIANG MAI, SONGKRAN IN PETCHABOON, & OTHER EXCITEMENTS

For the school year break in March through early April of 1964, I was part of a group of Peace Corps Volunteers recruited by the ministry of education for two purposes. First, we were sent to Chiang Mai where we were housed and worked in a rather magnificent Buddhist temple on developing in English a reader of basic Thai folk stories. In addition we were taken to several nearby villages where cottage industries had been developed. In one rather colorful umbrellas were made. In another fine Thai silk was woven, and in a third silver smuggled in from Myanmar (then Burma) and by remnants of the old Chinese Nationalist Army in those parts, into fine Thai bowls. These excursions were intended to help us appreciate Thai culture and industry. I must say I was profoundly impressed with the creative industry in the northern Thai villages we visited. I trust we were more than just tourists.

The second part of the seminar was in Petchaboon (now preferably spelled Petchabun, I'm told). Here we held a seminar with local teachers. I presume this was to help them see how the English language which they taught their students could be used to express Thai culture. That may seem self-evident, but I can testify that to my students in the Teachers Training College of Mahasarakham (now replaced by Mahasarakham University), it was quite a revelation! All of the English readers then used in Thai schools told either of Britain and its customs or America and its accomplishments. Not a word about anything Thai, or Southeast Asian, or ... English was never revealed as capable of speaking about anything Thai! But I digress.

We were in Petchaboon during the festival of Songkran, the Thai New Year. In Petchaboon at least the day begins by washing statues or images of the Buddha and then everyone else who has come to watch this religious rite. And no, I don't imply a sprinkling. The Buddha got a real bath (cold water) and everyone in Petchaboon got wet!, very wet. While we were in Petchaboon we were taken to a nearby hill tribe. It was whispered to us men in the group that everyone knew those tribe's people raised and smoked opium. Of course, we men got to, along with the hill tribe men, enjoy a puff or two on the opium pipe. Alas, I am sorry to report, that puff or two did for me exactly what about ten years later, a smoke of a good non-medicinal marijuana cigarette did . . . absolutely nothing! Oh well, some of us are meant to suffer this life while others get to enjoy its varied, and often illicit, pleasures. Ah, but then, I console myself, "How many of those others get to enjoy seeing some *'fat lady,'* as they'd say, sing and then die, thereby bringing down the curtain on some operatic stage?

While I do not know what the Ministry of Education did with the editing work we did while in Chiang Mai, I do know those days in Chiang Mai and Petchaboon, and the various excursions to villages nearby did inspire my work for the remainder of my assignment in Mahasarakham, which work culminated in an English reader for our first year students filled with tales and customs about Isan (or Northeastern Thailand as we called it then).