



Happy Songkran!

I returned this morning, around 4:30, from my exciting and relaxing weekend away from Bangkok. Pictures are [posted](#). These you cannot miss.

The last two weeks have basically been a serious new emersion into Thai rural life. The first trip began last weekend as a fieldtrip with a class (though I'm not in the class), Thai Society and Culture. After the 11 hour (see: forever) busride, we arrived first in Chiang Rai, at the far north of Thailand, at the AKHA Foundation to freshen up and then moved on to check out a majestic, but very strange Wat in Chiang Rai. You'll see in the pictures that it's completely white and glittery--not standard for a Wat. Then on the inside alongside the Buddha image, the paintings, instead of depicting typical [Buddhist Jataka stories](#) or other belief-images, there are modern movie depictions. Alongside Jabba the Hutt, you'll find Converse All-Stars from a famous Thai movie, [Ong Baak](#). As well, it appears there is an American theme with the twin towers being crashed into by a monster which is also drinking oil and wreaking havoc elsewhere. On another side, you can find our Matrix hero, Neo. Very strange...I would like to talk with the monks who hang out at this Wat--they should be very interesting people.



After the Wat, we moved to the home of the designer of the strange Wat. It was stranger. Everything was made of wood (beautiful) or dead animal parts (many bull heads/horns, very creepy). We even sat on chairs made of cow hides and bull heads (the horns were the legs). After a while, I got a little creeped out by all the death here and wanted to move on quickly. Turtle shells as plates? Entire elephant skeletons? So much more? Check the pictures for that funness. Finally, we moved on to the mountains surrounding Chiang Rai. The first stop was a tea farm high on the mountains (this whole trip is on mountains...winding and weaving up and down steep slopes in minivans, essentially. One of our group, Nok, got sick as she was a bit unsettled by the winding and weaving). The tea farm had a phenomenal view and we were treated to a great tea-tasting. Green and Oolong teas--phenomenal, even for the non-tea drinkers among our group. Interestingly, most of these tea farms (there are many in these mountains) are run by Yunnan Chinese. As with most countries in Southeast Asia, the Chinese came to Thailand, worked their way up the social ladder and now run many businesses. This area has a lot of Chinese themes and much of the architecture and culture is Chinese. Nearly everyone speaks Yunnanese and Thai, as well



as various other languages. This mountainous area is also largely populated by various hilltribes. They are generally very poor and uneducated because the Thai government refuses to recognize them as citizens, thus excluding them from the mandatory education for Thai citizens and other benefits like cheap health care (universal, by the way). These tribesmen must go to the Chinese businesses in the area, like the tea farms, for work and their situation is much like a day-laborer's situation in America...but I think probably worse.

After the tea farm, we made our way to an [Akha village](#), Akha in this case being the hilltribe. They provided us with beds and showers and food, galore. They also explained how they live and how they work with a foundation to improve the livelihood of their people. Our "guide" spoke 5 languages: Thai, Lao/Isaan, Yunnanese, Akha (native), Lahu (another hilltribe) and wants to learn more english. The village consisted of about 300 people. As well as the aforementioned problems of health and education, hilltribe villages also face a threat from Christian missionaries and a high loss of their middle-aged people who leave for the cities. The Christian missionaries are seen as a problem because they further the erosion of the traditional values and beliefs of the hilltribe people. Another hilltribe we visited, a [Black Lahu tribe](#) (there are Red, Black, Yellow and She-leh) had been completely converted and their leader lamented of the near loss of all of their most important traditions. Generally each year there are many days of celebration in which traditional dances are performed and music and festivities occur, but now only once per year do the Lahu gather for tradition. The leader said he also found that social ills such as teen pregnancy and alcoholism have slowly moved in as their traditional values fell away. As well, it is easy to see that in these villages, there are generally only older people or very young people. All those in the middle leave for the city, even in relatively prosperous villages such as another Lahu village we visited was. This makes their traditional farming culture extremely difficult. Though they want to modernize very much, they also feel like they are compromising some of their most important traditions and values as a cost of modernization. Luckily for us, they haven't lost their love of food--it was phenomenal. Though I couldn't handle being vegetarian for very long, the warm soy milk they had for us was unparalleled.



After leaving the Akha and Lahu villages, we made our way to a restaurant called ["Baan-na-na"](#). (If anything, check out this site) However, it turns out that the restaurant is part of a group which has started a home in Chiang Rai for kids (up to 18) who are illegal immigrants or have no citizenship. The operation is small, but now the staff number around 6 and, before school let out for the 2 month break, they had 137 kids. These kids are a big issue

because the area we are in is a hotbed of human trafficking and drug trafficking. Border towns, like Chiang Rai see endless amounts of people trafficked from Burma and Laos into Thailand and then down into southern Thailand, Malaysia, Cambodia, Vietnam and

Japan as prostitutes. Baan-na-na is trying to get these kids off streets and into a good environment where they can get an education, health services and learn skills. While on the face of the border towns, things aren't too bad, it is important that the underground drug and human trafficking be stopped by getting kids off the streets, out of gangs, and into schools and good home environments. After eating at the restaurant (they need to improve their food...it figures though--the people who started it are from England), we went to the home, which consists of fields, activity fields, a small activity center and dorms. Looking at the buildings, you can tell they do not have much money. And they were just told that they have to move from their land because the man they were renting from sold it to another owner. They can't afford to stay there. We got to meet a few kids and talk with the staff and then had to be on our way after making donations to the group.



Our second night got pretty interesting because it was at an organic farm. Ajaan (professor) Plaek started his organic farm 7 or 8 years ago after retiring from teaching agriculture at the local university. All the food we ate was grown at the farm (even the fish) and we toured around the various aspects of the farm. After learning about how Ajaan Plaek talked about how he got into farming (which he did in broken english, impressive for this area) we ate and cleaned up. But my friends Mike and Diego and I were hanging out talking when Ajaan Plaek invited us to have a drink with his family/staff/friends. They decided to treat us to Lao Kao (signature Thai liquor, tastes a bit like tequila) and Leo beer. We had a good time talking about life in the US, life in Thailand, and then his daughter and her friends got us to play some games which we were pretty bad at. It was a great time, but we felt bad that they had to make extra trips to buy more beer, so Mike and I wanted to pitch in money.

This proved difficult because Thais, especially, are extremely generous and the daughter refused to take the money. She did, however, want my phone number. So, in the struggle to give her money, she managed to get my number as well. We ended up giving the money to the mother, who said she would give it to her the next day. Though, now I'm not sure what to do as I am text-messaging with the farmer's daughter and probably won't be anywhere near Chiang Rai for the rest of my trip.

The following morning, we left the farm for a quick hop over to Laos. We had planned on going to Burma as well, but it would have cost 500 baht (15 bucks?) per person, whereas Laos only cost 20 baht (60 cents). So to Laos we went and check out a lot of textiles made by local villagers in Laos. We also went along the Mekong River between Burma (so we saw Burma, but didn't go in), Laos and Thailand. At this juncture of the three countries, there is a monstrous Buddha image on Thai soil. This is interesting because it is a replica of another Buddha image at this three-border point, at the bottom of

the river. The Thai navy has made diving expeditions to see that this is indeed the case, but no one is sure when it dates from or who made it. As well, they don't want to bring the image up from the deep because they don't know which country would have rights to it. So it sits. Also, a note about Burma: you'll see in the pictures a very nice building which I photoed from the river bank which happens to be a casino. Gambling is illegal in Thailand, but all the Thais say the casinos in Burma are the best. If you want to rub elbows with influential Thai politicians and businessmen go to this casino. More about gambling in Thailand in a moment. The last things we checked out were a Thai-Lu village and another Wat. The villagers greeted us with music and dancing and put on an hour long performance. They were elaborate and graceful, but mostly just curious about the white people who have come to their village. And then it just so happened that a girl in our group from California (Berkeley), Monica, is of Thai-Lu descent and can speak it. They were amazed to hear someone not from their village speaking their language. Thai-Lu is the minority of minorities. Their numbers are miniscule. It was fun to see them and enjoy their dancing. But this was the end of our trip to Chiang Rai. We arrived back



in Bangkok (another 11 hours) at 6am on Monday morning. Then after 2 days of class, we were off of school (and I still am) because of the Songkran Holiday. So what did I do? I headed north again. (no, not to see the girl from the farm...though she is cute)

My friend Bon (Thai) wanted to go somewhere for [Songkran](#) because we didn't want to stay in Bangkok, where it is either boring or [dangerous](#). With him and Hao, I went to the province of Roi Et

(meaning 101) in the [Isaan](#) region of Thailand. This is the area of which everyone talks about the food and "real" Thai culture. Bon had friends in a small village, Don Dang ("Red Highland"), whom he had spent a few weeks with doing a survey of the village for research. Going here was amazing. And it turns out I am the first white person to ever go to this village. It was easy to tell because everyone stopped and stared when they saw me. And many wanted me to drink beer or Lao Kao with them. But the experience was truly amazing, and by the end of our 4 day stay, Mae (like the vowel sound in "cat", meaning mother) and Yai (meaning grandma) were calling Hao and I "luk luk", calling us their kids. See the pictures.

It was great being on a farm in this simple village. First, we were greeted off the bus by the guards of the village (not really necessary, but they have them during the Songkran time). They motorcycled us to the village (a kilometer or so) and we were instantly welcomed with to the Elders day celebration. It was a lot of old people singing and dancing on a huge stage. And WOW! There I was, the tall white guy, the first white person to ever come to the village. I was a sight to stare at....and everyone wanted to

offer me a beer.

It seemed like we were always eating, so we always felt full. And in Isaan, they have some of the best rice. As well, they eat lots of sticky rice, which is wonderful. Isaan people, different from all other regions, like their food to be sticky and they cook their food to be that way. The flavors in the foods they cooked for us were amazing, with tons of flavor. My only issue was that there were some strange things left in these foods...like the feet and knuckles of chickens, or tendons of the beef. I avoided the feet and knuckles, but they wouldn't let me escape the chicken kidney and the chicken heart (which was delicious, though I don't know if I'll do that again). Each day we helped Mae with chores; cleaning dishes; taking the cows (6) to the pasture; harvesting grass for the cows; feeding the chickens and ducks; or getting food for the day, like when we went searching for bamboo shoots and another plant for the curry she made one night (great!) The only thing about Isaan food is that the people don't really recognize rotten food as "rotten", its just food and you cook it up anyway. I think this may be one reason why they add so much flavor to everything. When food is rotten, just force it to taste good, right? All of the food we ate was fresh this time around though, so it was ok. And it turns out that this village has recently taken up planting Eucalyptus trees for selling for paper products. We got to see that too.

It was a great way to spend my Songkran weekend because the village celebrations are so much fun. If you are ever feeling down, you should have a Songkran parade in a small village, throwing water and baby powder on each other, singing and dancing with everyone in the village. All the young women in the village were sure to make sure they got powder on my face and poured water on me. The leader of the village (aw-ba-taw), (also a friend of Bon's whom we called Paw, father, and whose wife we also called Mae), when I told him that I didn't have a girlfriend said that he would find me one very quickly. And at various times I had to impress them with my ability to handle a shot of Lao Kao. But they all loved just having a great time enjoying the music and celebrating the coming of the rainy season. After this, there was a large concert and dinner in the village and the food was again great (theme?). At various points there were concerns that there might be a fight in the village because guys from another village had come to the parade apparently had grabbed someone's girlfriend. Mae told us that despite the fun, nearly every year there is a fight amongst the young men (generally between 15 and 21 yrs old), but that there is little they can do to stop it. Luckily, I witnessed no fight.



Finally, on our last day, we got to see the [rocket festival](#). There about 300 households in the village and about every 10 households would build a rocket for the festival. Villages

come from all over to do this and there is judging and everything. The rockets are part of the festival for asking for rain. Tons of people went to the fields/pond outside the village temple and checked out the rockets, had homemade smoothies or beer and did gambling. Again, gambling is illegal, but mostly nobody enforces it on villages or in small amounts. There just can't be casinos in Thailand and you have to know who to pay off. Villages in this area also do [cock fighting](#) and Isaan is where Muay Thai boxing comes from, so whenever this is going on, you can bet (ha!) there will be gambling going on.



As well, we also got to hang out with Nui (Nu-ee) and Ploy, two little girls age 5 and 4. They were very cute...when they wanted to be. Ploy is still very innocent, but Nui could be quite the devil. Bon told us that it is very common for Isaan children to be very rough. If you start playing a little roughly, they get rougher and rougher. They are tough, too. After carrying Nui on my shoulders, she began to get a bit rougher with me, calling me her "Chaang" (elephant) and I had to become a bit less responsive to her so that she wouldn't get rougher. I became unfun, but she learned quickly how we liked to play together.

Hao, however, was a different story because she was too soft with Nui. Though not hard, Nui bit her on the arm a few times and would pull her hair. So I had to tell Hao that she had to become a bit more firm, or else it wouldn't stop (though I thought her psychology degree should have taught her a bit more about child psychology, right). Once Nui knew not to act that way with us, she became nearly a perfect angel. And when she and Ploy were angels, they were wonderful and cute.

Leaving was difficult, and I think I already miss Yai constantly telling us "Gin Kao! (eat!)" or "Ap-naam! (shower!)". I think she took about 3 showers per day. And if not eating, she was weaving or chewing her homemade chew stuff which turns your mouth blood-red (I tried it...and it tastes pretty bad). She was phenomenal--sassy and funny and grandmotherly. Even though they are obviously poor, they were generous to fault and it was amazing being able to live with them for those few days. At the end of our stay, Yai and Mae gave us cloths they had woven and sent us away by giving us a blessing, tying simple white string on our wrists.

If you want other random [news](#): There were [major floods in Trang](#) province (in the south), Thailand has [banned youtube.com](#), and [killing continues](#) in the deep south (Yala province). These are pretty good articles.

Oy--I am so sorry for writing this novel. Hopefully the pictures and things will make up for it.

Chon Kaeo--Aaron