

The Village that Swept Away Evil

How only 1,000 baht and an education changed and saved lives in a poor hamlet hidden away in the hills of the North.

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There is no convenient way to glaze to the providence of Phayao in the far North; the closest airport is Chiang Rai, two hours away by car and there is no train line.

Its remoteness turns out to be its drawcard, for the countryside is picture-perfect with rolling mountain ranges, rice fields and rustic serenity. The township hugs a giant lake with a temple on an island the middle, and the sunset is as romantic as you'll ever get.

Once the sun goes down Phayao is extremely quiet; things aren't much different by day. This is a town without any major department store. "We got our first pizza parlour a gear ago," a University of Phayao official revealed last week. "Before that we had to drive to Chiang Rai."

Only nine kilometres east of Phayao town is the district of Dok Kham Tai, and it is here our story begins. It is a story where we lift the veneer of serenity and delve into a social problem that almost wiped out an entire generation of the female population.

For a long time, the name Dok Kham Tai was synonymous with prostitution. It was a town that supplied the brothels and massage parlours of Bangkok with sex workers.

Every March the daughters of Dok Kham Tai made the 12-hour journey from Phayao to Bangkok with the blessing of their parents, in an annual migration that ended in the worst possible way for everyone except the procurers.

Up until the 1990s, it was compulsory for the Thais to complete six years of education. A 12-year-old was thus able to leave school and go to work, which was the only realistic choice for destitute rural families with no money for secondary school, and Dok Kham Tai was as poor as you could get.

Nobody is quite sure how it started, but a trickle of girls went to Bangkok and started working in brothels whose clients were mainly Thais. Thai men consider Northern women to be the most beautiful, with their

translucent skin and Chinese features, as opposed to Western sex tourists who prefer darker Isan ladies. The girls of Dok Kham Tai were naturally beautiful, and soon these girls were sending money back to their uneducated and poor parents, who were able to build bigger houses and afford important things like gold necklaces and colour TVs. It made their neighbours envious.

Soon there was an annual pilgrimage.

Minivans would arrive in Dok Kham Tai every March, at the end of the school year, ready to pick up girls freshly graduated from Year 6, to take them to “work” in Bangkok.

How could a mother and father release their 12-year-old daughter into the talons of such procurers? The answer is: willingly.

Dok Kham Tai was one of the few places on earth where the birth of a daughter, as opposed to a son, was cause for great celebration - it meant that in 12 years, those parents would be rich.

Any child of an impoverished family who sends back a couple of thousand baht per month is a saint. This, coupled with an acute lack of education, meant the parents of Dok Kham Tai happily released their daughters, at 12 years of age, to the brothels of Bangkok.

That situation was dreadful enough, but it became worse.

In the 1990s Thailand was struggling with rising HIV infections and AIDS deaths. The daughters of Dok Kham Tai contracted HIV en masse. Thus the circle of life was lucrative but short. The girls left at 12, sent money back to their parents, and by their mid-teens they came back home, pustule and emaciated, to die.

This situation was too much one Phayao native by the name of Ladawan Wongsriwong, an outspoken and high-profile female politician of the 1990s. In 1995 she created the Young Northern Women’s Foundation (under Royal Patronage) and she did something so simple one wonders why nobody had thought of it before.

Ms Ladawan figured that if she could offer Year 6 students (and their parents) enough money to ensure they could continue their studies into Year 7, or secondary school, then the threat of these girls falling prey to the Bangkok brothels went right down. In other words, give a kid enough money to buy books and a uniform and that kid would continue her education.

And so, starting in 1995, every year Ms Ladawan led a contingent to Phayao, where each Dok Kham Tai daughter received the princely sum of 1,000 baht. It's hard to believe, but a meagre thousand baht was the difference between being a prostitute or a high school student.

I was one of those contingent members. We stood in a row at the local school while rows of girls, one by one, came up to receive their little white envelopes containing 1,000 baht.

Some of those kids wore uniforms that were clinging onto their shoulders for dear life. I remember seeing socks that were more hole than material. One undernourished girl is forever etched in my memory, because the sleeve of her white uniform was attached by two or three threads. One sneeze and it would become a tank top.

Ms Ladawan did some other things, too. She lobbied for the establishment of a commercial college at Dok Kham Tai. She set up a water bottling factory there. She took a group of Dok Kham Tai girls to Prachin Buri to teach them how to make straw brooms.

She sponsored plays that were acted in front of parents about life in a Bangkok brothel. There was stark realism in the dissemination of information, as parents were made to understand that any kid who took the minivan would come back in a coffin. We visited girls on their deathbeds, victims on the vicious circle that decimated an entire generation.

Last Wednesday I returned to Phayao for the first time in years to give a speech at the very dynamic University of Phayao. It is the sole university in the province and only five years old; prior to this, Phayao kids wanting a degree had to go to Chiang Mai or Chiang Rai, way too far away and way too expensive.

This university is testament to how much education can turn a community's direction on a dime. There are 20,000 students, half of them hill-tribe kids who, like me, grapple with the Thai language. Half are on educational loans or scholarships. But these are 20,000 youngsters who otherwise may never see a university education, simply because of the tyranny of distance.

As for Dok Kham Tai, the story is even better.

The vans have long gone. The families of Dok Kham Tai no longer hold out for March. The girls stay and receive an education in one form or another. There are women's groups to provide local support and the University of

Phayao has two faculties actively supporting local handicrafts and products.

Last week I found Ms Ladawan's number and gave her a call, the first time we'd spoken in a good five years. She leads a quieter life now, but she beams as she talks about the Phayao girls.

"We did it," she said. "We changed everything for the better. Dok Kham Tai would be a ghost town now if we hadn't stepped in 20 years ago. And do you know that Phayao is now known as a city of education? We eradicated the prostitution. Because education can solve every problem. It really can."

Dok Kham Tai is no longer synonymous with prostitutes. It is now famous for its brooms.

They make the best straw brooms in the country, known as mai kwad dok kaew in Thai. How extraordinarily fitting; these women swept the evil out of their lives, and they have the equipment to show for it.