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INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS
76 Parinayok Road
Phanfa, Bangkok
10200

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Of Past "Liberated" Areas and
the Path Toward Liberation

Mr. Peter Martin
Institute of Current World Affairs
4 West Wheelock Street
Hanover, NH
03755

Dear Peter,

For the New Year's holiday season I joined the swarms of Bangkokians who leave the city for the scenic North. In the company of some Thai friends I visited the compulsory sights--mountain forests, picturesque waterfalls, and ancient temples. However, we followed a slightly unusual itinerary, beginning with the mundane, a former communist party base-camp, and moving toward the sublime, Buddhist meditation centers.

As soon as I arrived at the gateway to the North, Phitsanulok city, my hosts, a neurosurgeon at the provincial hospital and his wife, shepherded me into a waiting pick-up truck. The miles to Hin Rong Kla National Park, site of a former communist stronghold, slipped by as we sped along a flat, well-paved road originally build by American military advisors 25 years ago. But when we climbed up another twisting road to the mountain-top park, my hosts narrated the history of the communist stronghold and how the Thai Army had cut this road through the teak forests at a cost of ten lives for every ten kilometers toward the red flag atop Hin Rong Kla.

Founded in 1968, base-camp 10 on Hin Rong Kla mountain was a key communist party center for Phitsanulok and two adjacent provinces with a school for political and military studies for the hundreds of students who flocked there following the 1976 coup, a radio station, and a weekly newspaper, "Independence." From the heights of Hin Rong Kla, cadres commanded the strategic tri-province area providing access to other base camps in nearby Laos. Despite a major government campaign in 1972 to dislodge the cadres, their power and influence spread throughout the region. Only in 1981, when the Army, at great cost, built the road toward Hin Rong Kla and captured nearby Khaw Khor mountain, was the end near for Hin Rong Kla. And in 1982, some 7,400 cadres and supporters, mostly Hmong hilltribes people, surrendered after minor skirmishes.

Erik Guyot is an Institute Fellow studying the role of U.S. security assistance to the Philippines and Thailand.

Today, the former mountain redoubt has been converted into a tourist spot. At the base of the mountain, cosy bungalows provided accomodation for us, and on the previous day, the Minister of Agriculture and 250 senior officials. On the mountain-top, signs carefully mark the various attractions: the liberation school (with wooden shacks preserved intact); a large, yellow bulldozer quietly rusting away near the school is identified as a "Victim of War" because it was stolen by the cadres years ago and then sabotaged before their surrender; the liberation hospital (off limits because the area has yet to be cleared of mines); and the rock outcropping where the party's flag flew for over a decade. In the valley below the lookout are abandonded rice terraces and banana groves, now overrun by weeds and reclaimed by nature.

To a visiting American, the entire park was surreal. That in a few short years a former communist stronghold would be transformed into a tourist trap spoke volumes about the Thai propensity to smooth over past conflicts and wherever possible, sightsee and turn a profit.

Back in Phitsanulok city, also the last capital of the Sukhothai Kingdom, we visited several temples built during the Sukhothai era (13th to 15th centuries). One relatively modest-sized temple played an important role in the incorporation of the Sukhothai Kingdom into the newly ascendant Ayudhyan Empire (14th to 18th centuries) centered just north of present day Bangkok. A stone inscription at Wat Chulamani related how King Borom Trailok, Ayudhya's longest reigning king from 1448 to 1488, temporarily ordained as a monk at the temple in a mass ceremony in which 2348 followers simultaneously entered the monkhood. By ordaining, King Trailok adopted and paid homage to the Sukhothai tradition of royal ordinations, thereby helping to assuage local resentment at being brought under the Ayudhyan Empire. The custom continues to this day when the present king briefly donned saffron robes after his ascension to the throne.

Buddhism still flourishes at Wat Chulamani: one of the region's largest Buddha halls is being built on the temple grounds. The young monk who showed us around the temple explained that since construction on the Buddha hall had been halted due to a temporary shortage of funds, the Buddha's solid-gold top-knot (Khet) had been removed from the Buddha statue to a local bank for safe keeping. He also gave us the impression that this was an unnecessary precaution because two guardian pythons, as thick around as telephone poles, lived beneath the Buddha hall. In response to our queries as to who fed the pythons he replied that being magical creatures they didn't have to eat regularly.

The high point of our stay in Phitsanulok was, of course, a visit to see Phra Buddha Chinarat, the gold-plated Buddha image that is considered the pinnacle of classical Thai art. Cast in 1357 by King Lithai of Sukhothai, the image is an immense statue of the lord Buddha subduing Mara (evil): sitting cross-legged with his right hand extended downward to touch the earth just prior to his achieving enlightenment. It is flawless in all details and symbolizes the past glory of Sukhothai. (Unlike most Buddha images, which face East, Phra Buddha Chinnarat follows the local tradition of facing West "toward the Burmese enemy.")

As with all Buddha images, Phra Buddha Chinnarat is reputed to confer special powers upon its locale. It is said that when King Trailok first came to Phitsanulok as a prince to rule over the city, the image cried tears of blood that the Sukhothai kingdom had been subjugated. The statue's powers were evident again in 1831 when the third king of the present-day Chakri dynasty ordered that the statue be moved to the capital, Bangkok. The raft to transfer the image was struck by lightning. When two lesser statues cast at the same time as Phra Buddha Chinnarat were removed to Bangkok, the monk in charge fell ill and died a year later, and drought plagued Phitsanulok for three years.

Afterwards, I took the night bus to Chiengmai, Thailand's second largest city and center of Northern Thai culture, now jammed with Thai and western tourists. I soon set off with other friends to visit Doi Sam Mun park in Mae Hong Son province near the Burmese border. We hired a pick-up and spent the next seven hours choking on clouds of dust as other caravans of tourists made their way toward various mountain spots.

The outline of row upon row of mountains receding toward Burma was beautiful, but the dull, grey slopes were logged bare of any standing trees save for inaccessible peaks or deep ravines. Here and there, a latticework of bright, green vegetation covered the slopes where foresters had planted shrubs to prevent runnoff and protect new evergreen seedlings. Near our destination, we stopped to ask directions from some villagers. I chatted with one and complimented him on his garden containing small peach trees, fine snow peas (imported from Taiwan), and red and white opium poppies, which were planted not for consumption, he said, but to show tourists like us what poppies looked like.

We camped by a spring-fed stream near a Thai Yay (hilltribe) village of forest rangers and their families. The men planted evergreen seedlings in the deforested areas and put out forest fires now that the dry season had begun. The women tended the seedling nurseries as well as their crop of mushrooms and vegetables. The children looked after themselves. After welcoming in the New Year with Thai folk songs, including a few bawdy and incomprehensible tunes led by a tipsy old forester, we descended through the dust to Chiengmai.

No trip to Chiengmai is complete without a visit to Doi Suthep--a mountain-top temple that enshrines a sacred Buddha relic. The location for Chiengmai's most famous temple was chosen in a suitably auspicious manner: King Kuena of Chiengmai placed the gold-encased relic on the back of a white elephant and set it free. The elephant promptly set off for the mountains and after pausing twice, it reached the temple's present location, trumpeted, and (according to the version I heard) died on the spot. (The last part of the story is especially plausible: the present road winds 11 kilometers up to the summit.)

Doi Suthep temple crowns a long flight of 300 steps, which are flanked on either side by fierce Nagas, mythical serpent-like creatures. Swarms of parents, children, and grandparents puff up the steps, forsaking a small, recently-built cable car for the exhilaration of the climb. At the center of the open-air temple is a dazzling gold-plated cedi (stupa) holding the relic, further out at the cardinal points are shrines to local religious figures, and circling the outside of the temple is a ring of hundreds of large brass bells. Crowds circumnavigate the temple clockwise, ringing as many bells as their arms and ears can take, thus bringing themselves and others merit. To one side and below the main temple buildings are the monks' quarters, even on the busiest of days, the distant chatter and peal of the bells seems not to disturb the monks whether they are meditating, studying, or merely enjoying the view.

Now, however, a controversy swirls around Doi Suthep. The Tourism Authority of Thailand is determined to build a cable car track to the peak of Doi Suthep mountain, thus supplanting the paved road (originally built in the 1930's) with a futuristic mode of transport commensurate with Chiengmai's status as Thailand's number one tourist attraction. So far, construction has been stalled by protests led by Chiengmai's ecclesiastic elders. Virtually every monk I spoke with--from earnest young students to the venerable Abbot of one of Chiengmai's largest temples--opposes the project. They fear that in order to attract enough tourists to make the cable car profitable, restuarants and perhaps a disco will be built on the sacred mountain-top.

The unease, if not hostility, surrounding the proposed cable car is in marked contrast to the ground swell of local support that built the original, winding road to Doi Suthep in 1934. Then, under the guidance of one of Northern Thailand's most revered monks, Khruba Sriwichai, thousands of lay worshippers volunteered to build the road by hand, thereby making merit for themselves and making the site appropriately accessible, yet not too accessible, for later generations. To some, the cable car is seen as spurning this legacy and reducing Doi Suthep to just another tourist trap. But unlike the Thai Army's costly, yet successful, road-building effort toward the red banner flown at Hin Rong Kla mountain, the Tourism Authority may be facing a more formidable, saffron-robed opponent.

Sincerely,
Erik Guyot
Erik Guyot

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