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SOUTHEAST ASIA

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The Tailor of Nakhon Phanom

By Matthew Z. Wheeler

March, 2004

NAKHON PHANOM, Thailand— In March 1946, 11-year-old Phan Que Phung fled his hometown of Thakhek in Laos, on the banks of the Mekong River, and never returned. With his mother and thousands of other ethnic Vietnamese, he crossed the Mekong to Thailand to escape the advance of French forces then sweeping over Laos. The French offensive aimed to reclaim the Indochinese colonies France had lost twice, first to Imperial Japan in 1941, then to Lao and Vietnamese resistance forces, which had declared independence for their respective countries in September 1945.

Although Phan Que Phung has been a refugee for 58 years, he now has hope that this status will soon no longer apply to him and his Lao-born wife, Thoan, who is also ethnic Vietnamese. "I expect we'll have resident-alien permits by the end of the year," he says. These permits, called *bai tang dao* in Thai, are a step shy of citizenship, but would offer Phung and other first-generation refugees official status and rights as residents of Thailand. Only a day before I first met Phung, Thai Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, publicly promised the 3,000 or so remaining Vietnamese refugees in Thailand that they will be granted resident-alien status. With resident-alien permits, the remaining Vietnamese refugees will no longer be subject to restrictions enacted during the Cold War, when Thai authorities considered them a potential threat to national security.

Thoan and Phung are among some 3,000 Vietnamese refugees remaining in Thailand. They were part of a wave of refugees who fled fighting in Laos during the First Indochina War between France and Vietnam from 1945 to 1954.

The fate of Vietnamese refugees in Thailand has always been linked to the vicissitudes of Thai-Vietnamese relations. For most of the last 60 years, these relations have in turn been linked to the Cold War, which caused extreme chill in Indochina. The First Indochina War, which resulted in French defeat at the hands of the Communist Viet Minh (short for *Viet Nam doc lap minh hoi*, or League of Independence of Vietnam) in 1954 and the end of French colonial rule in Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam, also resulted in the exodus of roughly 70,000 ethnic Vietnamese like Phung from Laos to Thailand. The Second Indochina War (which ended with U.S. withdrawal in 1975, Vietnam's re-unification under Hanoi's rule and Communist victories in Laos and Cambodia) and the Third Indochina War (which saw Vietnam invade and

occupy Cambodia from 1979 to 1990) sustained Thai anxiety about Vietnam and Bangkok's policy of discrimination against Vietnamese refugees. Ironically, with the advent of better bilateral relations, Vietnamese in Thailand have been embraced by both Bangkok and Hanoi as a symbol of Thai-Vietnamese cooperation and friendship.

These ethnic Vietnamese women turned out for the ceremony dedicating Ban Na Jok as the "Thai-Vietnamese Friendship Village" dressed in ao dai*, the national costume of Vietnamese women.*

Thaksin announced the new policy of resident-alien permits for the remaining first-generation Vietnamese refugees during a two-day joint cabinet meeting between Thailand and Vietnam on February 20-21, 2004. The first day of the meeting was held in the Vietnamese port city of Danang, the second in Nakhon Phanom in Thailand, home to several thousand ethnic Vietnamese including Phung and his wife. The two prime ministers presided over the dedication of a "Thai-Vietnamese Friendship Village" at Ban Na Jok, a Vietnamese community of stilt houses and tidy vegetable gardens located several kilometers from Nakhon Phanom. The focal point of the Friendship Village is a museum chronicling the life of Ho Chi Minh, father of Vietnamese independence, who spent a year of his 1920's Siamese sojourn at Ban Na Jok.

The ceremony drew a large crowd of villagers and townspeople, who sheltered from the sun under a striped awning facing a dusty soccer field where dozens of costumed dancers waited to perform for the dignitaries. Many of the older people in attendance were identified as ethnic Vietnamese by their dress, the women in richly embroidered *ao dai*, the men in dark suits and ties, some with Vietnamese flag pins on their lapels.

It was a simple ceremony. Young women in traditional Thai, Lao, Vietnamese and hill-tribe dress, heavy makeup and elaborate hairdos formed a gauntlet to greet Thaksin and his Vietnamese counterpart, Prime Minister Phan Van Khai. The prime ministers each made short speeches witnessed by cabinet members, other VIPs, loose ranks of khaki-clad civil servants and a phalanx of journalists. Their speeches hailed progress in the development of friendly and cooperative relations between the two countries, noting in particular the various agreements and memoranda concluded during the joint retreat. There followed ceremonial tree-planting by the prime ministers (a few trowels of soil, a quick dousing from a watering can, applause) and, finally, a tour of the Ho Chi Minh Museum. On the soccer pitch the dancers shuffled and weaved in time with a pounding northeastern rhythm. As the prime ministers made their way from museum to motorcade, a throng of flag-waving well-wishers rushed forward to touch them.

It was impossible for me to witness the ceremony without thinking back on the historical enmity between Thailand and Vietnam, which the ceremony had glossed over as a history of harmony and profound fraternal goodwill. In fact, Vietnamese refugees in Thailand had once been prohibited from flying the Vietnamese flag. Now the roads were lined with Thai and Vietnamese flags, from the provincial airport to the center of Nakhon Phanom and all the way to the newly paved streets of Ban Na Jok. It had once been illegal for ethnic Vietnamese in Thailand to study the Vietnamese language or to speak their mother tongue in public. Now Thailand's own Ho Chi Minh Museum housed a classroom for teaching Vietnamese. Vietnamese refugees and their descendants, perceived by Thai officials during the Cold War as a potential fifth column, now welcomed the Thai prime minister with symbols of their ethnic

These young women welcomed the prime ministers of Thailand and Vietnam to Ban Na Jok on February 21.

identity—the *ao dai*, the conical hat, and the flag of the motherland.

Much has changed, but one thing has not. Refugees like Phung remain, as they have for nearly 60 years, people without a country.

* * *

According to Prime Minister Thaksin, the two-day joint cabinet retreat marked “the start of a new era between Vietnam and Thailand.” Indeed, the ceremony of Ban Na Jok is a symbol of how far Thailand and Vietnam have come since the “bad old days” of the Cold War. A Thai museum celebrating the life of Ho Chi Minh would have been unthinkable even a decade ago.

Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra (L)
Prime Minister Pham Van Khai (R)

It seems, however, that “new eras” in Thai-Vietnamese relations are not altogether novel. A new era opened when Bangkok and Hanoi established diplomatic ties in 1976, not long after Cambodia, Laos and South Vietnam fell to Communism. A newer new era in bilateral relations began with the 1991 international settlement of the decade-long Cambodian civil war, during which Bangkok and Hanoi supported opposing factions. Another new era might be dated from 1992, when Vietnam acceded to the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Treaty of Amity and Cooperation. This paved the way for a new era in Thai-Vietnamese relations to begin in 1995, when Vietnam gained membership in ASEAN. Thai and Vietnamese leaders hailed a new era in 1997 when Thailand and Vietnam delimited their maritime boundary, resolving overlapping claims that had resulted in regular clashes between Thai fishing vessels and the Vietnamese navy.

The temptation to speak in grand terms of even modest milestones in the progress of Thai-Vietnamese relations almost certainly stems from the fact that relations between the two countries were so bad for so long. Siam and Vietnam were rivals for influence over the trans-Mekong region before France established dominion over Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam in the latter half of the 19th century. In the 1840s Siam and Vietnam fought a long and inconclusive war in Cambodia.

Colonial France challenged Siamese interests in Indochina in ways that pre-colonial Vietnam never could. In 1893, after French warships blockaded Bangkok, Siam was forced to surrender the western provinces of Cambodia and claims to Lao territory east of the Mekong. (Some of

The Ho Chi Minh Museum in Ban Na Jok. The museum presents a highly selective image of the history of Thai relations with Vietnam. In the interest of presenting a picture of solidarity and friendship between Thailand and Vietnam the museum glosses over the ideological battle that raged between the countries during the Cold War and ignores a series of uncomfortable facts about Thailand’s role in the Vietnam War. A visitor to the museum might be excused for not knowing, for example, that Thai soldiers died trying to thwart Ho Chi Minh’s goal of a re-unified Vietnam. Some contemporary Vietnamese studies of the Vietnamese in Thailand also serve to reinforce the new official line of fraternal goodwill between Thailand and Vietnam. Trinh Dieu Thinh, senior researcher at Hanoi’s Institute for Southeast Asian Studies, praises the “assistance and protection in difficult days of misfortune” offered by Thais to Vietnamese refugees, which has, “promoted friendship and mutual understanding between the two peoples.” Thinh diplomatically absolves Thais of responsibility for the hardship and discrimination faced by the Vietnamese in Thailand: “Thai people and officials had to adopt a cautious attitude toward the refugees, which was not necessarily in keeping with their real thoughts and feelings.” Trinh Dieu Thinh, “Formation of the Vietnamese Community in Thailand,” in Thanyathip Sripana, Theera Nuchpian and Pham Duc Thanh, eds., *Twenty-five Years of Thai-Vietnamese Relationship* (Bangkok: Institute of Asian Studies, Chulalongkorn University, 2002), pp. 135 and 154.

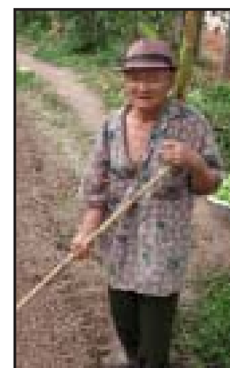
this territory was briefly recovered during the Second World War with Japan's help.) During the colonial period, Siam served as a convenient safe haven for many Indo-chinese nationalists including Ho Chi Minh, who spent seven years there during his 30-year exile from Vietnam.

With the advent of the Cold War, Thailand moved squarely into the anti-Communist camp. Bangkok served as headquarters for the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization, established in the wake of the French defeat and withdrawal from Indochina in 1954, which aimed to contain the spread of Communism. Beginning in the early 1960s, the U.S. built

Thai and Vietnamese flags on the road from Nakhon Phan

seven airbases in Thailand, including one at Nakhon Phanom, that were later used to conduct operations over Indochina during the Vietnam War. Thailand not only served as an unsinkable aircraft carrier, but also sent infantry to fight in South Vietnam; 539 Thai soldiers were killed in action there. Thousands of Thai "volunteers" also fought in Laos, often against North Vietnamese troops.

In 1975, as a reward for its fidelity to the U.S. and its faith in Washington's security guarantees, Thailand found itself on the losing side of the Second Indochina War, facing three Communist regimes across its eastern border. The result, according to former Thai diplomat Sarasin Viraphol, was



(Above) ***Ho Chi Minh (Never) Slept Here:*** *This simple wooden house in Ban Na Jok, Thailand,a few kilometers from the Mekong River in Nakhon Phanom province, is a replica of the one built and inhabited by Ho Chi Minh in 1928-29. In the midst of his 30-year exile from Vietnam, the father of Vietnamese independence lived here expanding his network and working to instill patriotism and revolutionary fervor in local Vietnamese residents. The original house fell into disrepair and was replaced with this replica by the residents of Ban Na Jok in September 2001. The star fruit and coconut trees that Ho had planted are thriving. (Right)* ***He remembers Ho:*** *Some residents of Ban Na Jok, like this man tending his vegetable garden, have memories of Uncle Ho's stay in the village.*

"considerable psychological trauma." Demonstrating a flair for understatement, Sarasin wrote, "The loss of perceived American protection, coupled with the exposure to the communist challenge from the entire Indochina region, brought considerable dismay and disquietude."[1]

Thai fears about an expansionist Vietnam, heightened following Communist victories in 1975, reached an even higher pitch after Hanoi invaded Cambodia in January 1979. Conventional wisdom within the Thai military at the time was that Hanoi had designs on Thailand's 14 northeastern provinces. Bangkok's greatest nightmare—Vietnamese armor rumbling across Cambodia toward the Thai border—had become reality. In response, Bangkok helped supply the Khmer Rouge-dominated anti-Vietnamese resistance in Cambodia and led ASEAN in orchestrating the international isolation of Vietnam and its client regime in Phnom Penh. The war in Cambodia during the 1980s, with its echoes of pre-colonial rivalry, suggested an enduring strategic conflict between Thailand and Vietnam.

Given this history, the presence of tens of thousands of ethnic Vietnamese in Thailand, concentrated in the northeastern region, was a source of tension between the two countries and a worry for Bangkok. During the Cold

This photograph of a U.S. Air Force officer, seen in a photo shop window in Nakhon Phanom, is a reminder of Thailand's role as America's unsinkable aircraft carrier during the Vietnam War. The U.S. airbase at Nakhon Phanom opened in 1963 and closed in December 1975. Known as "Naked Fanny" to the soldiers and airmen who served there, the U.S. airbase was one of the most remote in Thailand.

[1] Sarasin Viraphol, "Thailand's Perspective on Its Rivalry with Vietnam," in William S. Turley, ed., *Confrontation or Coexistence: The Future of ASEAN-Vietnam Relations* (Bangkok: ISIS 1985), p. 21.

This image of Thailand being gobbled up by Communist Indochina was on the cover of Inside Asia, *February-March, 1986. It reads:*

Wake Up, Thai People!
We have already lost 352,877 square kilometers of our territory. Only 514,000 square kilometers are left.
Unity is strength; protect the nation, stop corruption; the nation prospers.

It bears the name of a senior monk, Luangpho Samniang Yusathaphon. From Thongchai Winichakul, Siam. Mapped: A History of the Geo-body of a Nation (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1994), plate 20.

War, Thai authorities viewed the Vietnamese in Thailand as clannish and unassimilable, a vanguard of the "Prussians of the East." Some Thai authorities feared that Hanoi could activate this community of refugees to serve as a Communist beachhead on the Mekong. The ethnic Vietnamese were particularly troubling for Bangkok because of their presence in the northeast, a region remote from the center of Thai power, ethnically distinct from central Thailand, poor, poorly administered and therefore considered susceptible to Communist influence.

Indeed, most of the Vietnamese refugees who crossed into northeastern Thailand from Laos in 1946 sympathized with the Viet Minh. They were greeted by a Thai government that was well-disposed toward the nationalist struggle against the re-establishment of French rule in Indochina. Under the leadership of Prime Minister Pridi Banomyong the refugees were offered government assistance and allowed a degree of autonomy to administer themselves. Many refugees found employment on Thai public works projects. Thai authorities also turned a blind eye to Viet Minh fundraising and arms smuggling.

Even at this early stage, however, there was concern in some quarters that the refugees posed a security threat. An article by "a Siamese" that appeared in a Thai newspaper in September 1947 hints at the perception of a Vietnamese menace that would soon become widespread and animate government policy:

> Siam has opened her doors out of compassion for fellow human beings to the Vietnamese refugees, but unfortunately it has turned out that these refugees … are Communists who seek to spread Communism in Siam, too. … In Nakhon Phanom they have their own legislative body whose members are openly elected by the Vietnamese in that province. They also have their own administrative body for the dual purpose of restoring Vietnamese independence and propagation of the Communist doctrine.

The article also notes that Viet Minh soldiers were daily seen on the streets of Nakhon Phanom carrying rifles and submachine guns.[2]

Under Field Marshall Pibul Songkram, who assumed power in April 1948, Thailand shifted to the right and the government hardened its policies toward the Vietnamese. Refugees were restricted to a number of border provinces and their activities were closely monitored and controlled by Thai authorities. Vietnamese were prohib-

[2] "Special article: Vietnamese Communists in Siam … by a Siamese," *Warasap*, September 23, 1947, cited in Christopher Goscha, *Thailand and the Southeast Asian Networks of the Vietnamese Revolution, 1885-1954* (Richmond, Surrey: Curzon, 1999), pp. 286-87. Concerned by these perceptions, Ho Chi Minh's man in Thailand, Hoang Van Hoan, sought to improve the image of Vietnamese refugees by implementing a policy of "Thai-Vietnamese Friendship." The aim was to win the sympathy of Thai officials as Bangkok prepared a clampdown on Vietnamese. Hoan urged refugees to respect Thai laws and not to fly Vietnamese flags. Vietnamese fighters in Thailand were no longer allowed to carry arms in public.

ited from engaging in certain occupations, from wearing black pajama-type trousers and from speaking Vietnamese in public. Even the traditional chignon worn by Vietnamese women was outlawed.[3] In 1951, the Thai government further stipulated that a Thai policeman must live as "headman" with each group of ten Vietnamese refugee families. No refugee was allowed to leave the village in which he or she was registered for more than 24 hours without written permission from authorities. Permission was required to change residence. Those visiting a refugee, including family members, had to be announced to authorities, and authorities were required to verify that there was no political purpose to the visit.[4] Those refugees traveling outside of permitted areas without authorization could be imprisoned. In 1953, Bangkok relocated a number of Vietnamese refugees to camps in Thailand's deep south, far from the Franco-Vietnamese conflict.

Bangkok preferred to be rid of the refugees. Between 1960 and 1964, 45,000 Vietnamese were repatriated to North Vietnam under an agreement brokered by the International Red Cross. Repatriation was suspended by Hanoi after the Gulf of Tonkin incident and the escalation of fighting in the Vietnam War. Suspected as spies and saboteurs, Vietnamese refugees continued to be subject to surveillance and harassment from Thai authorities.

According to Thai historian Thongchai Winichakul, "[V]ietnam after 1975 had become a symbol of the worst otherness in the official Thai view." [5] Vietnamese were demonized and maligned in official propaganda. Thongchai argues that the massacre of student protestors at Thammasat University on October 6, 1976, was facilitated by propaganda that portrayed the students as Vietnamese. One Thai friend remembers that in the 1970s politician Samak Sundaravej (one-time Deputy Interior Minister and current Governor of Bangkok), warned Thai men that eating Vietnamese noodle soup would cause sexual dysfunction.

Such negative views persisted during Vietnam's occupation of Cambodia during the 1980s. A 1985 survey of Thai local leaders, including village headmen and teachers, revealed that Vietnamese rated highest as the "most hated" and least trustworthy nationality, followed by Cambodians, Laos and Burmese.[6] Even as official restrictions on Vietnamese were relaxed, ethnic Vietnamese had still to contend with discrimination, bigotry and, sometimes, open hostility. Most Vietnamese in Thailand kept their ethnic identity a secret outside of the Vietnamese community.

The easing of tensions between Thailand and Vietnam in the late 1980s following Thai Prime Minister Chatichai Choonhavan's call for the transformation of battlefields to trading markets and the withdrawal of Vietnamese troops from Cambodia signaled a change for the Vietnamese refugees. In the late 1980s, citizenship was granted to third-generation ethnic Vietnamese. Later, resident-alien status was granted to the sons and daughters of the 1946 refugees.

Only first-generation Vietnamese remained classified as refugees. According to Chulalongkorn University's Thanyathip Sripana, an expert on Thai-Vietnamese relations, the fact that restrictions remain for first-generation refugees is largely a result of bureaucratic inertia. The Vietnamese in Thailand have had no effective lobby in Bangkok. Local officials and security services, meanwhile, are loath to surrender their prerogatives, no matter how anachronistic.

* * *

I met Phan Que Phung and his wife Thoan at Ban Na Jok. Like me, Phung and his wife had returned to Ban Na Jok the day after the opening ceremony to visit the museum honoring Ho Chi Minh. Phung struck up a conversation with me about my camera. I liked him. Phung's age, his slim build, the way his hair was combed, his dap-

Phung and Thoan in front of their home.

[3] Trinh Dieu Thinh, "Formation of the Vietnamese Community in Thailand," in Thanyathip Sripana, Theera Nuchpian and Pham Duc Thanh, eds., *Twenty-five Years of Thai-Vietnamese Relationship* (Bangkok: Institute of Asian Studies, Chulalongkorn University, 2002), p. 152.

[4] Poole A. Poole, *The Vietnamese in Thailand* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1970), pp. 90-91.

[5] Thongchai Winichakul, *Siam Mapped: A History of the Geo-Body of a Nation* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1994), p. 6.

[6] Thongchai, p. 168.

per appearance (even in his casual clothes), his interest in photography — all of this reminded me of my grandfather. When he learned my nationality, Phung told me he had been a tailor and served the officers and airmen of the U.S. airbase in Nakhon Phanom during the 1960s and 1970s.

Several days later, I took up an invitation to visit Phung and Thoan at their home in Nakhon Phanom. The cement walls of the front room (sitting room by day, garage by night) were decorated with larger-than-life-sized posters of Michael Jordan, reflecting the theme of "Sportman," the name of Phung's old shop. Thoan served coffee and sugary Japanese confections as we sat around a table in a back room, partitioned from the front by two tall cabinets cluttered with calendars and photos of Phung and his family dating from the 1950s through the present.

One of the cabinets held a sort of time capsule, a collection of liquor bottles that dated from the early 1970s. Most unusual was a bourbon bottle shaped like a gold-topped bowling pin. Phung saw me admiring his collection. "I don't drink," he explained. "They all came from the PX at the airbase, gifts from my American friends. There was Bob, Charlie, Mike …. I don't remember now who gave me which bottle." When I suggested that it looked as if Phung had had at least a couple of shots, he said I was mistaken. Over the years some of the liquor has evaporated.

I asked Phung about the circumstances of his arrival in Thailand. He crossed the Mekong to Nakhon Phanom with his mother three days before the French attacked Thakhek. "I wasn't scared. I was just a kid. When we crossed the river, we thought it was temporary. We thought we'd be back in Thakhek in two or three days." Phung's father, like many of the men, stayed behind to fight the French or look after their property. "I never saw my father again. I don't know what happened to him. I don't know where or when he died," Phung said.

Thoan remembers the French attack. "I was there when the French bombed the market," she said. "I hid under a table. The explosions shattered the glass in the windows."

Many Vietnamese crossed the Mekong to Thailand during the attack, even as French planes strafed the river. Several boats with engines were hit, and fuel spread across the surface of the river. "The river was on fire," Phung recalls, "like a napalm strike." When there were no more boats, some lashed banana trees together to serve as rafts. Some swam to safety on the Thai the side of the Mekong. Others died trying.

"Many people were killed that day. We don't know how many. Bodies were washing up 10 kilometers downstream three days after the attack."[7]

Phung described the difficulties of the early years in Thailand. New arrivals were taken in by "old Vietnamese," mostly descendants of Catholics who had fled religious persecution in Vietnam in the early nineteenth century. "Most of us had nothing. We made eating utensils from coconuts. We went to the temples to eat food left over by the monks."

"When there were no more boats, some lashed banana trees together to serve as rafts. Some swam to safety on the Thai the side of the Mekong. Others died trying."

"Oh, Thai Buddhism is good," Thoan said. "Nobody starves in Thailand." It occurred to me that Phung and Thoan may have had memories of the famine that swept northern Vietnam toward the end of the Second World War.

At night, Phung studied Vietnamese in a clandestine class of four or five students. He also studied Thai on his own, borrowing textbooks from his well-off chums who went to school. "I used to pester them with questions about Thai until they'd get irritated with me. I really wanted to learn."

According to Phung, the Vietnamese in Nakhon Phanom prospered because of their work ethic. "Vietnamese know how to suffer and we're not afraid of hard work. I've read how the factory owners in America like to have Vietnamese workers. They work so hard and always want to work overtime." Phung seems to exemplify the traits he described. He worked for 50 years, raised five children and now enjoys a contented if modest retirement.

One afternoon I went with Phung and Thoan to run some errands around Nakhon Phanom. As we drove through town in their black sedan, Thoan pointed out the Vietnamese-owned shops we passed, one after another. We ate noodles in a shop owned by ethnic Vietnamese. The walls were hung with Vietnamese kitsch, embroidered images of three-wheeled *cyclos* and young women in conical hats and *ao dai*. Above the coffee stall

[7] By all accounts, the attack on Thakhek was brutal and resulted in a high number of civilian deaths. In his history of Laos, Hugh Toye wrote, "An officer present at the battle between Franco-Lao forces and Viet Minh at Thakhek in March 1946 has said that it turned into a savage demonstration of Lao hatred for the Vietnamese, which the French were unable to stop." Toye, *Laos: Buffer State or Battleground?* London and New York: Oxford University Press, 1968, p. 79, note 69. One wonders if this implication of Lao savagery (and French helplessness) was not meant to discharge the French from responsibility for the massacre.

The Mekong River from Nakhon Phanom looking northeast toward Thakhek, Laos. "Nakhon Phanom" means "city of hills," a reference to limestone formations visible on the Lao side of the river. "Thakhek" means "foreigner's landing," an indication of the history of the town as a node of transit linking Siam and Vietnam. The name is also suggestive of the Mekong's role in connecting the peoples of the region.

in the front corner was a panoramic photo of Vietnam's Hoa Binh hydroelectric dam.

"The Thais don't know my real name," Phung told me. "I went to the district office for an ID card once, decades ago, and I didn't realize until weeks later that the official got my name wrong. My name is like 'Foong,'" — he wrote the name in Thai on a pink napkin —"and the official wrote 'Yoong.' When I went back and explained to him his mistake, he told me that it would be too much trouble to correct it. I think he was just being lazy, but I couldn't force him to do anything about it. So, to Thai people here I'm 'Yoong,' but that's not my name."

Phung has grown accustomed to this kind of indifference from the Thai bureaucracy. Phung and Thoan submitted applications for resident-alien permits five years ago. As things stand now, they are still subject to many of the restrictions imposed on first-generation Vietnamese refugees. For example, they cannot leave the province without permission from local authorities. "It used to take a week to get permission," Phung told me. "Now, it only takes ten minutes."

Such petty rules, Phung explained, are not a serious impediment to a happy life, but they constantly remind him of his second-class status and the discrimination with which refugees have lived for the past 50 years. Even though things have improved a great deal, Phung still encounters prejudice against Vietnamese. During the recent Southeast Asian Games in Vietnam, for example, some Thai newspapers warned that Thai spectators in Hanoi might be in danger from Vietnamese mobs if Vietnam were to lose to Thailand in the soccer final. "I couldn't even bring myself to read the papers then," admitted Phung. "They wrote as if Vietnamese were Indonesians or Cambodians. How could we show our faces here if Vietnamese were to behave that way? Vietnamese are not like that." Vietnam's team lost to Thailand; there was no violence.

Thoan also expressed some resentment at the way Vietnamese have been perceived in Thailand. Once, when Phung left us alone in the car for a few minutes, Thoan said, "I tell you, it hurts my heart to think about they way we've been treated. They don't trust us because we're foreigners. But look at Thaksin. His grandfather came from China, and now he's prime minister! It's not just Thaksin, either. His whole Cabinet is Chinese!"

Phung is excited at the prospect of gaining resident-alien status. He still wonders why it has taken the Thai government so long to come around to the idea. "If we

***Two flags, no country**: Without citizenship or resident alien status, Vietnamese refugees in Thailand are unable to obtain passports or other travel documents. Many hope to see Vietnam before the die.*

had ended up in Europe or America or Australia, after nearly 60 years we would be citizens by now," he complained. "Anywhere but in Thailand."

Phung's comment about citizenship betrayed an uncharacteristic trace of bitterness about his status as a refugee. Asked directly about his feelings toward Thailand, Phung has nothing but praise and gratitude. "Even though I wasn't born here, I feel close to Thailand, to the land, to His Majesty the King. I've never thought of living anywhere else," he said.

Phung hopes that the granting of *bai tang dao* to remaining refugees will help dispel lingering chauvinism against Vietnamese, and that the descendants of Vietnamese refugees in Thailand will be able to be celebrate their Vietnamese identity. Phung said, "I've seen videos of the overseas Vietnamese in America. They dress as Vietnamese and sing Vietnamese songs, even the young people. I would like for our young people to have that freedom." He emphasized the word "freedom" by speaking it in English. For Phung, such freedom possesses the attraction of something long denied.

I asked Phung what would change for him when he finally receives resident-alien status. "I'm old and retired now. In fact, my life will not change much. I'll be able to travel. That is important to me. I want to visit Thakhek, to see my old street, my old school, to see if our house is still there. And of course I want to visit Vietnam. I've never been there. I want to know, is the soil red, black, or what?"

"There is something else," Phung added after a moment of thought. "The feeling will change. *Khon tang dao* [resident alien] sounds so much better than *khon opayaob* [refugee]." ❑

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

Fellows and their Activities

Alexander Brenner (June 2003 - 2005) • **CHINA**

With a B.A. in History from Yale in 1998 and a Master's degree in China Studies and International Economics from the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies, Alex in China, focused on the impact of a new government and a new membership in the World Trade Organization on Chinese citizens, institutions and regions both inside and far from the capital.

Cristina Merrill (2004 - 2006) • **ROMANIA**

Born in Bucharest, Cristina moved from Romania to the United States with her mother and father when she was 14. Learning English (but retaining her Romanian), she majored in American History at Harvard College and there became captain of the women's tennis team. She received a Master's degree in Journalism from New York University in 1994, worked for several U.S. publications from *Adweek* to the *New York Times*, and will now spend two years in Romania watching it emerge from the darkness of the Ceauscescu regime into the presumed light of membership in the European Union and NATO.

Andrew Rice (May 2002 - 2004) • **UGANDA**

A former staff writer for the *New York Observer* and a reporter for the *Philadelphia Inquirer* and the Washington Bureau of *Newsday*, Andrew is spending two years in east-central Africa, watching, waiting and reporting the possibility that the much-anticipated "African Renaissance" might begin with the administration of President Yoweri Museveni. Andrew won a B.A. in Government from Georgetown (minor: Theology) in 1997 after having spent a semester at Charles University in Prague, where he served as an intern for *Velvet* magazine and later traveled, experienced and wrote about the conflict in the Balkans.

Matthew Rudolph (January 2004-2006) • **INDIA**

Having completed a Cornell Ph.D. in International Relations , Matt is spending two years as a Phillips Talbot South Asia Fellow looking into the securitization and development of the Indian economy.

Matthew Z. Wheeler (October 2002-2004) • **SOUTHEAST ASIA**

A former research assistant for the Rand Corporation, Matt is spending two years looking into proposals, plans and realities of regional integration (and disintegration) along the Mekong River, from China to the sea at Vietnam. With a B.A. in liberal arts from Sarah Lawrence and an M.A. from Harvard in East Asian studies (as well as a year-long Blakemore Fellowship in Thai language studies) Matt is also examining long- and short-term conflicts in Burma, Thailand, Laos and Cambodia.

Jill Winder (July 2004 - 2006) • **GERMANY**

With a B.A. in politics from Whitman College in Walla Walla, WA and a Master's degree in Art Curating from Bard College in Annandale-on-Hudson, NY, Jill is an ICWA Donors' Fellow looking at Germany through the work, ideas and viewpoints of its contemporary artists. Before six months of intensive study of the German language in Berlin, she was a Thomas J. Watson Fellow looking at post-communist art practice and the cultural politics of transition in the former Soviet bloc (Czech Republic, Slovakia, Poland, Croatia, Hungary, Latvia, Romania, Slovenia and Ukraine).

James G. Workman (January 2002 - 2004) • **SOUTHERN AFRICA**

A policy strategist on national restoration initiatives for Interior Secretary Bruce Babbitt from 1998 to 2000, Jamie is an ICWA Donors' Fellow looking at southern African nations (South Africa, Botswana, Mozambique, Zambia and, maybe, Zimbabwe) through their utilization and conservation of fresh-water supplies. A Yale graduate (History; 1990) who spent his junior year at Oxford, Jamie won a journalism fellowship at the Poynter Institute for Media Studies and wrote for the *New Republic* and *Washington Business Journal* before his years with Babbitt. Since then he has served as a Senior Advisor for the World Commission on Dams in Cape Town, South Africa.

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