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SOUTHEAST ASIA

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Observations, Celebrations and Potations of the Mekong, Part I:

Village Spirit

By Matthew Z. Wheeler

August, 2004

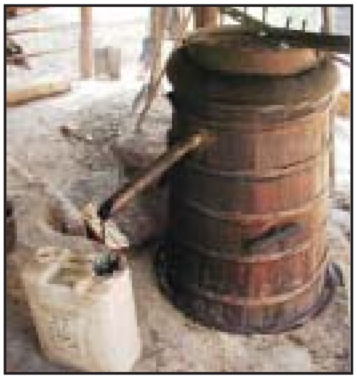
BAN HAD BAI, Thailand–At dawn one morning I found myself beside the Mekong River on my hands and knees, immobilized, stomach convulsing, eyes watering, jaw locked open, retching like a rank freshman.

This is what happens, I thought, when you drink bad moonshine. It's not that I over did it the night before, you understand. I acquired the fundamentals of hangover prevention long ago. No, it was something else. It was matter of quality, not quantity. I had been laid low by village spirit.

I had been welcomed by the villagers of Ban Had Bai during my stay, and feted the night before my departure. It was a consequence of that warm farewell that I found myself in such a compromising position that morning.

I came to Ban Had Bai, a Tai Lue community in Chiang Rai Province, hoping to learn something about rural life on the Mekong River. Well, I was learning. I learned that you can't tell bad moonshine from good until it's too late. Later I would learn that bad stuff, made by greedy and impatient bootleggers, is contaminated with chemicals used to accelerate the distillation process. Sometimes unscrupulous whiskey makers spike their brew with amphetamines.

Thais call their homemade hooch "*lao kao*," or "white liquor." It is poor man's spirit, the liquor of laborers, farmers, and the unemployed. There is no cheaper or more certain means of intoxication. It's clear as water and gives off fumes like



(Above) This is how it should be done. A Tai Lue distillery in Shan State, Burma, is an example of traditional whiskey making. (Left) "You! Drink!" A young man raises a glass of lao kao, *the rice-based moonshine favored in much of rural mainland Southeast Asia.*

lighter fluid. Even when it has been properly distilled it burns going down, and not always in a good way. When a circle of cross-legged villagers opens a space for you and offers to share some *lao kao*, you know that you are drinking with folk.

No connoisseur of *lao kao*, neither was I a neophyte the night before. In recent weeks at various places along the Mekong I had been treated to many small glasses of *lao kao* and never had a bad experience. On the night in question there was no way to avoid drinking *lao kao*. Courtesy demanded it. Drinking formed part of a ritual with which my village hosts honored me. In truth, I was inclined to have a drink, having achieved that expansive and obliging frame of mind that helps me to stay in a strange place without being a stranger.

My first visits to Had Bai had been by chance. The *songthaew*, or pickup truck-cum-public bus, that runs between Chiang Saen and Chiang Khong often stopped there on the driver's whim. He'd make a detour to Had Bai's riverside, announcing to the passengers, "Twenty minutes for noodles!" During these lunch-time interludes, I would join the old women sitting in the *sala*, or Thai-style gazebo, as they chewed betel and talked together. They wore sarongs and sleeveless blouses, their faces streaked white with cooling talcum, all dark, smiling eyes and betel-red teeth. I could hear the clacking sound of women working looms nearby. Below us on the bank stretched garden plots, tomato patches and small fields of corn, which yielded to the river, brown like chocolate or greasy-looking and grey depending on the light and time of day.

I liked the feel of Had Bai and thought it might be a good place to learn more about how life along the Mekong was changing. In April, with a rented motorcycle, I visited Had Bai *en route* to Chiang Saen. I wandered past the *sala* down the leafy road running along the riverbank. There I met La, a fisherman and farmer who first appeared to me striding up from the river's edge, carrying a boat engine on his shoulder and a fishing net of bright-white nylon folded over his other arm, its lead weights clicking together.

It took only a few minutes of conversation before La invited me to stay at his house, a cinderblock box with an aluminum roof that he shares with his older sister and niece, standing just off the riverbank road behind a bamboo fence. I mentioned that I was interested in learning about life in Had Bai. Did I mind the humble house, the poor food? No. Could I sleep on the floor, shower from a bucket? Yes. Fine, I could come anytime. La, a native of Had Bai who had returned three years ago after seven years in southern Thailand, was just a few months older than I. He owned a small boat. He would take me fishing. I could stay as long as I liked. I was welcome.

A view of the Mekong River boat landing below La's house

When I showed up several weeks later, La was out on the river. I was greeted by La's older sister, who, confusingly, is also called La. Sister La introduced me to her 14-year-old daughter, Nui, who had just returned from school. Nui was immediately friendly and familiar, lacking any adolescent self-consciousness. Uncle La would be back soon, she said. In the meantime, Nui and three of her friends offered to show me around the village.

Had Bai is remote and small, poor, but not destitute. Had Bai's people are mostly Tai Lue, an ethnic group found predominantly in China's Yunnan Province, as well as in Burma and Laos. The people make their living farming, fishing and weaving textiles. This latter enterprise has gained for Had Bai some welcome attention in recent years, and tour guides will sometimes bring interested tourists from the Golden Triangle. Walking around the village, I saw many looms under houses raised on stilts, or on the patios of more modern homes.

The girls showed me the village pillar, a phallic symbol that serves as a spiritual focal point. Continuing up the street we entered the Buddhist temple compound through a small side entrance. We strode across the lawn to the main hall, past a monk cutting grass with an old-fashioned mower. Inside the temple we each made our obeisance. I examined the temple murals depicting scenes from the lives of the Buddha while the girls waited outside, sipping cans of soda.

With the tour of Had Bai completed, the girls invited me to join them in gathering mushrooms. We walked to

La and his boat on the Mekong River, near Had Bai

fallow fields south of the village and dug through mounds of mulch, plucking out pale, slender fungi. With little rain lately there weren't many mushrooms to be had. As we searched, the girls quizzed me about my wife. They demanded a promise that I bring Ruang on my next visit so that they could meet her. On the way back to the house, Nui pointed out a sandbagged foxhole on the riverbank near thatched huts where a small unit of border guards was billeted; it was a cellular phone "hot spot," the only place nearby where I could call my wife.

La had returned with two small fish. After the formality of greetings, he said, "The fishing is no good."

"Why is that?" I asked.

"It's the season. And the water is too low."

Nui said, "That's because of the Chinese dams."

Indeed, the Mekong water level was at its lowest levels in four years. It was tempting to blame it on the dams China had completed and continues to build on the Mekong mainstream. Nui's assessment echoes the views of environmentalists in northern Thailand who are worried about the impact of these dams on the Mekong. In fact, however, water levels were relatively lower in Cambodia than around Had Bai, suggesting that drought was the primary factor.

La invited me inside while his sister prepared the fish and mushrooms in their outdoor kitchen. La built the house himself with money earned working in southern Thailand. The interior was divided into a central living area and two bedrooms. On one wall La had taped up pictures of boxers and boxing celebrities, including Lela Ali, Muhammad Ali's daughter, and Oscar de la Hoya. "Golden Boy," La said, tapping de la Hoya's picture. The room was empty of furniture except for a low, wooden table, upon which sat an old TV and a video compact-disc player. A few cheap schoolbooks, covers missing, and newsprint pages curling from moisture, were stacked haphazardly in one corner. Three small Honda boat engines sat on the floor by the doorway. It was dark; spaces for windows were boarded up.

"I'm going to finish the house," La said, "when I get the money."

We ate a meal of fish in a piquant broth and sticky rice, the staple food for rural people in Laos, northeastern Thailand and parts of the north. We watched a bit of television news after dinner. The big story was Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra's controversial bid to buy a Liverpool Football Club. How would he pay for it? Would the government own the club? Was it legal? Thaksin had advanced a scheme to raise money by selling lottery tickets for 1,000 baht (US$25) apiece. The plan to own an English Premier League team seemed typical of Thaksin's desire to own things, to be taken seriously on the world stage and to always be making news. Moreover, the story drew attention away from the separatist violence in Muslim-majority southern Thailand, where just a few days earlier more than 100 young men were killed while attacking security forces. Thaksin stood to benefit whether the deal went down or not. (In June, several weeks after my stay in Had Bai, Thaksin scrapped his bid in the face of mounting criticism.)

La thought it would be great if Thailand owned Liverpool Football Club. "It will help Thailand's team to

La cooking in his outdoor kitchen

get better. Now we can only compete with neighboring countries. If we get better, we can take on the Japanese and Koreans. If I had the money I'd buy a ticket. Definitely." First prize was to be 1 billion baht (roughly $25 million). With a billion baht, La said he would build a new house.

"You could buy a new house for everyone in Had Bai," I said. Nui laughed out loud at the idea as she sat on the floor, ironing her school uniform for the next day.

That night La gave up his room for me. Sister La had sprinkled the bedding with mentholated prickly-heat powder. This, I felt, was the essence of hospitality and consideration.

In the morning I discovered that I had arrived at the wrong time to learn about typical, everyday life in Had Bai. It was the eve of the annual village festival, when villagers honor the tutelary spirit and beg for its continued protection throughout the upcoming year. In the old days, the village would be shut to outsiders and villagers would indulge in a days-long long bacchanal in which social rules and taboos were suspended. Times had changed, though. These days the festival was more narrowly focused. For two days only, all work in Had Bai would cease as villagers devoted themselves to a single, usually illicit activity: gambling.

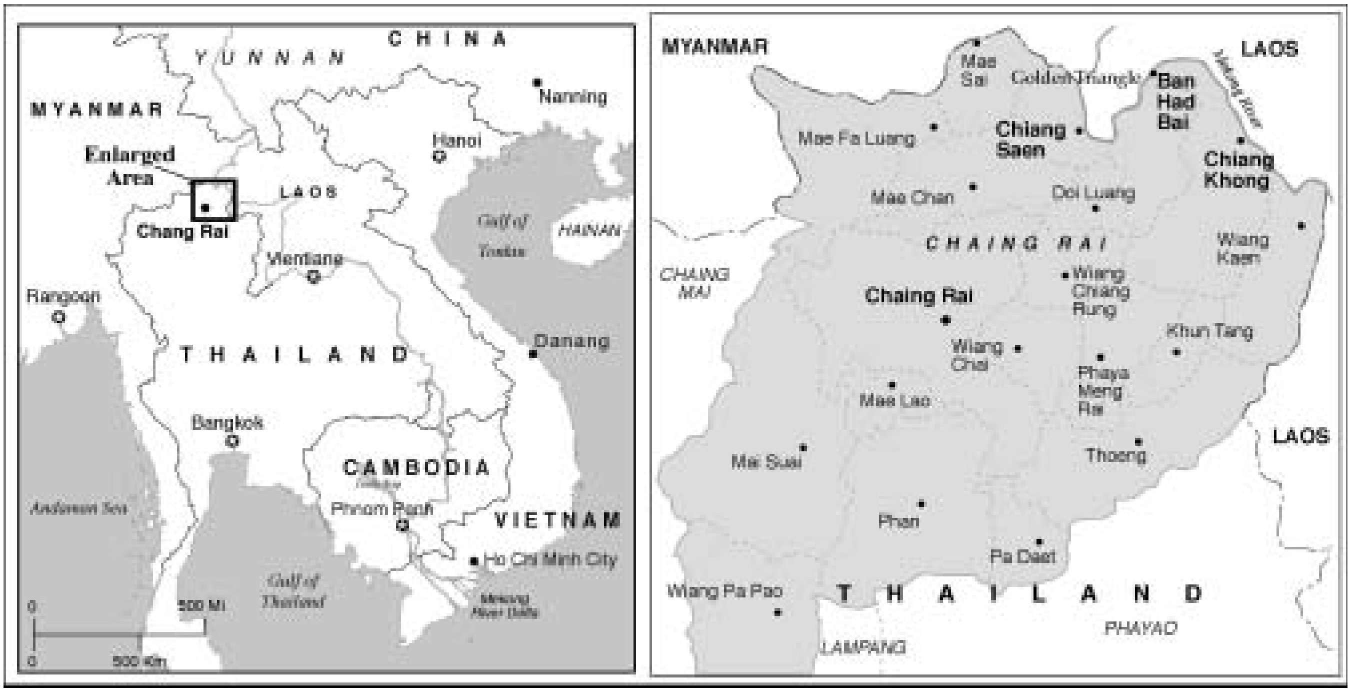
Gambling is confined to a walled compound housing a shrine where dwells the village guardian spirit, *Kuery Gai Jae*. The wooded compound, adjacent to the Buddhist temple, contains a principal shrine, a small shack called *san jao paw*, and a couple of smaller, ancillary spirit houses. Villagers are free to beseech the village spirit for favors at any time. If the outcome they seek comes to pass, the supplicant shows gratitude by offerings of food and whiskey. If nothing comes of the request, the villager incurs no obligation. The annual celebration is a collective request by the village for blessings and the reassurance of supernatural protection.

Although Tai Lue are Buddhists, they share with most Southeast Asian Buddhists a belief in a world of spirits that exists parallel to the world of mortals. To enjoy a tranquil life, one must consider the interests of spirits, taking care not to offend them and seeking their favor by means of offerings. Spirits are usually associated with specific places and natural features such as plots of land, rock formations, trees, rivers, springs, and the like. Spirit houses are a common sight in Thailand. They often look like miniature temples inhabited by figurines of spirits and animals. Spirit houses are usually situated on the corner of a property, a form of compensation for the spirit displaced by mortal inhabitants. La's spirit house was the most humble I've seen, a piece of corrugated metal nailed to board, stuck on top of a post. Inside there was a tumbler of *lao kao* and several balls of sticky rice.

By the time I got to the compound on the first morning, offerings of food, fruit and *lao kao* had already been presented to the village spirit. Bundles of incense sticks smoldered, filling the air with perfume. Had Bai's oldest men were ensconced before the spirit house, betting on their luck with a stack of bone-colored dominoes. I took a photo of the *san jao paw*. Someone moved to stop me, but the shutter had already opened and closed. With this transgression I risked the spirit's wrath on an auspicious day.

Groups of men formed here and there to sit and gamble beneath the trees. By noon women started to arrive, some with pots of food and drinks for sale, others with pockets full of coins and 20-baht notes. Women-only card games soon formed that wouldn't break up until evening.

I wandered around the compound, observing various games. The domino and card games were opaque to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CAMBODIA
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Doi Luang
CHAING RAI
Wiang Kaen
CHAING MAI
Chaing Rai
Wiang Chiang Rung
Khun Tang
Wiang Chai
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Gamblers making the most of Had Bai's two-day gambling festival

me. The only game I could fathom was *dao bu pla* ("gourd, crab, fish"), a dice game that attracted both men and women gamblers as well as a crowd of amused child spectators. Punters bet by placing coins or carefully-folded bills on a sheet of cheap paper printed with six squares. Each square featured a picture of a gourd, a crab, a fish, a tiger, a prawn or a chicken. Wagers represented which combination of these images the gambler believed would appear on three dice cast by a croupier. The result was revealed only after a suspenseful interval, prompting groans or cheers from the punters depending on their aptitude at calculating odds, or dumb luck. I placed a few bets and quit while I was behind.

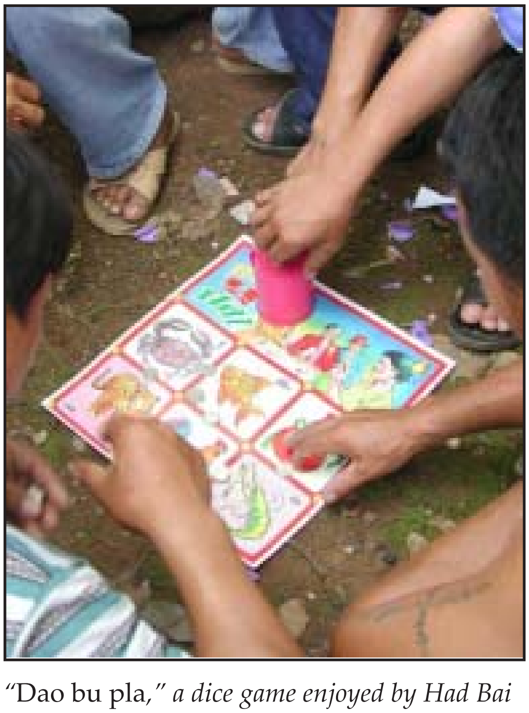
Around dinner time the crowd thinned, but gambling continued. At dusk small bonfires flared. Fluorescent lights hung from the trees. The people of Had Bai took full advantage of their 48-hour dispensation. Some gambled while I slept and when I returned in the morning, a few diehards were still at it. In time they would be joined by others, until the compound was again a scene of lively activity.

La declined to come to the compound. He didn't gamble, but he respected the traditional prohibition on work. He didn't fish or tend his corn crop. He took long naps. One hot afternoon, he watched *Gladiator*, dubbed into Thai. He also puttered around the house and yard, fixing things. With wire, a scrap of aluminum, a length of hose and half a plastic soft-drink bottle, La installed a makeshift gutter on the side of the outhouse, feeding into a fifty-gallon drum. When he had finished, he looked at me in mock-triumph, gave thumbs-up and said, "MacGyver." It was a reference to the hero of a U.S. television series of the same name who employed his intelligence, ingenuity and engineering skills to resolve each episode's dilemma. La said, "I like to solve problems."

I soon learned that La was as quiet as he was hospitable. We spent long periods together without speaking. Though he spoke little, La did have an unusual verbal tick. From time to time, as an exclamation, he'd say, "Yassir, Arafat!" When I asked him about this, La said that he'd heard it on the television news, and liked the way it sounded. Once, sitting on the bank watching the Mekong flow past, he admitted that he didn't really like to talk. "I'm not a clever talker," he said.

La had an aura of sadness about him. He had been married to a woman in Pattani province, but it didn't work out. That's all he'd say about that. Though he harbored some deep melancholy, he also evinced a quiet pride in his labor and his role as man of the house. He was protective of his niece. He saw that she did her schoolwork and confided his hopes that she would be able to continue studying in Chiang Saen once she had finished the local school. Once I drove La down to Chiang Khong and we returned with spare parts that La used to fix up an old bicycle for Nui.

Unlike some of his buddies, La was a responsible



"Dao bu pla," *a dice game enjoyed by Had Bai villagers. Be careful, it's addictive.*

drinker. La didn't drink *lao kao*, except on special occasions. He enjoyed beer when he could afford it. As his guest, a few bottles of beer and an evening bag of ice was the least I could do. One sundown we visited La's friend Somla, a man as gregarious as La was quiet. Somla, whose Lao father had been in the French colonial army, married into the village. He joked that in marrying a local woman, he'd brought much-needed genetic diversity to Had Bai. "Ninety percent of the people in this village have the same surname." That evening as we talked, dusk turned everything rose-colored and green.

My last night in Had Bai, was one of those occasions that demanded *lao kao*. La's grandparents arrived to wish me farewell with a traditional ceremony called *kwan bai sin*. It began with each of us placing a hand on a plate of fruit and baked goods as La's grandfather recited a prayer. Then the grandparents each tied several white strings around my wrists as I knelt before them. They murmured prayers as they tied the strings, wishing me good health, happiness, safe travels, marital bliss, clever children, success in work, and lots of money. Then the *lao kao* came out for a round of toasts. La's grandmother, a frail, wizened pixy, seemed anxious to see me drink. She beamed each time I emptied my glass and saw that it was refilled.

"Enough with the whiskey, Grandma!" La said, placing the bottle beyond her reach. He told me not to feel obligated to drink. "That stuff is like benzene. I'm not lying."

Neighbors visited throughout the evening, including a single mother and her six-year-old daughter. The child had Down's Syndrome; the next day she would leave for a state school in Chiang Rai. The mother said that her daughter would be better off in school than she would be in the village. It was good news that the girl had been accepted, but the mother was worried. Her daughter was leaving, and she was so young, so vulnerable. The mother asked me to perform a *bai sin* ceremony for her daughter. In effect, they asked me to be something like a godfather. I performed the ritual for the girl as it had just been performed for me. While I had been happy to accept blessings from La's parents, taking it as an expression of hospitality and good will, being an officiant of the ceremony was altogether different. As I tied strings around the girl's little wrists, I worried that sincerity would not suffice for the expected custodial enchantment.

If I didn't know better, I'd say La's grandmother was trying to get me drunk.

A soldier from border patrol unit came around with his own bottle of *lao kao*. I had met him a few days earlier, while he was building an annex to his bamboo hut as a garage for his motorcycle. He invited me to drink with him and his three comrades who were sitting nearby watching Thai boxing, a bottle of *lao kao* open on the table. It was too early in the day for me. I had talked with him a few times since, but hadn't raised a glass with him yet. I was obliged to spend that final evening at La's house, so I invited him over.

I wasn't sure the soldier would come. He was a bit aloof from the villagers. He wasn't one of them. He came from Phayao, capital of the province just south of Chiang Rai, and had been in Had Bai only a few months. It was not bad duty, he said, but he was tired of the routine and boredom of military life. He'd served for nearly 20 years and would be getting out soon. He looked forward to going home, fishing with his son, waking up with his wife. He claimed to be baffled by the locals. Why did they build their houses on the low ground? If he were to settle here, he'd build up on the hills behind the village so he could enjoy a good view.

I thought it strange that La and the soldier didn't yet know each other except by sight. They had lived within a stone's throw of one another since the soldier's arrival. That night, though, La and the soldier talked for an hour or so in the northern dialect that I couldn't understand. With the soldier's bottle half empty, the evening ended. We'd all be rising early in the morning.

Next day was market day, when traders come from Laos with goods and produce to sell on the field by the soldier's huts. An important social aspect connects with the commercial transactions of the market. One of La's friends found his Lao bride behind a market stall.

I woke in darkness on market day to the sound of cocks crowing and the sensation of something radioactive burning in my stomach. In vain my eyes sought a glimmer of light that might guide me toward the outhouse. I waited for light or the sound of someone stirring. I knew that I was ill, but told myself that whatever it was would soon pass. I listened to trucks passing by on the way to the market.

I managed to get up and get dressed once La turned on a light. I strolled around the market feeling as though I'd been stuffed by a mad taxidermist.

I found the soldiers and sat with them, hunched over, clutching my stomach.

"I don't feel well," I said.

"Drank too much, huh?" the soldier from Phayao said.

"Maybe. Actually, I don't think so."

"It doesn't take much."

"You drank more than I did. You seem to be doing alright."

"I guess I've built up a tolerance."

I went to the river bank where an official issued paper border passes to visiting Laos disembarking from slim boats on their way market. Unable to stand, I stretched out on a platform of split bamboo where people sometimes sit to watch the river. It was good to be prone. I remember thinking again that I'd feel better soon. I was due to ride back to Chiang Rai that day.

Man in Black. A tahan prahn *("hunter soldier," or Ranger), one of a small unit of paramilitary border guards stationed in Had Bai. He is hard at work guarding Thai territory while another official charges Lao people for border passes. I took this photo just moments before I became ill.*

I roused myself from the platform and headed up the bank toward La's house. It was then that my body took control and purged the venom I'd ingested. It was no relief.

I found Sister La at the house. She gave me some water and told me to lie down. I fell asleep for a short time until I needed to vomit again. For the next few hours I couldn't stand for more than 20 minutes at a time. I went about packing my things in short bursts of activity, interrupted by longer spells of lying on the floor. Every action demanded great concentration and effort. My legs ached fiercely.

La returned with some small bottles of Gatorade-ish sport drink; he'd already heard that I was sick. "That *lao kao* we drank, it was bad," La said.

"Right. Well, you told me to be careful. Honestly, though, I didn't drink enough to be hung over."

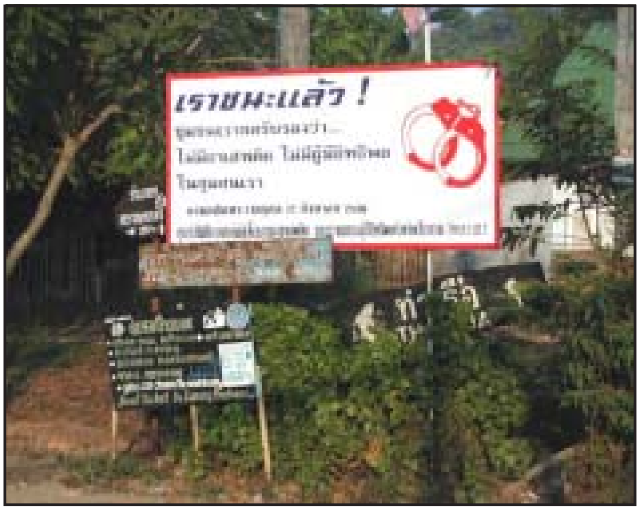
"It's not that. The *lao kao* probably had chemicals in it."

"I believe it. I'll be more careful in the future." I was amazed at how awful I felt. I had had, five maybe six shots of *lao kao* and I felt as if I had been keel-hauled.

I meant to leave Ban Had Bai that day, but it took some time before I was able to stand up for any length of time. Sister La offered food, but I had to decline it. She relented about feeding me, but insisted on massaging my legs. She told me she had been a masseuse in Ang Tong many years ago. "I left after a month," she said. "It was scary. The customers were awful. Sometimes they were drunk or on drugs. It wasn't worth the money."

Her husband was still alive during her time in Ang Thong. He died only a couple of years ago. She showed me a wallet-sized, black-and-white photograph of a thin, hard-looking man. I asked how he died. "He just got sick. He wasn't well," she said. "He was addicted to amphetamines. Half the people in the village used to smoke the stuff."

I remembered La pointing out a village on the Lao side of the river called Ban Sao Jin, "China-Girl



Billboards like this one in Chiang Khong were put up all over Chiang Rai province to announce the victorious end of the government's anti-drug campaign. This one reads, "We've Won! Our community guarantees that there are no drugs [and] no persons of [dark] influence in our community."

Village." He said they made amphetamines there.

"And how is it now?" I asked Sister La.

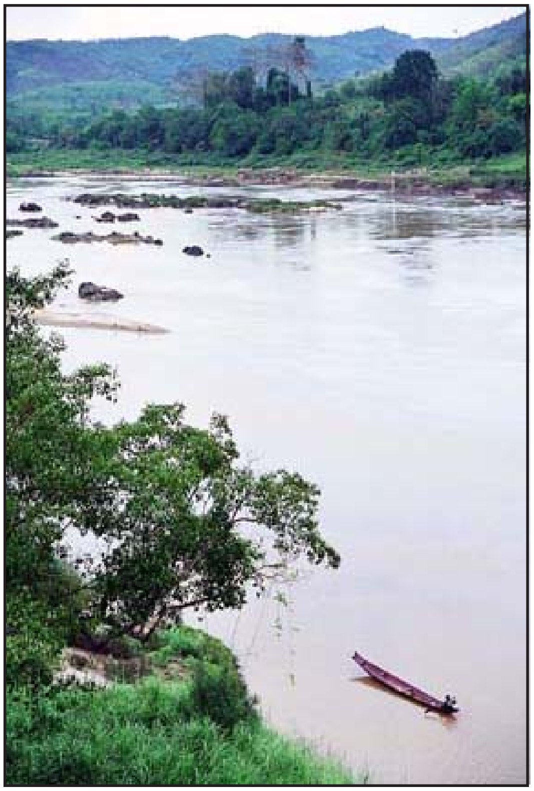
"Since the Prime Minister's campaign, it's better. I still worry about Nui, but it's better than it was." Thaksin declared war on drugs early in 2003, setting a three-month deadline for officials to meet numerical targets for dealers and users arrested and rehabilitated. The result was a rash of extra-judicial killings apparently carried out by police and border guards and at least a temporary decline in the supply of methamphetamines in Thailand. Like many foreign observers, I saw the drug war as an assault on human rights and rule of law (see MZW 6); it played differently here in the sticks.

After the massage I felt well enough to finish packing, and hit the road. Once I got moving, I thought, I'd be fine. As I pulled on my gloves and helmet, neighbors gathered around to say goodbye and urge me to return. Sister La insisted that I take a two-pound bag of sticky rice. La apologized for not having a phone so we could call each other. He'd borrow someone's mobile and call me sometime.

"Come back soon," he said. "We'll drink beer instead of *lao kao*."

I rode out past the soldiers' huts, past the marketplace and the *san jao paw*. I remembered my errant photography of the *san jao paw* and I wondered if I had offended the village spirit. Had *lao kao* been an agent of reckoning?

I turned south. The road bent gently to the contours of hills. Again and again the road turned toward the Mekong River, revealing vistas of water and rocks and blue-black hills in Laos. After a while, I felt much better. ❑



The Mekong River, south of Had Bai

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