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Observations, Celebrations and Potations of the Mekong, Part 2:

Mekong Straight

By Matthew Z. Wheeler

SEPTEMBER, 2004

CHIANG KHONG, Thailand–Arriving in Chiang Khong for the first time last year, I walked down a side street to the Mekong River, where pavement gave way to a broad, flat expanse of dirt and rocks. Three Lao cargo boats were moored upstream from a large rock formation, crowned with a green spirit house, that jutted into the current. A band of laborers, about 25 strong, bounced up and down wooden planks leading from boat to bank. They were mostly middle-aged men and some looked too old to be doing heavy labor. They wore rubber sandals and shorts and each man sported a *pakama*, a multi-purpose cotton cloth roughly the size of a bath towel, usually woven in a broad plaid pattern. Most men had their *pakama*s tied around their heads, lending them the mien of pirates.

My presence seemed to be a welcome distraction to the workers, but they wouldn't acknowledge me. I took photographs and listened to the men banter.

"Hey, Somchai! Smile for the camera a little! You're a star!"

"What does that guy want with pictures of your ugly face, anyway?"

"Well, he's wasting film, that's for sure."

"That *farang* [foreigner] better be careful, your mug might break the camera."

It went on that way for a while.

I took in the surroundings. Chiang Khong's Wat Luang port wasn't what I

My first view of Wat Luang landing. A Royal Thai navy patrol boat station is on the left bank. Further up stream, the new port is just visible. On the right bank is the Lao town of Ban Huay Xai.

had expected. The port existed as a place in my mind before I ever went there. I had read about Chiang Khong and the port in a book titled *The Legend of the Golden Boat,* by Andrew Walker, an Australian anthropologist who did fieldwork there during the early- to mid-1990s. Although Walker studied long-distance trade in the borderlands of China, Laos and Thailand, his work in Chiang Khong focused on cross-river trade between Thailand and Laos, specifically the role of boat operators who carried goods between Chiang Khong and Ban Huay Xai on the Lao side of the Mekong. Reading Walker's introduction, I felt a sense of yearning as he recalled evenings drinking with his informants, looking out over the mellow Mekong at sunset.

The Wat Luang "port" was a bit of an exaggeration. Although it seemed too bucolic and quiet, this was the place Walker had described. More landing than port, it was simply a convenient place for boats to stop and unload or take on cargo. Upstream from the cargo boats were several of the small, brightly painted cross-river boats Walker had studied. Across the river, slightly north, was the Lao town of Huay Xai.

I caught one of the laborers looking at me. I said, "Hello," which produced embarrassed laughter. One worker, passing me on his way to the truck for another box, said, "We didn't know you could speak Thai."

When they had finished loading the boxes the laborers trudged up the slope to a rough, tin-roofed hut and some wooden benches that served as their meeting point and rest area. Wiping sweat from their faces, they lit cigarettes and drank water from a plastic cooler.

A tall worker with graying hair covered by an olive-green bush cap wanted to know my story. I told him.

Addressing his mates, he said, "Hey! This guy is a researcher, like Doctor Andrew!" This drew some approving nods. The ice was broken. Dr. Andrew Walker had blazed a trail.

"You knew Doctor Andrew when he did his research here?" I asked.

"Yeah. Dr. Andrew. A good man. Do you know him?"

"No, I've never met him, but I read his book. I learned a lot about Chiang Khong."

The worker introduced himself as Dok. I told him my name. With a grin, Dok said, "Doctor Matt."

"No. I'm not a Doctor," I said.

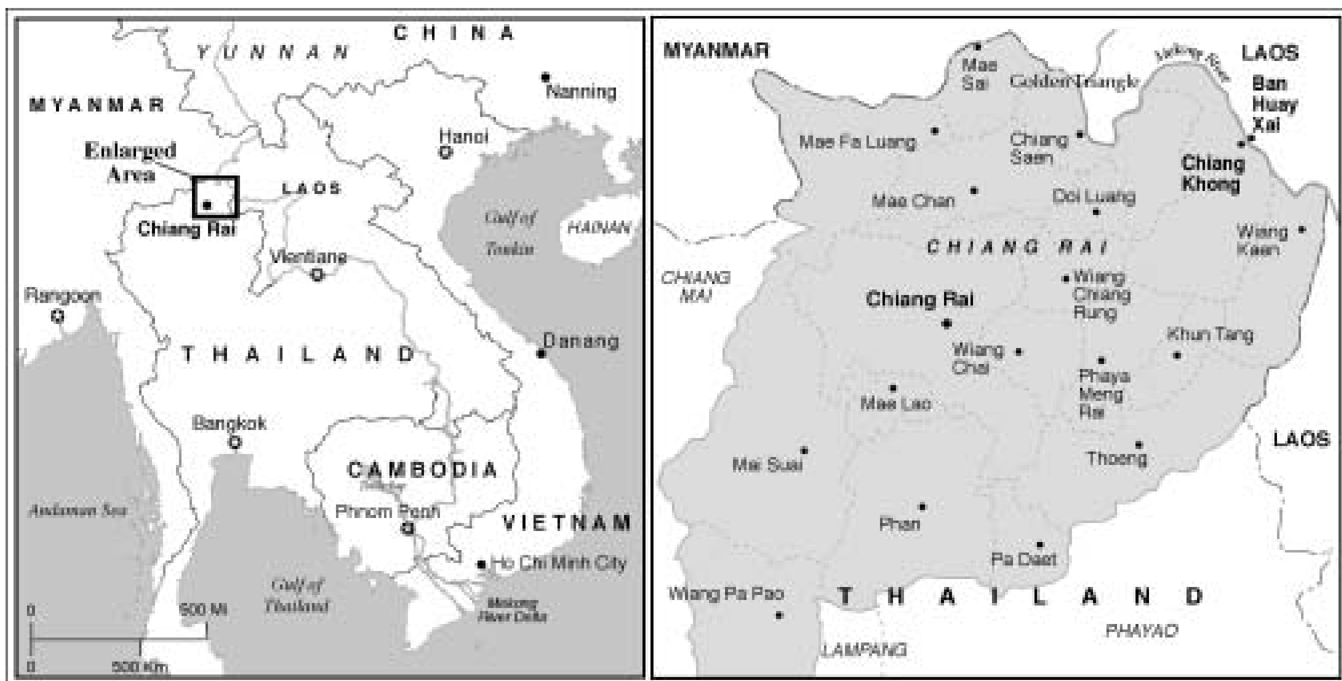
"OK. *Ajaan* Matt." *Ajaan*, or "teacher," is a term of respect. Dok was displaying good manners. However, *ajaan* is too exalted a title for me.

"You guys don't need to call me *ajaan*, either."

The workers drifted back to the riverbank; there was more work to do, unloading small decorative trees in ceramic pots.

Late in the afternoon, around quitting time, I rejoined the laborers on the bank. One of the men had cooked a fish stew. They passed around a wooden spoon. Bits of green "mouse-shit chili" burned my lips, but it tasted good. Someone emptied a plastic bag of *lao kao*, rice-based moonshine, into a bottle and began to pour shots.

Dok invited me to have a seat beside him. I must have mentioned an interest in history; as we sat looking out



over the river Dok held forth on France's annexation of Laos in the 1880s.

"We lost a lot of land to the French. They had guns, cannons. We had only knives and swords. What could we do?" He spoke with real regret as though this lack of adequate weapons, rather than the fact that he was born too late, had denied him his chance to fight the French.

"I know, we weren't colonized, but we still had to give up a lot of land. About 40 kilometers down that way." He pointed downstream. This is the portion of Laos between Thailand and the Mekong that Siam formally ceded to France in 1893. "It used to be ours. We can't look down on the Lao anymore," Dok continued. "We need to respect them. We're a developed country, but so what? They haven't had it so easy over there. With the Communists, I mean. But these days, they're doing pretty well. Better than they were, at least. Their government has opened things up.

Wat Luang laborers at the end of their workday. Dok is fourth from the left, backrow. Boss Chaw is standing to the right and front of Dok in the 'heart' T-shirt. Boon is kneeling, far right. This picture was taken on my first day at the landing.

"Back around 1971 and '72, it was like there was no border between us. We went back and forth across the river, 24 hours a day. No problem. We'd go over for weddings or funerals, they'd cross over here. That all changed when the war ended. Then, you'd see soldiers over there with rifles on their shoulders."

Changing the subject again, Dok said, "You know, they have emeralds and sapphires over in the Lao mountains." He seemed a bit wistful at the thought of precious stones so near, but so far out of reach. "Koreans used to fly into Huay Xai to buy them all. The Lao airline doesn't fly to Huay Xai anymore."

"Are there precious stones on the Thai side?" I asked.

Dok looked at me and shook his head. "If there were, *ajaan*, we'd be miners."

"Really, you don't have to call me *ajaan*."

The sun eased lower behind us, casting warm light onto Laos, the green cargo boats and the river. The workers unwound. A few small children in blue-and-white school uniforms showed up looking for fathers and ice-cream money. They gamboled on the bank while their fathers had one for the road. Other workers settled in for an extended drinking session. The rowdiness and horseplay died down as the day's labor began to take its toll. The men grew quieter and more relaxed as the bamboo cup made rounds.

A teenaged girl appeared on the deck of one of the Lao boats, a sarong tied tight under her arms. She was the daughter of a middle-aged woman, a boat owner from Luang Prabang I had spoken with earlier in the day. The girl lowered a bucket into the river, hauled it onto the deck, squatted, and with a plastic cup scooped water from the bucket and splashed it over her head. She did this again and again. The image of the bathing girl in fading light transfixed the workers, who watched her with some combination of weariness and quiet appreciation approaching reverence.

The talk turned to the new port being built upstream by the provincial government as a part of a plan to expand international trade along the Mekong. The port, just visible upstream, was almost completed. It looked like a giant cement ramp rising from the water. One of the men said that when it opened, cargo boats would be required to load and unload at the new port, and even the small, cross-river boats that Dr. Walker had studied would have to shift upstream. The laborers might be put out of work.

"Why can't you all work at the new port when it opens?" I asked.

"The new port is in Hua Wiang. We're in Wat Luang. Different villages."

"But it's in Chiang Khong, right? Does it matter which village you come from?"

"Yes, it does matter. We're Wat Luang men, *ajaan*. Hua Wiang has its own men lined up."

"If the new port puts us out of work, we'll be eating only *nam prik*!" said one of the men. *Nam prik* is a pungent, spicy condiment made from dried shrimp paste, fish sauce, lime, garlic and chilies, usually eaten with vegetables or rice. "To eat only *nam prik*" is a figure of speech meaning to be broke or destitute.

The new port was built as part of an agreement by

Thailand, Burma, China and Laos to increase trade by opening the Mekong to commercial navigation. The fact that a port would put men out of work was counter-intuitive, and revealed a dynamic of local social and economic divisions that wasn't immediately apparent. Construction of Chiang Khong's new port began without any consultation with Wat Luang's workers. It was another event beyond their control, like a flood or a drought, and it threatened to bring an end to their way of life.

Dok, feeling the effects of *lao kao*, waxed profound. "I don't see why they need to blast the rapids," he said. He was referring to the Chinese-sponsored Mekong River Navigation Improvement project, a scheme to destroy a number of rapids and shoals in order to permit passage of large Chinese commercial vessels. "Nature is best. I like my whiskey from a bamboo cup. Just leave the river alone! And what do we need with those Chinese fruits they send down here? Apples and pears are nice, but we have durian and *lam yai*!"

Finishing touches made to Chiang Khong's new port in Hua Wiang. This port threatened to put the Wat Luang laborers and boat operators out of business.

A laborer named Boon flicked his cigarette lighter and held the flame over my notebook so I could see to take notes. On his forearm was a crude tattoo of a dagger and clenched fist. He was also a little drunk. He grinned and said, "I'm a child of the Mekong."

The next day Dok wasn't laboring. He stood a little higher in status than most laborers because he sometimes worked as a boat operator. It was his turn to drive one of the cross-river boats, and he offered to take me for a ride. I waited for him in the boat drivers' shack as the sky darkened with rain clouds. Boats bobbed in the muddy river, black rubber sheets thrown over the engines to protect them from rain. Small Lao flags mounted on the prows of cargo boats snapped as the wind picked up. Down on the bank, the laborers were struggling with large metal sheets and lengths of rebar, working in pairs to lift them from the back of a flatbed truck and load them into a boat bound for Luang Prabang.

Dok landed his boat with passengers from Laos, female traders carrying brightly colored umbrellas and plastic bags of merchandise. Dok called me down to the boat and we motored upstream to get a look at Huay Xai landing and the new port under construction on the Thai side. When fat drops of rain began to fall we went back. The traders were still in the boat operators' shack, waiting out the rain with a bottle of Mekong.

Mekong is a brand of Thai whiskey and drinking it is one of the pleasures of life in Thailand that I had nearly forgotten. There's some dispute about whether it is actually whiskey or rum, but that's not important. There are several brands of similar spirit, but they are known generically as "Mekong." When I first arrived in Thailand in 1993, I soon discovered that Mekong was far less expensive than the beer sold by Thailand's well-connected and well-protected breweries. Being affordable, however, Mekong lacks status. It is a utilitarian option. Most Thai men prefer to drink expensive scotch (though the boom-time practice of flaunting boxes of Chivas Regal or Johnnie Walker Black Label during drinking sessions seems to have waned). As with scotch whiskey, Thais mix Mekong generously with soda water and ice. Served this way, Mekong is refreshing and one can drink for hours with few adverse consequences.

Cross-river cargo boats at rest. Rain is coming in.

The Lao traders had no ice and no soda, so we took turns drinking Mekong straight.

The rain let up; sunlight returned. Golden rays shot from behind Wat Luang, the nineteenth-century temple that gives the village its name, illuminating wet foliage on the long mid-stream island and the Lao bank. This green of tree leaves and tall grass was more brilliant for the contrast with dark clouds beyond, and for the Mekong we had been drinking. A rainbow formed, joining the lost Siamese territory

south of us to the emerald-rich hills in the northeast.

The loud motor of a small boat attracted my attention. It carried three men from the mid-stream island toward the Thai bank. I asked Dok what they might have been doing on the island.

"They've been drinking *lao kao* over there."

"Why go the island to drink?"

"Ah! For a change of atmosphere."

Then Dok said, "Let's go!"

I followed Dok down to the bank. He called out to some of the workers and several of them joined us in the boat. We crossed to the island and climbed single file up steps carved out of the earth to a hut at the top of the bank. Inside, a man and a woman were seated on the floor beside a plastic jerry can, with plump plastic bags of *lao kao* around their knees. We kicked off our sandals and climbed inside. The couple went about dispensing the spirit. A plastic bag, about one liter, went for 20 baht, less than 50 cents. A shot glass went back and forth, from laborer to the young woman to the hands the next laborer.

When the glass came my way I asked them, "What will you do if the new port doesn't hire you?"

Boon said, "We hope they will hire us. If they don't we'll have to find other work. Maybe we won't be able to stay in Chiang Khong."

Dok said, "Some of us have fields we can work."

Chaw, the laborers' head man, spoke up. He had yellowy eyes and wild hair that gave him the appearance of being always a little drunk. "Even when the new port opens, the cross-river boats will continue to land at Wat Luang. Many times before they've said that they'll shut us down, but it never happens."

Boon and Boss Chaw on the boat, heading toward the lao kao *hut on the mid-stream island.*

Boss Chaw enjoying his lao kao *from a bamboo cup.*

A voice rang out from the Thai bank, requesting that we return with some *lao kao*.

On the way back, Boon asked me how I liked Bangkok. He'd never been there.

"He's been to Chiang Rai, though," one of the others said. Boon punched his friend on the arm. "Boon was in prison. Two years. Amphetamines."

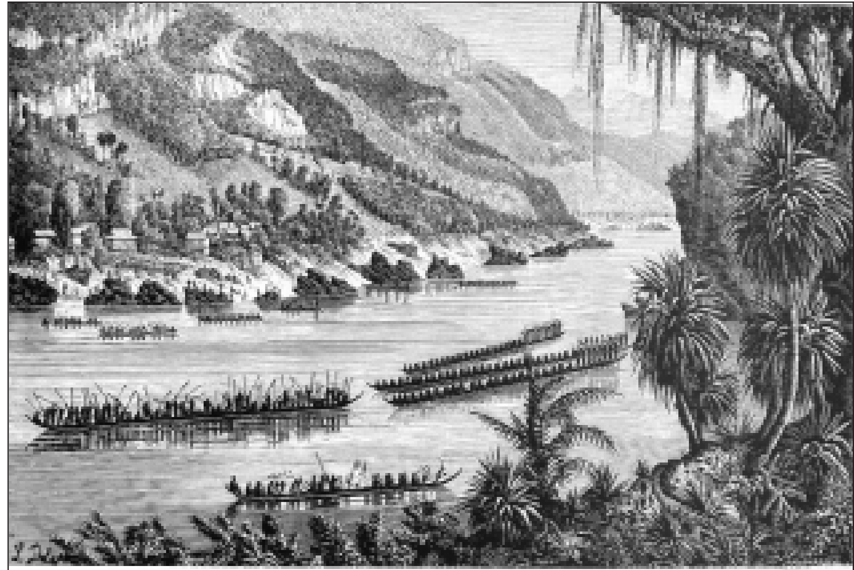
With a nod, Boon conceded the fact. "That was eight years ago," he said. "I'm clean now. None of us laborers uses drugs. Boss Chaw won't allow it."

Back on the bank, Boss Chaw bummed a cigarette from one of his workers. Boon joked, "Boss Chaw is so selfish. He's got four packs of cigarettes wrapped up in his *pakama*, but still he cadges smokes." Chaw smiled because it was true.

When I said good night to the workers, Boon, the tattooed ex-convict child of the Mekong said, "Don't forget us, *Ajaan*."

Several of the Wat Luang laborers had encouraged

me to return to Chiang Khong in April to celebrate the Thai New Year, called *songkran*. This three-day celebration is famous as the "water-throwing" festival. April is the hottest, driest time of the year, so there is some logic to splashing friends and neighbors and being splashed in turn, though the practice is rooted in ritual cleansing to begin the New Year. Traditionally, the first day of *songkran* is given to making merit, bathing Buddha images and pouring water over the hands of respected elders. These days, some zealous youngsters have taken liberties with the traditional three-day duration of *songkran*, stretching it out to a week They crowd the nation's roadsides, drinking, singing, dancing and launching buckets of water at passing cars, motorcyclists and pedestrians. During the holiday no one who ventures outdoors (excluding monks, but including police officers) is safe from a thorough soaking.



Some things don't change much. An engraving of a mid-nineteenth-century boat race on the Mekong by Louis Delaporte. From Francis Garnier and Louis Delaporte, Journey on the Old Mekong: Volume 3 of the Mekong Exploration Commission Report (1866-1868) *(Bangkok: White Lotus, 1996*

Chiang Khong's *songkran* celebration is enlivened by boat races pitting teams from the town's several villages against each other. Races are fiercely competitive, with a year's worth of bragging rights at stake. *Songkran* also brings the inauguration of the annual giant-catfish-hunting season, marked by a boat procession, speeches, prayers and beauty pageants.

I returned to Chiang Khong in mid-April and walked the familiar path to Wat Luang landing. It was desolate — no cargo boats, no cross-river boats, no laborers or traders. Weeds that once grew only by the slope now surged in matted waves toward the river and rocks of the spirit house. Could a New Year hiatus explain the apparent desertion or had the new port displaced cross-river trade?

For several days I holed up in the guesthouse, working on an unrelated newsletter. *Songkran* began in earnest and I could hear drums and the chants of villagers cheering their oarsmen in preliminary heats. The crews had trained for days before the races began; I saw them paddling in the late afternoons, when couples and families went down to the sandy bank near the guesthouse with bottles of whiskey and soda and buckets of ice to enjoy the river and the cooling hours. The manager of our guesthouse, a cheerful, ever-smiling young man, was a member of Wat Luang's team. He returned in the evenings rubbing his neck and complaining of aches but grinning all the while. I asked if I could paddle, but he told me that ever since a Dutch tourist had managed to tip over one of the boats, it was locals only.

On the final day of the races I went to Wat Luang landing, again a place of activity. Two awnings had been set up to shelter supporters of opposing teams, while most people sat further up the bank under the shade of trees. Old folks drank mass-produced *lao kao* poured from brown bottles. Younger spectators waded into the river, waving flags and whooping at the finish of each race. Nearby, among some rocks on the river's edge, someone had set up a makeshift spirit shrine, a miniature shelter made from a scrap of blue plastic tarpaulin and some sticks. Two women in straw hats and loud shirts lounged before it, their feet in the river, turning around now and then to mumble petitions for victory or to replace the cups of beer and whiskey.

Chiang Khong residents enjoy boat races of 2004.

I made new friends who suggested that I contribute to their beer fund. My baht disappeared with one of the spirit worshippers who returned with five

Drinking to the Spirit: *A makeshift boat-race day shrine and its devotees.*

bottles of Elephant brand beer. She opened one bottle and put the remaining four among some rocks in the river to keep cool. Even in April, the Mekong in this region is surprisingly cold. Later, as the heat grew intense, I couldn't resist the impulse to plunge in. My breath left me instantly and I was reminded that melting Himalayan snow first feeds the water that flowed around me.

When the races ended I went by boat to Had Sai, location of the large-but-uninteresting Giant Catfish Museum and scene of the culmination of *songkran* festivities. The day before, I had gone there to witness a ceremony marking the start of catfish-hunting season: bland speeches by local notables who sat with their silk-clad wives on black vinyl couches waiting for a turn at the microphone. Speeches completed, officials presented offerings of flowers and incense to a spirit house while a squad of female dancers in red and gold took the floor, curling their fingers backwards to unnatural degrees, an image exaggerated by the long, gold, needle-like adornments capping each digit.

The catfish ceremony took on unusual significance this year. For decades the great, scale-less creatures have been closely associated with Chiang Khong. The secrets and traditions of hunting the giants, one of the world's largest fresh-water fish, have been preserved by generations of Chiang Khong fishermen. As recently as 1990, some 69 of the fish had been caught at Chiang Khong in a single season. Catches, however, declined rapidly thereafter and three years had passed since a giant catfish had been caught near Chiang Khong. The International Union for Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources lists the fish, known in Thai as *pla buek,* as critically endangered and reports that it is threatened with extinction. Their declining numbers and apparent disappearance from the upper Mekong has made the giant catfish a symbol of Mekong-River environmental problems, particularly those associated with dam development in China and the navigation-improvement scheme.

A dancer at the giant catfish festivities.

Attention shifted up the bank, where a parade of floats bearing beauty queens and musicians progressed slowly toward the riverside stage, site of the evening's entertainment. Hundreds of people carpeted the shaded slope above the river bank while others squatted in shadows of museum buildings. Only the dusty, bright, sun-struck spaces before the stage stood empty. On stage a young man sang country songs; now and then he stooped to accept a garland of paper flowers from a fan. A troop of young hill-tribe boys followed the singer, playing long curved pipes while dancing an energetic, unrythmic duck-walk. A beauty pageant followed. Dozens of women in traditional silk dress, heavy makeup and carefully coifed hair took turns stepping gingerly across the stage, trying to avoid electrical cords and uneven joints in the risers. The crowd moved steadily toward the stage, occupying dusk's lengthening shadows.

One of the spirit worshippers from the boat race, having overdone the unhealthy mix of sun and booze, quietly vomited while her companion stroked her back. It was time to go home.

One of the beauty pageant participants, a prospective Miss Giant Catfish.

The next day I joined the annual ceremony of offerings to the spirit responsible for Wat Luang. A band of musicians formed a circle under an awning in front of the spirit house, joined by other residents of Wat Luang. Those braving the brutal sun were busy pouring glasses of *lao kao*, proffering garlands of jasmine flowers and adjusting the glinting, gauzy banners planted around the shrine. Dok was there, stabbing sticks of burning incense into the flesh of a flattened pig's head. The musicians kept up a loud, relentless, tuneless cacophony. I took photos, sweat and smoke stinging my eyes.

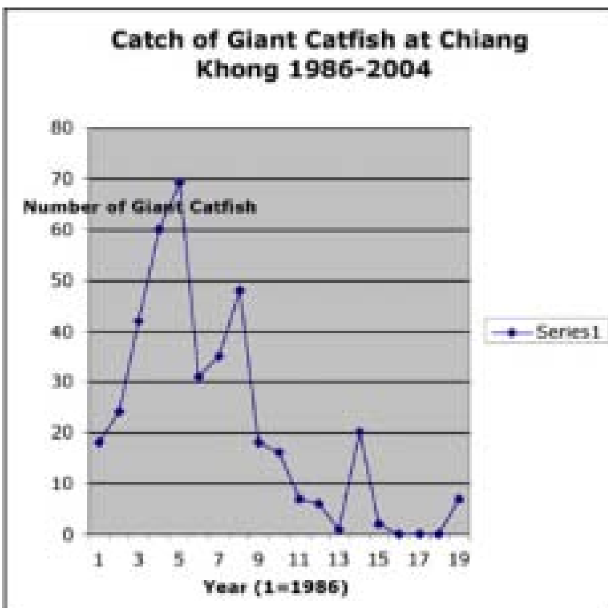
Dok told me that the cross-river trade had moved to

***Giant Catfish caught** and **catfish graph** [see below] (Graph courtesy of SEARIN): A male* pla beuk *awaits his fate. He was the first giant catfish caught near Chiang Khong in three years. At least seven giant catfish were caught during the 2004 catfish hunting season in Chiang Khong. In spite of the fish's apparent comeback, it remains critically endangered.*

Hua Wiang port. The laborers had been put out of work. "Some are working their fields now. That's what I'm doing. Some have moved on." What had become of Boon? He didn't know.

If Wat Luang's role in cross-river trade had passed into history, the tradition of hunting giant catfish received a reprieve. I stopped in Chiang Khong in early May to pick up a book I'd left behind and learned that two giant catfish had been caught earlier in the day. I raced to Had Sai where onlookers had gathered to see the fish, alive and tethered to bank with green rope and bamboo poles. Though they were only partially visible in the brown water, the size of their pale, pinkish bodies impressed. One weighed 280 kilograms (617 lbs.), the other 250 (551 lbs.).

Villagers who came to have a look at the catch were genuinely excited. A few, however, looked on with misgivings. No one knew where to find the mighty fisherman, though someone speculated that he was on the phone somewhere, making a deal to sell the fish. One woman said she wouldn't eat *pla beuk*. Another agreed, claiming that she didn't like the taste. "But that's not it," said the first woman. "They're river spirits. It would be unlucky to eat them. Maybe it's OK to eat them if you're city folk, but not if you live by the river." ❏



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