

The Contributions of an Outsider's View

Doi Ang Khang is located in Northern Thailand on the border with Burma. It is a place where daily Thai and Burmese troops face each other across the demilitarized zone. At night the Burmese soldiers may cross the border to receive health care from Thai doctors. The landscape is stunning. High altitude rain forest sits atop a karst geology. This border is also occupied by two hill tribe villages, the Khob Dong and Nor Lae villages. Inhabitants of these villages, escaping cultural and religious intolerance, emigrated from far the North in China and Tibet. For the Thais this is an important place because King Bhumipol Adulyadej founded an agricultural station there some thirty years ago. The motivation, to provide these tribes economic opportunity beyond the region's cash crop, poppy. In addition to the agricultural experimentation station, the King, through his Royal Charities, created many educational and social development projects for the hill tribe villages. He funded schools, sanitary facilities, public health education and many other programs. As the Nor Lae village began to thrive the Khob Dong village languished. This was surprising because the Khob Dong village existed some seventy years before the Nor Lae village. By comparison the Nor Lae village only moved to the Thai side of the border during the military takeover of Burma. Indeed Nor Lae villagers still farm the demilitarized zone between the two borders.

The four Worcester Polytechnic Institute students making up Team Ang Khang sought to understand why such differences existed in the development trajectory between these two villages. Why were more Nor Lae going to the regional secondary school? Why were so few Khob Dong villagers not using their latrines, still choosing to relieve themselves in the woods adjacent to their village. "We're hoping the students will pick on something we haven't." One Royal Project worker remarked. The Thais felt that the students, from their Western standpoint and by doing a comparative project, could get more reliable answers from the villagers about the influence of their customs on the different village lifestyles. So for one month in the winter of 2005 four WPI students, who spoke some Thai, interviewed, observed, and poured over policy archives in an effort to address the Royal Project Office's concerns. The students learned of the different religious and cultural histories of the tribes (one was Animist the other Buddhist), their needs and the differences in perception between Royal Project officers and the tribes, especially the tribe "failing to thrive." A result of their two months in Thailand and one month in the villages was a set of concrete recommendations the Royal Projects officers could act upon.

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