



You Like Opium?

Jinghong was the northern-most point on the Mekong traveled by the French on their epic journey over 130 years ago. Based on local advice, the experiences of other overland travelers I had met, and tips along the internet trail, Jinghong seemed to be the best starting point for a casual descent of the river. Off and on for two days, we lurked around the loading docks and the Mei Mei Café, a backpacker hotspot, to try to scare up a boat.

The buffalo burger at the Mei Mei Café aside, the frontier city has taken on a Chinese countenance: a façade of white-tiled concrete buildings glassed in blue, karaoke bars and the ethnic majority Han Chinese outnumbering by a four-to-one ratio the 30,000-strong Dai people, who were pushed into the south of China and northern mountains of Southeast Asia by the Mongol hordes in the 13th century. Filling the streets in uncommon numbers, Dai monks wore saffron, the soothing logo of the Theravada Buddhists of Southeast Asia.

It was easy to pick out the Dai women, adorned in vivid colors with babies slung to their backs. Like the other ethnic minorities, the Dai are not bound by the Chinese one-child policy. They are, however, in theory limited to two children. But as one local woman pointed out, “Farmers need a boy. Boom, boom, boom—until boy.”

After a thorough search of the Mei Mei Café and Jinghong in general, we failed to find anyone interested in helping us hire a boat. We did, however, find a rubber dingy below the bridge, and spent a day floating 25 miles to the next village, Galanba. As goalless as vagrant leaves floating down the Mekong; we were beginning to get the feel of the river like a couple of ageing Huck Finns.

Once back in Jinghong, we resorted to our back-up plan: a two-day detour by road crossing the border into Laos. We would put in the river in Xieng

Kok, an opium smuggling village 20 miles south of China. We were on the street at six the next morning, rolling across Jinghong's new bridge with two Chinese drivers in a red taxi.

"Federico Fellini" was the can-do guy riding shotgun, who enjoyed directing things. He bolted from the car at a bus stop to talk to a very naughty-looking young girl. It was not yet 6:30 a.m., and she had trouble written all over her: ample breasts flowing out of a glittering halter top, scarlet lips and dyed blond hair falling along her shoulders, a couple of crude hand tattoos, eyes flashing like beacons. Fellini walked her to the car and tried to slot her in the back seat between Simon and me. Disappointment swept her face as we ungraciously told Fellini to knock it off. She withdrew into the peasant crowd waiting for the bus. Fellini chain-smoked and hacked out the window all the way to the border of Laos.

We passed through several Dai villages, encountering a steady flow of assorted hill tribes on their way to markets and fields, loaded with panniers of vegetables, shoulder poles of firewood, and harrowing blades. Shepherded by a boy and two men in straw hats, a flood of goats and water buffalo filled the road, parting and closing around us like a smelly school of fish.

In the middle of Xishuanbanna Nature Reserve, we stopped in a Dai village walled by spiraling limestone peaks. Fellini got out, pulled off his director's coat, and stopped colorfully dressed hilltribers for our photo-ops. Back at the wheel, Fellini goosed our flashy red taxi around every turn of the tortuous road the rest of the way to the border, while his co-driver enjoyed a drooling sleep. We roared up to the remote border outpost in a cloud of dust.



Third World border crossings are almost always melting pots of diverse cultures, and duty-free zones for smugglers. In the case of southwest China and northern Laos, the crossings are also safe havens for anarchic tribes escaping the Han Chinese yoke. Many tribes in the Golden Triangle border area, mostly in Laos and Burma, continue to cultivate opium. It is processed in local factories owned by drug lords who direct the shipment of raw opium

and refined heroin. The forbidding terrain of the region allows the tribes and drug barons to pass as they please through the borders.

In Laos, ethnic groups are neatly classified into three categories based on the relative altitudes of their traditional villages. The largest group, the Lao-lum, comprises 55 percent of the country's five and a half million people. Their dialect is the nation's official language. They inhabit the lowlands along the Mekong and its tributaries. Part of the broad Tai diaspora from southern China, which includes the Thais, settled in Laos toward the end of the first millennium. Not long after, the Lao-lum adopted Theravada Buddhism to go along with their traditional animist beliefs.

The oldest inhabitants of Laos are the Lao Theung tribes—Khama, Htin, Lamet, Loven and more. They are loosely affiliated with the Mon-Khmer groups who mostly live in Burma and Cambodia. Some 9,000 years before the Tai race did, they migrated from southern China, displacing the aboriginal hunter-gatherers who first inhabited Laos. The Lao Theung were, for a time, enslaved and eventually displaced by the Lao-lum. They pushed upward from the plains and lowland rivers to altitudes ranging from 1,000 to 3,000 feet.

Farther up in the mountains of Laos, the Lao Sung people, speaking various dialects of the Tibeto-Burman language group, are relative newcomers from China. They arrived less than two centuries ago, and now dwell in the upper valleys of Laos above 3,000 feet. Like the Lao Theung, the Lao Sung practice animism and favor the healing powers of a shaman—sacrificing a pig or chicken, smearing blood on a sick person, applying dermal treatments, and employing the deterrent magic embodied in amulets and spirit strings worn around the wrist. Fiercely independent, they choose to live in isolation from lowlanders, practicing migratory slash-and-burn agriculture. At the turn of the 19th century, when the British needed more opium to pay for their Chinese tea, the Lao Sung—Hmong, Akha, Mien—with the mountainous, alkaline soil beneath their feet, were willing cultivators and users.

Our bus passed through a caravan of cargo trucks parked near the Laos-China border, their chancy loads wrapped in tarpaulins. The old vehicle lurched and groaned through long tracks of cratered tarmac disappearing into dusty red earth. This wasted road was built by Chinese troops during

the Vietnam War. Today, after 30 years of neglect, modern China has plans to rebuild it as an overland link to the markets of Thailand, Malaysia and Singapore.

But for now, the concrete and bricks and glassy tile buildings of China seemed dog-years behind us. Instead we passed through shabby villages of thatched huts with no electricity. The charred hillsides still smoldered, recently slashed-and-burned. Bevies of black pigs shared a play space with pot-bellied three- and-four-year-old kids, their naked bodies tinted in layers of dirt.

Many of the children had blond hair, their noses bubbling with snot and eyes flowing with conjunctivitis—the face of Third World poverty. Dark-skinned women wore checkered head wraps of blue and white, green and red, pink and white, like colorful tatterdemalions. Men, also blackened by the sun, walked the roads in groups of two, some carrying flintlock muskets. They wore olive drab Mao hats and traditional baggy trousers that fell to the shins, with embroidered game pouches strapped across the front, bandoleer-style. Motorized vehicles were outnumbered four-to-one by horses and donkeys, transporting people and products—including opium.

We arrived in a village called Luang Nam Tha just as a bus was leaving for Muang Sing, our destination for the night. The driver happily stopped, for the *kip* equivalent of a couple of bucks, and loaded our bags on top, giving us less than a minute's layover. The bus was mostly filled with women of the Hmong and Mien tribes, who nursed their babies and fidgeted the way white-knuckled flyers do. Their sundry possessions overflowed from the roof and aisles.

Simon, confined as if in a dollhouse, creakily folded his six-foot-two-inch frame into a corner beside two young Japanese women on a field trip to study Laotian culture. I fell into the middle of the bus, my ribcage pressed by the handlebar of a tricycle. Aware of the Lao's predisposition for motion sickness, I kept an eye on the peaked-faced ones sitting within barfing range. Every time I shifted, the tricycle's siren and flashing red light went into action. Barreling down the road trailed by a rooster tail of dusty clouds, the driver doubled as DJ, spinning cassettes of traditional Lao love songs, medleys of stringed instruments accompanied by high-pitched singing.

Once, we stopped to pick up a villager who didn't know which side of the bus to enter. While he circled trying to find the door, the passengers erupted in jeering laughter.

The road twisted indecisively along the upland valley of the Nam Yuan River, a tributary of the Mekong. The mountainous landscape shifted from treeless nubs of freshly toasted hillsides to the luxuriance of primary forest, fleeced in white spring bloom. In a few hours' time, approaching Muang Sing, we drove directly into a fiery sun as it dipped into the crosshairs of the valley's opening.



Centuries of southbound migrations from China have left the Muang Sing area of northwest Laos home to as many as 30 ethnic minority groups, possibly more tribes per square mile than any other place on earth. During the Vietnam War, Muang Sing was by turns occupied by the Pathet Lao—the Vietnamese-supported communist liberation movement in Laos—and the Iron Age hill tribes conducting guerilla warfare operations in the region as surrogates of the CIA.

For a time, the CIA's go-to guy in Laos was a rogue warrior named Anthony Posphepny. Beginning in the early 1960s, Tony Poe, as he was known, conducted his own guerrilla war in the opium-growing Golden Triangle region. He paid cash bounties of a dollar each to tribal operatives, mostly from the Mien tribe, for every pair of ears severed from Pathet Lao fighters. Another tactic was to marinate the severed heads of Pathet Lao soldiers in formaldehyde, then drop them from low-flying planes onto the terrified enemy.

Poe had "gone bamboo," according to fellow paramilitary operatives. He saw it differently, and even defended his collection of ears: "The guy's dead anyway, what's the difference?" He finally ended the bounty system when he encountered a Mien child missing his ears. The kid's dad had cut them off in order to collect on Poe's reward. The American was upset, not because the child was maimed, but because his bounty system had been cheated.

The sobering truth about soldiers like Tony Poe is that they were damn good at fighting and terrorizing whoever was designated the enemy. Such is war. Although Poe pushed his job too far for even military stomachs, the American national purpose was to win; this end justified all means.

Poe was the latter-day inspiration for the Conradian character of Colonel Kurtz, played by Marlon Brando, in *Apocalypse Now*. Although Kurtz got his throat slit at the movie's end, Poe was awarded the CIA Star, the Agency's highest award, by Director William Colby. And this was after a newspaper in 1970 exposed his paramilitary exploits in Laos, and he was banished from the country. Poe retired with his Laotian wife to Udorn Thani, Thailand, before dying, unrepentant, in San Francisco in 2003.

Among Poe's responsibilities in Laos were tapping telephone lines and monitoring road traffic to keep abreast of Chinese and North Vietnamese troop movements, given the threat of China's entry into the larger Indochina war. Muang Sing, just six miles from the border, became one of our paramilitary's prime listening posts.

The American build-up in Laos began after China fell to the communists in 1949, and was redoubled after John Kennedy became President in 1961. The day before taking office, Kennedy was warned of the looming communist menace in Laos by his predecessor, Dwight D. Eisenhower, the lead trumpeter of the "domino theory." Washington saw backwater Laos as a wobbly domino ready to fall and topple the free world with it.

Conflict between the warring princes of Laos had heated up. Sensing the threat of the Red Hordes, the Pentagon dispatched 500 marines with helicopter support to Udon, Thailand, across the Mekong from Vientiane. The Kremlin replied by shipping arms to the Pathet Lao. But the superpowers' open confrontation in Laos soon fizzled. The Geneva Accords of 1962, signed by Kennedy and Krushchev, forbade the presence of American or Vietnamese troops in Laos.

With the ink hardly dry, all parties to the Accords switched to covert operations. With no official government budget to hold back the communist tide in Laos, the CIA and its paramilitary warriors circumvented international law by conspiring in the most lucrative business in the neighborhood—the

smuggling of drugs. Nowadays this might seem an obvious option. Conflicts around the globe—in Columbia, Afghanistan, Burma and other countries—are underwritten with drug profits.

The British East India Company showed how profitable it was to create the demand and then cultivate the supply in the 18th and 19th centuries. London fought two wars to preserve their lucrative colonial franchise—the right to foist the “heavenly demon” on the Chinese. After Britain passed the Opium Act in 1878 and withdrew from drug pushing in the East, hill tribes continued to grow small quantities of opium for personal consumption and resale to French colons. Once the French left, the Americans needed local anti-communist warriors. With their planes, arms and access to markets, they turned the rather amateurish cottage industry of family-run farms into an international conglomerate. The region’s annual output of opium increased tenfold in just a few years.

Opium became coin of the realm, and during the 1960s and 1970s, one of the epicenters of the opium trade was Muang Sing, where Chinese merchants acted as brokers for the Corsican traffickers. The district still produces several tons of opium a year: some for export but mostly for local consumption by older male addicts, and a bit for recreational use by backpackers wanting to puff some of the “heavenly demon.”



Today Muang Sing is a sleepy, backwater village with a main street of stilted homes converted to guesthouses, and a market that bustles for two or three hours each day before dwindling to a few tribal stragglers. As we arrived at dusk, monks in saffron robes and matching ski caps teetered along the road astride bicycles, while kids played badminton beneath the wan glare of a single bulb. The occasional backpacker dawdled by in that tribe’s unisex uniform—tie-dyed pantaloons, tattered T-shirt, ears in hoops and bangles, an embroidered, ethnic-style shoulder bag faded by the sun.

In the late light, we found a room on the town’s east end, amid the gentle decadence of the Lao Herbal Sauna & Massage, Sing Savanh Nightclub, and Jin’s Chinese Restaurant and Disco/Pub. We enjoyed Mekong catfish in the

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open-air restaurant below the guesthouse. From across the room, in the general vicinity of a slip of girls sitting next to the kitchen, a deep voice rose like the disembodied sound of a ghost, “Where are you from?” One of the young girls—well-formed and handsomely masked in all the red shades of rouge and lipstick—stood proudly as the illusory baritone. As she repeated the question, her Adam’s apple rose from her neck like a goiter, “I was asking where are you from?” A Laotian lady-boy in Muang Sing—she could have been a talking poodle and I would not have been more astonished.

Out in the darkened street, the kids were still swatting the shuttlecock and letting go with peals of mockery at the losers. A few market ladies worked the shadows selling hand-woven textiles. In a dimly lit home-style restaurant beneath one of the guesthouses, a few backpackers gathered like tribal women around the village well telling stories of the road. Simon and I skulked in the shadows among the vending ladies, mindful of the traveler’s imperative to sample the corn when in Kansas. From out of the dark a voice whispered, “You like opium? I have. You like?”

We were soon back in the room taking our perfumed medicine from the red neck elegance of a Coke-can pipe, inhaling ambrosial vapors tainted by a burnt-cola aftertaste. No cosmic zaps that re-jiggered our lives—just a gush of free-associative babble. I lost my innocence with opium while in the army over three decades ago not so far from Muang Sing. At 18 years old, I had neglected to follow the advice of the wise Chinese opium smokers. They always said it should not be taken by the young but instead savored in old age, a seductive escape from reality. Jean Cocteau, the French surrealist writer and artist, took a similar view:

“Everything one does in life, even love, occurs in an express train racing toward death. To smoke opium is to get out of the train while it is still moving. It is to concern oneself with something other than life or death.”

We concerned ourselves with a search for Muang Sing’s night life. The only glimmer was Jin’s Chinese Restaurant and Disco/Pub, lit up with a single strand of low-wattage fairy lights. Inside, a disco ball sparkled color onto the dance floor as a TV showed syrupy Thai pop videos. A few couples danced with typical Lao reserve, rotating in the circular formation of the traditional *lamvong*, waving their hands in the air but never touching.

After a beer, we walked out into the fresh air, feeling wanton, as in the illusion of revisiting an old haunt. The night sky flashed in pinpricks of silver. More monks padded by in the darkness. A sparrow of a man in bare feet brandished a calumet pipe, inviting us to his hooch to smoke opium. "Not tonight, good buddy. We've seen enough action already. Thanks anyway," I replied airily. He pressed a dollop of opium pasted on a tear of newspaper into my hand. Perhaps transported by Muang Sing's easy-going mood, I stuck the paste in my pocket, handed him some *kip* and in opposite directions, we vanished into the darkness. Lucky I did not accept his invitation to the hooch. I later learned of its dangers.

Our sleep was deep, the "ultimate siesta," matching the countryside's stillness. A chorus of roosters crowed us awake, when, according to Chinese zodiacal folklore, all the demons and ghosts who swirl around the night, depart. Or had the opium kept us sleeping through the pre-dawn cacophony? We tried to catch an early bus to Xieng Kok, the Mekong village where we could hire a boat. But the driver wouldn't leave until the moment the bus was full, a "Laotian moment" that might take hours to arrive.

We killed time strolling around the market populated by tribal women burdened with wooden yokes around their necks, carrying loaded bamboo panniers, bartering, buying and selling. Unharnessed, they gathered at low-set tables where they sat on plastic chairs the size of milking stools. Clouds of smoke hung lazily in the air where stoves heated vessels of hot soup laden with spirals of tripe. The din of diverse tongues wafted through the market like some Eastern Babel.

The women of the Mien tribe stood out in their tightly wrapped black turbans, with red ruffs worn gaily around the neck like cocktail boas out of the Roaring Twenties. The Kaw and Hmong women, when relieved of their yokes, looked like provincial princesses in their beaded headdresses, bedizened with crimson pompoms and half-moon pendants of silver. Strands of silver coins framed their faces, forming necklaces as dense as chain-mail hanging down to the chest. Approaching with smiles of incandescent ivory, their teeth often capped in ornamental gold, Thai lu women peddled handwoven hemp and cotton. Several women of childbearing years walked around bare-chested, their breasts swollen with milk.

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I waved some *kip* at a *sawngthaew* driver, and he gathered a couple of fellow drivers and market boys to give his truck a push-start. Soon we were bouncing down the dusty track toward Xieng Kok, tracing the Ma River, another tributary of the Mekong.

The *sawngthaew* was a local taxi, always loading on more people and cargo than letting off. At each village, the stop was easily identified by the barnyard of passengers huddled near the road—screeching chickens, quacking ducks, litters of short-haired, black piglets.

We arrived before noon in Xieng Kok, situated on a rocky knoll above the sandy beaches of the Mekong. Across the dull jade waters were the Shan States of Burma. Xieng Kok is the only legal border crossing between Laos and Burma. An idyllic sprawl of thatched huts and brightly costumed tribal women, the village is a major conduit for Burmese opium and heroin.



By noon, a swarm of river touts emerged from their shaded hideaways. Belying their drowsy demeanor, with staccato swiftness, they offered up an amusing menu of boat options: you want fast-fast boat, slow-fast boat, or slow-slow boat, as they pointed first to a speedboat, then a river ferry and finally a rice barge.

Four speedboats, or *heua wai*, were nosed up on the beach, painted in red and yellow designs along their shallow gunwales. Their tiny propellers were mounted on long engine shafts that stretched 15 feet behind the boat, looking fancifully reptilian. Powered by Toyota four-cylinder engines—souped up with an open-intake carburetor and equal-length headers that meld into a megaphone exhaust—the boat's mosquito-wing prop was torqued by 150 horsepower.

After a long negotiation for one of the Mekong missiles, the captain warmed up the unmuffled car engine in a couple of shore-to-shore bursts, rupturing the stillness with a death roar like a B-52.

A Japanese man, Miyamoto, pitched in with us to share the cost of the

boat to Huay Xai. Soon we were being kitted out with orange life jackets and smallish crash helmets. After loading a five-gallon plastic container of gasoline about six inches from my backside, the captain tossed his cigarette into the water and untied the boat. In an act of benign disregard for the region's atmosphere of inertia, we blasted off like a rocket, throwing arcs of silver droplets into the air.

In no time we were shooting through a labyrinth of giant boulders. With every twist of the river apparently imprinted in his head, the captain seemed to see around corners and find the channel, never pausing to study a turn, thinking 20 seconds ahead and veering reflexively at 45 miles per hour.

But it wasn't long before the adrenaline thrill of rocketing down the Mekong took a back seat to the lush scenery and absorbing culture of the river. The sky was a seamless shroud of alabaster—cloudless, lacking depth and texture. The forested hillsides in both Burma and Laos grew thick with jungle-like profusion, steeped in a phosphorous air. Fluted waves of white sand provided the caulking for a gauntlet of basaltic boulders—misshapen monoliths framing the waterway like the tumbled approach of an ancient Inca city.

Our feet and seats were cooled by the pooling residue of the wake. The river smelled of all that had washed into it—an earthy compost of flora and fauna, living and dead—from the yak grazing grounds of the Tibetan Plateau to the tilled vales of Yunnan province.

At distant intervals, riverine villages, or *bans*, were camouflaged as tawny lines of thatch intruding on the verdant forest. Fishing huts, lean-tos of bamboo and thatch, no bigger than a dog's house, appeared on long sweeps of floury beach.

On the port side in Laos, small herds of broad-horned water buffalo rambled down the beach for the cool of an afternoon wallow. Three monks appeared out of nowhere, racing down the beach on bicycles as they gilded the landscape, flowing in sheets of saffron.

On the starboard side in Burma's Shan State, pack horses drank from a glassy pool of jade. After independence from the British in 1948, instability

reduced Burma from its position as the world's top exporter of rice to leading in opium instead. Then, as the CIA began using the opium-growing tribes of the region to fight their battles and spy on the Chinese, Burma's annual crop of opium grew from 40 tons a year to 400 tons by 1962, the seminal years of the Vietnam War. Today the output has reached 2,500 tons. Opiate revenues equal the sum from all of Burma's legal exports.

The captain approached a floating petrol-station at Mueng Mueng, killing the roar of the beast by placing his hand over its air intake. Stopped, we slowly unfolded our battered bodies from the snug confines of the boat. The captain motioned us into another boat. Meanwhile, one of the dockhands moved our packs and bungy-corded them in a shallow space on the needle-nosed bow of our fresh Mekong missile.

Mueng Mueng is known as a restaging point on the river, a place to change boats and drivers in some unwritten territorial accord, money and drugs no doubt playing a role.

A few miles south of Mueng Mueng, with the Mekong in a dry season recession, a rice barge was stuck mid-river on a spit of sand. At least 20 boys and men with blackened skin were stripped to their underwear, employing their collective muscle and engineering say-so to rock it loose. Farther downriver, a sleeping fisherman, drifting idly on a raft of lashed bamboo, never flinched when we screamed past and almost swamped him. Only a few minutes had passed when we got our karmic justice—washboarding across the wake of a passing cargo barge, in rapid turns catching air and landing in spine-crushing jolts. The barge was flying the boundary-state flags of China, Laos, Burma, and Thailand, chugging north to the Chinese border.

Soon we approached a turn in the river where the mocha-tinged Mekong bent to the east in a long sweep of fast shallow water. A sprawling, whitewashed building the size of Bangkok's Grand Palace loomed from the prosperous shores of Thailand. To the west was Burma: a narrow tongue of secondary forest jutting meekly from the mouth of the Ruak River as it merged with the Mekong. To the east, hugging the rustic shoreline of Laos, was a shoal of empty rice barges waiting for late spring rains to lift them from the dry-season doldrums. Bobbing there in the middle of the river we found ourselves in the watery bull's eye of the Golden Triangle.

The region was given its name by a senior State Department official in 1971 on the eve of Richard Nixon's visit to China. The term whitewashed China's major role in the cultivation and distribution of opium and heroin, impugning just Thailand, Burma and Laos.

This junction was the site of the Opium War of 1967, a two-day clash that pitted the world's greatest drug kingpins in a three-way battle recounted by such authors as Ed Gargan, in *The River's Tale*. Khun Sa, the self-described "King of the Golden Triangle," led his Mong Tai army in a pack-train of 300 mules loaded with 16 tons of opium to the nearby village of Ban Khwan. Moving up from the south in Thailand were the dusty remnants of Chiang Kai-shek's army, the Kuomintang, or KMT, crumpled 20 years before in China. Now they wanted to reclaim their sovereignty in the Triangle. From the east, General Ouane Rattikone, commander of the Royal Laotian Army from 1965 to 1971, moved his army in. The CIA was friendly with all three parties, and may well have puppeteered their showdown.

Khun Sa's shipment was worth millions of dollars and was destined for delivery at General Ouane's refinery in Huay Xai. But a double-cross unfolded. General Ouane wanted it all and dispatched his air force of T-28s bombers, unleashing 250-pound bombs and CBU's, or cluster bomb units, killing men and mules on all sides. Tony Poe later complained, "For two or three days you couldn't go in there, it smelled so bad from the putrefied dead mules."

With his American planes and ordnance, General Ouane trumped the carbines and machine guns of Khun Sa and the KMT. He shipped the booty to his refinery in Huay Xai, processing the raw opium into his trademarked Double Globe heroin. From there, the heroin was often transhipped by Air America, the CIA-operated airline, to GIs in Vietnam and Thailand and on to the US, with some 750,000 addicts.

Our next stop should have been Huay Xai, but unexpectedly we pulled into a floating petrol station at Xiangchai. The canny captain and complicit friend he brought along from Mueng Mueng motioned us out of the boat. Slow to smell the stench of bait-and-switch, I stayed in the boat taking notes and Simon crossed a couple of other fast boats to get to the dock and smoke a multi-colored Marlboro Light. Soon, a man who spoke decent English

arrived and casually informed us a taxi was waiting up the road and would take us on to Huay Xai. This was not our agreement.

In the Lao language, *jai yen* means “cool heart.” Lao people, including swindling fast-boat captains, don’t scream and shout and show anger. Raising one’s voice is just bad form in Laos.

I knew as much. But I detonated with a resounding “Bull! Shit!” They all looked at me as one person—frozen faces in a wax museum—and melted into embarrassed laughter. Simon, jolted out of his stoned reverie by my 400-pound gorilla routine, played the reasonable, even-voiced foil. Miyamoto, favoring Lao-style reserve, was flat freaked out and didn’t utter a word.

In moments, after a spew of shouting and a threat to get the police, the grating refrain of “cannot” turned to the more pleasing expression “can do.” A new captain jumped into the boat, while the culpable one sheepishly, but with that evasive Lao smile on his face, gathered his belongings. With dampened spirits, I began feeling like a trouncing turd in the Mekong punch bowl.

In less than an hour, staring fixedly ahead, we made our way through several tricky shoals, before pulling up to the busy loading ramp on the east end of Huay Xai. Miyamoto was trying to find a ferry to cross the river to Chiang Khong, Thailand before the immigration office closed. He bade a hasty farewell and disappeared into a rickety snarl of boats and people. It had not been my finest hour: tea and a 20-minute palaver would have sealed the deal; bullying was way out of step.

Once in Huay Xai—home to General Ouane’s old heroin refinery—we found a guesthouse near the ferry crossing. Nearby, we settled in at an outdoor restaurant on the river and enjoyed Mekong catfish. Across the water, the lights of Chiang Khong twinkled merrily, advertising Thai prosperity to the dim and sleepy Lao town.

Thais proudly compare themselves to bamboo trees blowing in the wind: bending, leaning, never breaking, surviving. The roots of Thailand’s economic success today arguably lie in the 1860s. Bedeviled by Europe’s

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race to colonize Africa and Asia, the King of Siam came to terms with several scowling French man-o-wars anchored near Bangkok. Eventually sacrificing Laos and Cambodia, he saved his nation from the decades of colonization that afflicted the rest of Southeast Asia.

Besides practicing smart diplomacy, the Siamese succeeded by adopting from the West. They borrowed architecture from the colonial French, drove on the left side of the road like the British, sent young royals to Oxford and King Mongkut even offered elephants to Abe Lincoln to help him win the Civil War. Following World War II, after a century of leaning toward Western ways, and centuries more of confrontation with Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia, Thailand naturally aligned with the United States in the Vietnam War and the Indochinese conflict.

At least in economic terms, that alliance paid off. Today, Thailand has more trucks than Texas. McDonalds, KFC and Pizza Hut are as common as pagodas. It would take Vietnam 20 years of growth at eight percent to reach Thailand's current Gross Domestic Product. Sleepy Laos and Cambodia, if not raped of their forests and other valuable resources, might catch up in the next millennium.

Acceding to international pressure and local police action, the Thai hill tribes of the Golden Triangle now cultivate less than one percent of the world opium supply. And once again the Thai army is in a paramilitary alliance with the United States (DEA), this time to combat the Wa militia, the latter-day drug lords of Burma.



The next morning we started off early. In head-snapping acceleration, the prow sliced to the south before cutting to the east. We roared straight into a rising sun, spraying the water in a thousand glints of gold and silver. Long pirogues, choked with rows of people, plied the river in gray silhouettes.

The morning was going by swimmingly until we rounded an elbow of the river cordoned in rocks and were blasted by an unmistakable smell: putrefying flesh. "Water buffalo," I announced knowingly.

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Soon I spotted the bloated carcass, salmon pink, 50 yards ahead on the starboard side. Simon chimed in: "If that's a water buffalo, why is it wearing a shirt and trousers?" I did a double-take.

"Whoooa Nellie! We got a dead man floating," I declared, semaphoring to Homphan, our captain, to stop the boat so we could pull the body from the water. He furrowed his brow, flashed that evasive Lao smile, shook his head. He would leave it as food for the fish.

What is the appropriate etiquette when one happens upon a dead man floating in the Golden Triangle? In England it was once a crime to witness a murder or to spot a corpse without making a "hue and cry." I suggested taking a picture. Simon replied with a glare.

Decomposition occurs rapidly in the tropics. The man floating had probably been killed upriver the previous day. Homphan had likely spotted the corpse already while taxiing up and down his route.

So on we went, shorn temporarily of our lively banter, glissading through a peaceful seeming river. Long pools gathered below the limestone rising around us, rock walls stitched in foliage. Then narrow straits interrupted—huddles of large boulders prickled with bamboo poles dragging fish nets. On both sides of the river, palisades of bamboo sheltered a patchwork of vegetable gardens. More bouquets of plumed bamboo arched to the water in graceful lines, while Irish-green banana fronds fell like tresses of untamed hair. A rice barge rolled past, followed by a long passenger boat prowed with the pleasing sight of monks, with a rainbow canopy of parasols shading their shaved heads.

We arrived in Pakbeng, where several fast boats were sandwiched against the floating dock, heaped with crates of eggs, sacks of chili peppers and hefty bundles of sugar cane. But with the many western goodies for sale—Classic Lay's Potato Chips, Kit Kat chocolate, Pringles, Juicy Fruit, Marlboros, and Coca-Cola—it seemed a floating 7-Eleven.

Having been to Pakbeng on several occasions, I knew there would be police lurking around the floating dock—a good spot for all sorts of black market high jinks. The dead man floating seemed like an event they might want to

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know about, yet each time I caught Homphan's eye, then pointed to the men in uniform standing two feet away, he flashed his no-can-do smile, shaking his head left to right. Making no hue and cry, we kept our sighting to ourselves.

Killing time, we shimmied across a wobbly plank from the dock and climbed like goats up the steep pitched scarp to Pakbeng's high street. The street affords a panorama of the crowded dock, the river and an arc of showy fast boats moored nose-first along the bow-shaped beach, like some Corvette rally in Appalachia. Standing in the same spot on previous trips, I had been approached by young men selling opium, often with police in full view and watching.

The opium peddlers had taken a break and given way to lawless timber merchants, loading fresh-cut colonnades of teak, the dismantled artifacts of an ancient forest cathedral, on a barge destined for Thailand or China. With the wholesale degradation of 80 percent of Southeast Asia's primary forest, such a sight is as ghastly as walking into a Hong Kong apothecary and seeing a jar full of 20 tiger penises—knowing there are less than 5,000 tigers left in the wild.

Soon we were back on the river. Homphan turned his bottle of energizing red syrup, the original Red Bull, bottoms-up for two or three last sips. Several small pirogues weaved in and out of boulders checking nets and removing their spare catches, before untangling the white snarl of filament. Hard to say what might get caught in those big nets.

Downriver from Pakbeng, we could smell traces of smoke. It was the early spring, the end of the swidden season, when the forests are dry and the mountains of Laos are set afire by the hill tribes who practice slash-and-burn agriculture. Swidden farming, the polite term for it, is the oldest method of organic farming. All it takes is a man's ax to fell the trees, a woman's scythe to cut bushes, and a dibble stick to punch seed-holes in the ground. No plowing, irrigation or fertilizer needed.

In Laos, the trees and bushes are cut in January and February. After removing raw materials of value—hardwoods, bamboo, medicinal herbs, bird eggs, fruit, spices and so on—they use dry bamboo for tinder and burn

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the place to a toast. The charred remains are cleared of stumps and boulders, and left to fertilize the soil with ash, the better to grow dry rice, maize, sundry vegetables, fruits, medicinal plants. Four or five years of farming drains the topsoil of its nutrients, and the swiddeners move on. In 20 years' time, the ground will rejuvenate.

We couldn't see the fires but soon the air whitened in a thin fog. Flakes of ash flew by, engulfing us like a snow flurry. Then it cleared, and we glided past two elephants working in tandem on the south side of the river. At the command of their mahouts, they hurled columns of teak onto a barge. The pachyderms had helped clear the nearby jungle, hauling the wood to the long stretch of sand bar.

Hamphan stopped the boat to take a break on a sand spit, shucked his clothes, shampooed his hair, and submerged in the cool wash of the Mekong. We dawdled on the white shore smoking a spliff, drowsily trying to get our minds around the fate of the dead-man-floating. Who was he, and what had he done to land in the river? Were his executioners anyone we had met that day?

Riding on toward Luang Prabang, we came to the river's picturesque confluence with the Ou, a populous tributary that originates in a mountainous wedge between China and Vietnam. We had reached the pockmarked limestone façade of the Pak Ou Caves.

Beginning in the first millennium, the two main caves—Tham Ting, a vaulted den opening like a gothic mouth to the river and Tham Phum, 100 yards up a winding set of steps, hidden from the river in a shadow of trees—became sites for worship of the animist spirits known locally as *phi*. Martin Stuart-Fox, a leading academic of Lao history and culture, explains the Lao need to propitiate the *phi*:

"In the Lao worldview, opposites interpenetrate: illusion and reality, spirits and human being, jungle and cleared land. For the Lao Lum peasantry, the forest was a fearful place of danger to be avoided. But its demons could be vanquished by those with the requisite merit, and whom divine forces assisted. The supernatural was taken for granted... ghosts and phi were an unquestioned part of everyday life for the Lao."

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Around 400 years ago, the cave's *phi* figures were replaced with Hindu statues and wooden images of Buddha. The two caves now house over 4,000 Buddha icons, strewn across the earthen floor like a minefield for the demons, ghosts and praying Buddhists to cross.

Standing on the winding steps in the dank caves, the Buddha images showed a variety of meaningful gestures, or *mudras* as they are called in Sanskrit. But here they were mostly fashioned with arms stretched down at the side and palms faced inward—the “calling for rain” *mudra*, an understandable focus of worship for a people who depend on the Mekong's fecundity.

Legend has it the kings of Lan Xang in the 16th century began paying an annual visit to the tutelary statues in the caves. Royal patronage ended only in 1975, when the Pathet Lao took power. During the three-day Pi Mai festival in April, the Lao lunar new year, pilgrims still travel upriver from the Buddhist holy city and ancient imperial capital of Luang Prabang to worship. As part of that ceremony, they give the dusty statues a ritual wash for the coming year.

Soon we were unloading at the dock and immigration office west of Luang Prabang. After registering with the police, under the duress of monopoly pricing, we hired the only *tuk-tuk* available to shuttle us the three or four miles into Luang Prabang.

We checked into our guesthouse, and then wasted no time in telling the Lao manager and staff about the floating corpse. “Why will no one pull him from the water?” I hued and cried.

After consulting bystanders, the manager said, “Maybe man not so good; he into drugs. Okay leave in the river.”

There is logic to this, in the Lao context. In the Golden Triangle, frontier justice and ethics rule; death is no idle prankster. Beyond this, Lao people fear places where demons and ghosts dwell—especially the evil spirits haunting the bloated corpse of an outlaw.

Perhaps the man's violent fate began and ended with opium. We later learned the Thai army had been fighting the Wa militia in the Triangle area

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in an attempt to stop the flow of narcotics. The Wa—not so long ago a tribe of headhunters and now armed with AK-47s and old American M-16s—are the main producers of opium cultivated in Burma. Ten Wa militiamen had been reported killed in one of many skirmishes over several days while we were there. (A year later, traveling on the same stretch of river with my wife, we came upon another neglected corpse, a man with a gaping hole in his back.)

Simon and I ended our day by trying to bury the dead man's mystery under the shadow of Golden Triangle poppies. We listened to Bob Dylan twanging *Absolutely Sweet Marie*, his gnomic epitaph on karma: "...to live outside the law you must be honest." America and the CIA are finished with their secret war in Laos. Tony Poe is nothing more than a good story. But descendants of their former accomplices still float down the Mekong.