

Letter to the editor: Ratanawan monastery reflects a globalizing Isaan

written by กองบรรณาธิการ | October 1, 2015

This weekend I went to Nakhon Ratchasima (Korat) to attend a community-based ceremony called Gratitude to the Teacher at Ratanawan Monastery. Located on a hilltop amid perennial green forest, it is considered a forest-tradition temple, a sub-category of Theravada Buddhism. This type of tradition is interspersed throughout Isaan — you may be familiar with Luang Pu Man Phurithatto, who made a debut of forest-tradition Buddhism in the region. Exceptional is the fact that roughly half the monks are of non-Thai origin, a number of whom are Caucasian. As such, the locals always call Ratanawan “wat phra farang” (temple of foreign monks). I have come here several times and am moved by the rites, be it monastic or lay.

What stands out the most is the racial diversity there. I noticed young ceremony-participants—in teenage years—who appeared Caucasian while their female parent looked Thai. They must have been children of couples with transnational marriages. The picture evokes part of the books on the Vietnam War I had been reading prior to settling this anthropological field trip. Historically, it was through the concentration of US bases in Isaan that allowed for intimate bonds with the locals. Since then transnational marriage, preferably with Western-looking men—or “farang” in Thai vernacular—has become ubiquitous to the extent that plenty of female villagers wish to marry “farang.”

The abbot of Ratanawan is a foreigner, as are plenty of monks there, and can speak English — the main lingua franca. To me, he acts as a cultural intermediary, ushering in people of the West and the East together into the same community. Mixed-blood families, as observed, are keen to lend a helping hand to monastic chores; informed of special ceremonies where the crowd is expected, they organize makeshift almshouses, giving out free foods to attendees and visiting nearby villagers. It shows a growing locality derived from international co-operation. In addition, there were 10-odd Chinese-speaking people. Knowing Chinese and overhearing their conversation, I recognized their accent, which suggests their homeland was of the South Sea, namely Malaysia and Singapore. They communicated with the abbot in English. I realized that they were the same group I had seen at Ratanawan in early May this year when I had visited. Not only are they spiritually committed to forest-tradition Buddhism, but they also furnish support. I recognized the Chinese name as the chairman of the ceremony, an acolyte, acclaimed throughout loudspeakers on that day.

Isaan in fact comes to my attention since the community is expanding to embrace cosmopolitanism. And because its people account for majority of Thais, I believe, the region is significant in determining Thailand’s trajectory. Here, the factor of “temple” is important. Important, because, referring to Ratanawan, it is now taking a vital role in globalizing Isaan. The locals themselves can entertain global elements, from language to ideology, while at home. I am often very surprised that more and more Isaanners can speak English—good English. It is decent proof of Isaan approaching globalism.

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