

SPECIAL: Isaan folk tales (part four)

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In our third week of publishing folk tales from Isaan, first published more than half a century ago, *The Isaan Record* takes you today to Maha Sarakham Province for a sad tale of witchery that turns out to be not so sad, and the story of a bad son who turned to religious works to atone for his grievous treatment of his royal parents.

Story 7: The Girl Who Weaves Silk at Night

NANG YAI VILLAGE IS ON THE EDGE OF THE TOWN OF MAHA SARAKHAM. A CANAL flows through the village, and in one place there is a pool in the canal. The pool is also named Nang Yai. The people in the village tell this story of how their village and the pool got their names.

Many years ago before there was a village, two families lived on the edge of the canal. Both families were very small. In the first family there were only a mother and her son named Jum. In the second family there were only a father and his daughter named Yai. The two families were rice farmers. They worked together because they were good neighbors. When they were old enough, Jum and Yai were married.

Jum and Yai were very happy together, and they built a new house on the canal between the houses of their parents. One day Jum had to go to Khon Kaen on some business. Before he left, he told Yai, "I will be gone for several days. If you need any help, my mother will be glad to help you."

Yai replied, "Thank you, Jum, but I do not think that I will need any help."

But Jum was not sure, so he told his mother, "While I am gone, will you make sure Yai is all right. She is young, and she should not be alone." Then Jum said the same thing to Yai's father.

That night Jum's mother heard a noise coming from Jum's house. She looked out of her window and saw a light coming from Yai's room. The noise was coming from Yai's room too.

Jum's mother wondered what Yai was doing, and the next morning she asked Yai. "What did you do last night, Yai?"

Yai replied, "I did not do anything." Jum's mother did not believe her, but she could not say anything.

The next night and every night that followed, Jum's mother saw the light and heard the noise coming from Yai's room. Every morning she asked the same question, "What did you do last night, Yai?" And every morning Yai gave the same reply, "I did not do anything."

Jum's mother did not know why Yai was lying to her. So the last night before Jum returned, she went over to Jum's house and looked through a hole in the wall into Yai's room. She saw Yai sitting in the middle of the room. There was a loom in the room, and Yai was weaving silk. She used her hand to pull the new silk thread from her mouth! Jum's mother was very surprised when she saw Yai pulling the thread from her mouth. She could not believe it, so she looked again. The silk was not ordinary, it was silver and gold! When Jum's mother saw that, she shouted, "Oh! Yai, what are you doing?"

Suddenly, Yai's room was completely dark, and the noise had stopped, Jum's mother could not make Yai come out of her room, and so she returned to her home. She decided Yai must be a witch.

When Jum returned, his mother told him what she had seen: "Every night there was a light in Yai's room, but when I asked her why, she would not tell me. Last night I went to your house and I saw Yai weaving. She was weaving silk, but the thread did not come off a spool, it came out of her mouth, and it was silver and gold. ...Jum, you must be very careful, Yai is a witch."

Jum did not know whether to believe his mother or not, so he quickly returned home. He looked under his house for the loom. It was not there, but that was where the loom had always been. He went into his house and looked into Yai's room. Yai was not there, but part of her loom was. Jum began to wonder, "Can it be that Yai is really, a witch? How will I find out?"

When Yai returned, home, Jum asked her, "Yai, what did you do each night?"

Yai would not answer Jum, she looked angrily at him. Jum thought, "Now I believe my mother, Yai is a witch." So he said, "Yai, you cannot live in this house any more. You will not answer my questions and you have lied to my mother. Leave, I never want to see you again."

Yai was very sad, but she did not cry. She walked out of the house slowly, and all day long she walked around the town. She would not talk to anyone, not even her father. That evening she went to the pool in the canal. She jumped into it and drowned.

When her father heard this he told Jum, "You have killed my daughter. You would not trust her, you believed your mother more than your wife. Yai was faithful to you, but you were not faithful to her. And now she is dead." Then Yai's father left; no one ever saw him again.

Jum returned to his house, he was very sad. He looked for Yai's loom, but it was entirely gone. He could not find it anywhere. He thought, "If Yai was weaving, there will be some cloth somewhere," but he could not find any. Jum was very lonely and worried. He did not know if Yai was a witch or not. He could not work anymore, he walked around the little village all of the time. Even at night he did not stop walking.

One moonlit night Jum walked by the pool where Yai had drowned. He looked into the water, and it looked as if Yai were weaving in the pool. Jum ran to get his neighbors, and when they looked into the pool, they saw the same thing.

No one knew what to believe. Every moonlit night, however, they could see Yai weaving in the pool; but at day, there was nothing in the pool but water and a few fish. Jum changed after that. Now he was happy and he did not worry any more. He became a wealthy farmer, and many years later he told his children the sad story of his first wife.

So the pool was named after Yai, it is called Yai's pool (or in Thai: Gud Nang Yai), and the village was named Yai top (or in Thai: Ban Nang Yai). Today if you go to the pool on a moonlit night, you can see Yai weaving too. Well, what do you think Yai really was? Jum knew, but he never told anyone, not even his children.

Story 8: The Three Buddhas in Kantarawichai

HAVE YOU EVER BEEN TO KANTARAWICHAI? IT IS A DISTRICT OF MAHA SARAKHAM Province; Kantarawichai is a beautiful little town on the road to Kalasin. In it are some famous statues of the Buddha. The people of Kantarawichai tell this story about these holy statues:

A

Hundreds of years ago, the Northeast was ruled by the Cambodian kings. This was before the Thai people came here. Kantarawichai was a very important town, in those days. It had a ruling prince and a princess. One of the princes was named Phranong Phratumman. He and his wife had a son named Tao Singh Toh.

Tao Singh Toh was a cruel young man. The prince and the princess were afraid of their son. They thought he would be a very bad prince. They did not want him to become the prince when they died.

When Tao Singh Toh heard that his parents did not like him, he was very angry. One day he ordered some soldiers to capture his father and put him in jail. The soldiers obeyed Tao Singh Toh because they were also afraid of him. So the Prince of Kantarawichai was put in the jail.

Then Tao Singh Toh said, "Now, I am the Prince of Kantarawichai. The old Prince, my father, has been put in jail because he was very evil." But the people did not believe him because they knew the Prince was good. Tao Singh Toh wanted his father to die, but he was afraid to kill him. So he said, "I will not give him any food, and then if he dies, it will not be my fault! I will not let anyone, except my mother, visit him, so, no one can bring him food."

When the Princess visited her husband in the jail she brought him food. Tao Singh Toh learned that his mother was bringing food with her. So he said, "You cannot visit the Prince for thirty days. The Prince knew that he would soon die because he had no food to eat. He called his son to him and said, "Soon, I will die, and you will be the Prince of Kantarawichai. But everything that you do will become evil." And three days later the Prince died.



B

Tao Sing Toh was very happy. He was the Prince now. But he was still angry at his mother, so he ordered the soldiers to kill her. They had to obey him because he was the Prince.

Everything that Tao Singh Toh did turned to evil just as his father had warned him.

He tried very hard to do good things, but everything he did was ruined. The people in Kantarawichai laughed at their Prince. They said, "Our Prince may be powerful, but he is foolish. He cannot do anything right."

This made Tao Singh Toh ashamed of himself. He was very sorry that he had been so cruel to his parents. He wondered what he could do that would be good.

Finally, he sent for an astrologer. The astrologer told Tao Singh Toh, "You have been very evil, and you are being punished. You must build two statues of the Buddha. One will be for your father, and the other will be for your mother. The two statues should be very beautiful, and they should be built in different places. When you build these statues, you will show that you love your parents, and your evil will go away."

Tao Singh Toh believed the astrologer, and he built the two statues very carefully. He wanted to be sure that they were very beautiful. The statue Tao Singh Toh built for his father is in the center of

the town. And the statue he built for his mother is on the edge of the town.

Still, Tao Singh Toh was not happy, for he knew that he had been very evil. He told his people that when he died they should bury him in the forest which is far from the town. Over his grave he asked them to build another statue of the Buddha. When he died, the people buried him in the forest, and they built a statue of a reclining Buddha over his grave. Today the forest, is called Don Phra Non, which means "the Forest of the Reclining Buddha."

C

This story happened many years ago, and if you go to Kantarawichai today, you can still see the two standing Buddhas. One is in the center of the town, and it is under a little pavilion. It is very holy, and many people worship it every year. The other Buddha is on the edge of the town. You might not see it because a big tree is growing up around the statue.

But the statue of the reclining Buddha in the forest is lost. Some people say it is made of gold. But no one will try to find it, because the people believe that it has a curse upon it. The people believe that the spirit of Tao Singh Toh still lives in the grave. The spirit is very evil, just like the Prince was so many years ago. If anyone sees the statue in the forest, they will die in the same day because of the evil spirit.

So the statue is lost; sometimes people try to find it. Only a few years ago three or four men from Bangkok went into the forest to find the statue. That evening they returned, and said, "We have found the statue of the reclining Buddha. It is made of gold. We will take you to see it tomorrow." But before they could take anyone there, they all died.