



Southeast Asia

CULTURE

Life in Rural Thailand

In this reading, a rural Thai couple who live about 40 miles north of Bangkok on the Chao Phraya River, tell about their country and their lives.

We meet Jaran Pomwat at the sawmill where he works. We see that there are hundreds of sawmills next to each other on the banks of the river.

“Nearly half of Thailand’s 500,000 square kilometers (198,000 square miles) is covered with forest, mostly of hardwoods like teak,” Jaran Pomwat tells us. The timber comes from the north and is transported by river, or road to the sawmills. Outside the sawmills there are thousands of tree trunks piled up together. It is an impressive sight.

“In the old days,” Jaran says, “elephants used to help with the forestry. Nowadays, it is mostly done by machines. Sometimes, on particularly difficult ground, elephants are still used to move the tree trunks.”

Jaran takes us into the mill and shows us where he works. He uses a circular saw to cut the trunks up into planks. “There are about 200 people working here, and there are as many women as there are men . . .,” he says.

Some of the timber produced here is sold abroad. “Thailand exported much more teak in the past than it does nowadays. In this country other types of trees are used more often than teak. Redwood costs only half as much and is popular for building and furniture-making,” he explains.

We leave the mill and drive the short distance to the Pomwats’ home. We walk along a path between tall grasses and trees. . . . The Pomwats’ house is built in the side of the broad Chao Phraya, the River of Kings. Four small rivers which rise in the hills in the north of Thailand, merge to form the Chao Phraya. It is Thailand’s most important river.

The Pomwats’ house is built on stilts because of the danger of flooding, and is made of wood from the local sawmills. Beneath the house there is space enough for keeping hens and ducks. There are several similar houses nearby, with ladders leading up into them. We take our shoes off at the bottom of the ladder and climb up after Jaran. Taking your shoes off before entering a house, or temple, is a Thai custom.

Pensri, Jaran’s wife, greets us warmly, holding Pontip, their three-year-old daughter. Prasit and Tornygoo, Pensri’s parents, greet us too. They live in the house as well. We all sit down on the floor in the main room and talk. The house is small Through the open windows we have a view down the river, where we can see the family’s boat tied up at the water’s edge. . . .

We are sitting together on the floor in the main room when Pensri brings in the supper. . . . We are about to eat the family’s favorite dish, Pat Preeowahn. This is made with fresh shrimp, pineapple, and garlic. . . . “We usually serve it with rice,” Pensri tells us. . . . Jaran goes and fetches

us water from a large jar, in the corner of the room. It is rainwater that has been collected, and is the family's only source of drinking water.

We all talk together over the meal. . . . We ask Pensri what she wants for Pontip. "She shall have a good education and then marry a man who can provide for her. I don't mind whether she makes good use of her education or whether looks after a home and family, as I have, she says.

It is getting late. We tell Jaran that we must leave. He shows us to the door and shines a flashlight onto our shoes at the bottom of the ladder. We thank the family for the delicious meal, and for spending their time with us. Then we climb down the ladder, collect our shoes and wave our good-byes to the Pomwat family.

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Understanding What You Read After you have finished reading the selection, answer the following questions.

1. What resource does Jaran Pomwat reveal is important in Thailand's economy?

2. Why do you think many sawmills are located on the Chao Phraya?

3. From where do Pomwats get their drinking water? Why would they not use the other source of water available to them?

4. What clues does the reading give about the roles of women in Thai society?

5. What do you think is happening to the rainforest in Thailand? Explain.

Activity

Make a drawing the Pomwats' house and its surroundings.