

NEWS IN BRIEF: Red District Movement Expands into Khon Kaen

KHON KAEN – This past Sunday morning, Red Shirt politicians, DJs, local leaders, and hundreds of villagers gathered in Ubolratana district's Khok Glang Nong Lai village to celebrate the opening of 68 newly minted Red Villages, as well as the inauguration of the province's first official Red District.

“I hereby open this Red District, [made up of] Villages for Democracy that are safe from drugs and that have strong community economies,” Khon Kaen MP Thanik Masripitak said to cheers and the nearby boom of fireworks. Mr. Thanik is the Pheu Thai MP spearheading the movement's expansion into Khon Kaen.



Villagers from Nong Lai Village receive a blessing as they represent their community in a procession that officially marked their village's opening as Red.

Mr. Thanik's remarks reflect the same platforms that the movement has in its birthplace, Udon Thani. There too, the

movement's chief architect and local Red Radio DJ, Ms. Ratanawan Suksala, [began opening Red Districts last year](#) not just as a show of organizational power (as its earlier incarnation, the Red Village movement), but to help fight drug use and to ensure local economic stability.

But where in Udon Thani many of the villages in these Red Districts had been previously inaugurated as Red, in Khon Kaen's Ubolratana district, prior to Sunday's ceremony only three villages had been established. This sudden surge of support, Red District Officer and local businessman Sirisak Nojit explains, is a sign of the country's changing political tides.

"Before people were scared [to show themselves], but now time has passed and people are showing that they're red," he said.

Here in Ubolratana, at least, that showing has been quite strong. At least 70-80% of a district's inhabitants must agree to a Red title before the district can be inaugurated, Mr. Sirisak explained. And in Ubolratana, he said, the figure was closer to 90%, with every village collectively approving the informal door-to-door referendum.

In the coming months, more Khon Kaen Red Shirts will be showing their colors. Phra Yun district is scheduled to be inaugurated on February 19, to be followed soon after by the Nai Muang sub-district of Khon Kaen city.

[Note February 20, 2012: Though Ubolratana was inaugurated as a Red District by MP Thanik, the Federation of Red Villages does not currently recognize the district as Red.]

Education Reform Finds a Home in Khon Kaen

Guest Contributor: Lukas Winfield

KHON KAEN – Thirty-some elementary students pick through a mountain of trash, carefully selecting old milk boxes, discarded spools of yarn, broken necklaces and other landfill gems for an art project. They are students from the local Non Chai Municipal Elementary School who have been studying Khon Kaen's waste system which has led them inevitably to the overflowing mountain of trash known as the Khambon landfill, some 20 kilometers outside of Khon Kaen. They have come to see firsthand the impact of waste and the consequences of urban consumption.

Non Chai has a slightly unorthodox approach to learning. Rather than reading textbooks or listening to lectures like many of their peers, students here are taken on field trips throughout the year to learn through experience.

Non Chai is one example of a larger move in Khon Kaen towards alternative educational models. In recent years, the city's Mayor Peerapon Pattabapeeradech has been vocally supportive of this movement, often spearheading reforms himself.

Seven schools have opened "Big Picture" classrooms which are offered as an option to struggling students. These classrooms have the academic freedom to ignore national benchmarks and create their own integrated curricula based off of student interests. Five years ago, the Khon Kaen Education Initiative (KKEI) was founded and it soon began funding and providing resources to provincial teachers experimenting with and developing more student-centered teaching.

"[Alternative] education focuses on teaching students how to learn rather than just handing them information," explains

Chuntinton Huttapanom, a vice-director working at Non Chai. She arrived at the school in October of 2011 and began pushing for reforms of the existing traditional model in favor of a more alternative model. For her, this is a radically different approach to education in Khon Kaen, where rote education is almost absolute. It is the norm for teachers to be seen as the holders of knowledge in front of whom students are expected to sit quietly and listen unconditionally.

Ms. Chutinton envisions a school that deconstructs the teacher-student hierarchy present in many Thai schools and, instead, prioritizes developing students' "learning skills" (i.e., critical thinking, problem solving, relationship building and more) over rote memorization and reading and writing drills. She hopes to ensure students' capacities for self-motivation so that they can continue their own education after they graduate. She points out, "just because you graduate doesn't mean you have to stop learning new things or new skills."

Ms. Chutinton cites her old classroom at Nong Waeng Municipal Elementary School in Khon Kaen as an example of a successful alternative education model. When teachers were having a hard time motivating students to attend classes, she decided to change her classroom environment as an experiment. In an attempt to make her teaching more relevant and engaging for her students, she decided she would liven up her math, science and English subjects by integrating trips to local gardens, camps and even the city landfill. The result was a rise in student attendance from an average of 70% to 95% and a class that was eager in their studies.

While the municipality has been supportive of the movement towards alternative education and at times has led it, direction from the municipal government has been inconsistent and, at times, even conflicting.

Schools have received heavy pressure to improve test scores on

regional and national tests like the Ordinary National Educational Test (O-NET), on which [Khon Kaen province placed 47 out of 72](#) during 2010 for Thai language skills. In response, schools such as Non Chai have stopped teaching during their last period of the day and instead focus only on tutoring for standardized tests. Tutoring has even extended into the weekend with students coming to school on Saturdays.

Sanya Makarin, a high school teacher at Non Chai, complains that the focus on testing has restricted his ability to teach and his students' ability to learn. "It disturbs the class and it disturbs their learning process," he says. Mr. Sanya explains that the pressure is not just about standardized testing, but also about following the municipality's flagship school, Suan Sanook, which focuses on more traditional educational practices.

At Suan Sanook, teachers focus on literacy competence and student obedience. Students are taught through rote learning; teachers lecture, students are expected to listen. This approach has been successful as students here regularly test higher than students from other schools and, often, Suan Sanook's students rank within the top three places at academic contests.

Its success has made it a model for other schools within the municipality. The school has grown accustomed to hosting visiting teachers who have come to learn how to copy their successful framework.

"Suan Sanook students can read and write and when they compete, they win. The weakness [of this model] is that people have many different learning styles. And not everyone can be the winner, students must learn compassion" points out Ms. Chutinton of Non Chai school. While she acknowledges the strengths of the Suan Sanook model, Ms. Chutinton criticizes it for being too focused on test scores and says it offers little room for student participation.

While the city's Mayor remains a strong voice in championing educators like Ms. Chutinton and Mr. Sanya, the future direction of Khon Kaen schools remains unclear. With Mayor Peerapon considering retirement, possibly as early as next spring, Ms. Chutinton admits, "I am worried a lot, I don't believe that the next [mayor] will understand alternative education like [Mr. Peerapon] does."

Lukas Winfield has worked in the field of education for the past five years. He currently teaches and organizes professional development for teachers in Khon Kaen.

Red Village Thwarted, a Community Divided

KHON KAEN – In Non Reuang, an unassuming Northeastern village located just 15 kilometers north of Khon Kaen city, fallow rice fields line pothole-ridden roads made dusty with windswept topsoil. Here, most residents are looking to have those roads repaved. Others are interested in having the local elementary school's bathrooms renovated. These are the daily concerns of a small provincial town in which everyone knows everyone else.

But on December 23, Non Reuang [made headlines](#) when a group of concerned citizens successfully torpedoed plans to establish the community as a Red Village, just one day before its proposed inauguration ceremony. A village-wide vote saw 160 votes cast against the Red Village's establishment and, as a result of a Red Shirt boycott, none cast in support.

The Red Village movement, conceived in the run up to last year's July 3 election, has seen hundreds of villages

throughout the Northeast name themselves “Red Villages for Democracy” in an attempt to demonstrate organizational power and scale. But in places like Non Reuang, the movement has strained community relations and deepened political divides.

The lead up to the village’s public referendum inspired unneighborly behavior of all kinds which has raised questions about the social net worth of redrawing rural landscapes into two-toned political maps. Red Shirts accuse the opposition group of voter intimidation, dissemination of libelous and misleading information, and even assaulting a Red Shirt supporter in front of the polling station. The opposition, on the other hand, claim that Red Shirts from other villages were brought in to artificially inflate support and that the Red Village movement is a Trojan Horse, the beginning of a Red conspiracy to dominate all levels of local government.

In light of all the squabbling and finger pointing that has come out of the last month, Village Leader and self-proclaimed “middle-man” Samran Srivichan has grown concerned that the disagreement seriously undermines the community’s well-being. “For the Red Shirts, [the Red flag of the Red Village movement] is a symbol of unity, but if everyone is not behind it, then it is not a unifying symbol,” he said. And to Mr. Samran, there are very practical advantages to having his community unified, or at the very least, capable of civility.

“Unity is very important for all of us,” he said. “If we want to build a house or a road, we can do it. We can work together. If we are not unified, then people are not willing to do this.”

Though Non Reuang is the first village in Khon Kaen to successfully oppose a Red Village’s establishment, Mr. Samran is certainly not the first to express concerns about the movement. In June of last year Army Chief Prayuth Chan-ocha, who is much despised amongst the Red Shirts for the May 2010 military crackdown that left dozens of unarmed Red Shirts

dead, [criticized the Red Villages](#) for their potentially destabilizing effects. Gen. Prayuth's emphasis on the importance of national unity can be heard in Mr. Samran's own criticisms. "I don't want there to be signs that break our unity," the village leader said. "We should just have flags and posters of the king and queen." Indeed, Mr. Samran has no fewer than 16 posters of King Bhumibol Adulyadej adorning the exterior walls of his home.

A voter for the Red Shirt-backed Pheu Thai government, Mr. Samran said that the opposition to the Red Village's establishment was partially due to poor procedure. Many complained that they did not know about the Red Shirts' plans until a mid-December village meeting devolved into shouts and name-calling. It was then that Mr. Samran proposed that the village hold a public referendum on the matter.

Though Ms. Ratanawan Suksala, a leading proponent of the Red Village movement in Isaan, told the Isaan Record last month that at least 70% of a given community must be in support of the Red Village in order for it to be inaugurated, the eleventh hour bickering in Non Reuang casts some doubt on the rigorousness with which that figure is assured, if at all.

Phaiboon Sornsakda, Mr. Samran's assistant, wondered if the Red Shirts thought the July 3 general election results were justification enough to inaugurate the village. "Around 70% of the village voted for Pheu Thai," he said. "We can vote for Pheu Thai politicians, but that doesn't mean we are voting for Red Shirts."

While Pheu Thai's most fervent supporters come out of the Red Shirt movement, the party's populist platforms also attract many votes from rural farmers who do not directly identify with the Red Shirt movement.

Despite Non Reuang's dispute, nearby Wang Taw village is set to be inaugurated as a Red Village later this month. For both

Mr. Paiboon and Mr. Samran, this should appease upset Non Reuang Red Shirt supporters and according to Mr. Samran, “that’s the end of the story.”

However, just 50 meters down the road, at a house lined with Red flags and whose walls are decorated with a photo collage of a Red Shirt rally, a group of Red villagers have more to say. Sanong Chaiyatha, easily the most outspoken Red Shirt in the village, considers the Wang Taw concession to be totally inadequate. She had wanted to found the Red Village in Non Reuang as a way to receive donations from the movement’s considerable largesse in order to fix the village’s crumbling roads and renovate the elementary school’s dilapidated bathroom. Now that the Red Village proposal has been decisively quashed, her village will have greater difficulty finding funds from the Red Shirt movement.

Nevertheless, Ms. Sanong said she would continue her search for funds elsewhere and, now, is left waiting. “Soon, I hope [Mr. Samran] will retire, so that a new village leader will make new decisions to help make the village a better place,” she said.

Though Non Reuang did not officially turn Red this December, it is now certainly a different place to live.

NEWS IN BRIEF: Foreign Retirees Find Unlikely Home in Rural Buriram

BURIRAM – After living in Switzerland for 18 years, Lanee Jaeger recently returned to her home village of Baan Na Phaeng

in Na Pho district to fulfill her Swiss mother-in-law's dream. On December 9, Ms. Lanee [officially opened](#) a foreigner village called Lanee's Residenz that sits on the fringes of the Isaan village where she was raised.

Lanee's Residenz, which hosts 13 houses arranged around a man-made lake, is currently home to six foreigners, some Swiss and some German. Ms. Lanee opened the village in the memory of her mother-in-law who had wanted to retire in Isaan, but only if she could among friends.

"This isn't a resort for helping *farang* men find Thai wives," said Ms. Lanee. "That is not the purpose of this village."

Though the region has a reputation for attracting *farang* men seeking Isaan spouses – last year [The New York Times reported](#) close to 11,000 foreign husbands in the Northeast – Lanee's Residenz boasts a different focus altogether. Her goal is to run a village that welcomes foreigners into a peaceful, affordable retirement plan.



Lanee's Residenz is located 85 kilometers north of Buriram city.

Such retirement communities of expatriates do currently exist, most prominently in Southern Thailand. In Phuket alone, one of the most popular foreigner destinations in the country, the provincial Immigration Office estimates that 20,000 of Phuket's 350,000 residents are expatriates. According to Ms. Lanee, her retirement village is the first of its kind in

Isaan.

Christa Maegerle, one resident, recently relocated from Phuket to Lanee's Residenz at the age of 68. "My head is clear, my health is okay and I wanted to decide by myself where to grow old," said Ms. Maegerle. "[People in Phuket] are afraid I'll miss the shops or my face massage! I don't miss them," she added.

Ms. Maegerle moved into Baan Na Phaeng foreigner village from Switzerland in October, before its official opening. Though she had never traveled to Isaan before, she is thankful for the opportunity to settle down here and cut spending.

"My health insurance each month in Switzerland is the same price as the cost of my whole life here each month," Ms. Maegerle explained.

Though there is the expectation that most foreigners have come to Isaan for a second chance at love – among the most common greetings to foreign men here is "Do you have a wife, yet?" – Ms. Maegerle has found something else entirely. "When you talk about Isaan in other parts of Thailand, people think you are crazy. But they have clearly never seen it before," said Ms. Maegerle. "I'm just so happy here."

Ms. Lanee also has high hopes that the foreigners in her village will establish a close relationship with the Isaan villagers right next door. In the past few weeks, the foreigners have been visiting the Isaan families in their traditional wooden houses, taking photographs of the rice harvest, and commissioning silk fabrics from the older generation of silk weavers.

Yanyong Yungthaisong, a 56-year-old silk weaver from Baan Na Phaeng, told The Isaan Record that she is delighted to meet the foreigners, and even more delighted to sell her silk directly to foreign customers. She claims the rest of her neighbors seem to feel the same way.

“For us old people, we won’t change our ways now. Silk is a part of us, we will make silk our entire lives,” said Ms. Yanyong when asked how the foreigners’ presence had affected her village. “But the teenagers seem to be changing. They are making themselves more modern, studying German sometimes. Some even use their English and act as guides for the foreigners, leading them around the village.”

With positive feedback from her guests and her home village, Ms. Lanee is hoping to expand her foreigner village. An advertisement for Lanee’s Residenz was recently produced by Swiss TV and will soon air in five languages in countries all over Europe. Ms. Lanee is hoping she will be able to accommodate for the anticipated demand.
