

## Family Life

The pace of life is slow here. But it would be too simple to call it laidback. As time here is indistinct, so the notions of work, domesticity and leisure are similarly less discrete. I am fortunate in being able to sleep ten or eleven hours each night. By the time I awaken the day, for everyone else, is already in full swing.

The villagers work in the fields and the forest, sometimes from sunrise. Depending on what crops they have planted they can have busy or quiet days. But they always have long days. Wood is to be chopped for the fire, water tanks to be filled, animals to be fed and their sties or huts cleaned, produce to be prepared, transported and sold. Meals are made of delicious, fresh ingredients, but that too takes preparation. Bamboo can be turned into many things: brooms, utensils, mats; it can be stripped for use whilst watching television or chatting to a neighbour. And if, after all that, one has free time, the steps and balcony can again be swept clean of the red dust that spreads everywhere.

As the sun descends, life moves upstairs. The village has electricity, but it is not as omnipresent as it initially seems. Some houses charge large batteries from the mains supply and then power household appliances from these batteries. The supply is finite, and far from seamless.

Villagers don't often visit other homes during the weekday evenings. Televisions are the main source of entertainment and information. Until about ten years ago there were only two families in the village with televisions and everyone would crowd into one or other of their homes to watch programmes together. Now, almost every home has a TV set (some even satellite television), and people watch in their family unit.

It is quite cold during the nights, though not cold enough to repel mosquitoes. And the atmosphere is still up near the hilltop. Sounds, to the visitor, are amplified - something falling from a tree onto the roof, the rustling of leaves, the padding of feet as a dog passes the hut take time to get used to. The cocks' crowing is considerably louder, but more familiar. The only soothing sound is that of raindrops on the roof, when tucked up in bed.

Benjamin and his family are constantly worried about me in the hut at night. The fire in the kitchen helps warm the upper floor of their house whereas the volunteer hut has no heating.

-Are you warm enough? Do you want extra blankets?

Actually, I'm using only half the blankets they gave me on arrival. I return the remainder quietly to Sang.

One afternoon early during my stay I am lying in the hut having an unearned afternoon snooze when I hear a motorbike pull up. Benjamin has gone to Mae Hong Son and hasn't had time to get there and back, but I'm too lazy to check it

out. Then I hear a voice - it is unmistakably Australian, yet softer and more courteous; its owner has been in Thailand a while I assume.

Aussie is a three-year veteran of the kingdom, former Tomato Village school volunteer, and occupant of a lakeside hut in Mae Hong Son - where he caught malaria. Confined to hospital, his spell teaching cut short, he took a recuperative break but is now back and ready for action. Funnily enough, as we sit drinking tea one of his first thoughts is about Benjamin's health.

-When I was here, Benjamin wasn't getting out much - to the farm or Mae Hong Son.

I haven't been there long enough to know what is normal.

-He says it's been the coldest ever winter here.

In fact, the locals feel that each successive winter is colder than the previous. Benjamin and his wife have full-blown colds while Sang has a runny nose. They consume enough medication to keep the dispensary working full time.

Three older children live elsewhere in the Mae Hong Son region. Now Sang shares her parents with two dogs, a kitten, three pigs and countless fowl. I try to count on my first afternoon here but lose track of the roosters, hens and chicks as they wander with the freedom of the unwitting carefree.

The father and baby pigs share one sty. The baby is still small enough to fit in the trough; at feeding time it climbs in and scoffs the food, blocking Father from eating until Baby has had its fill. Mother pig has a sty to itself; isolated since it ate two of its newborn babies. If the sty is a prison, this pig is one of those prisoners who spends daytime working out and night time planning escape. Early one evening, levering itself up the sty's railings, it executes a dashing leap for freedom. Mother soars up, up, but not away. With a crash its head hits the corrugated iron roofing, dislodging it onto the ground, but sending Mother crashing back to Earth inside the sty. Ten out of ten for effort, but freedom denied.

Sou is fourteen, tan and my kind of dog - quiet and peaceful. The eldest pet, it has a privileged mat on the balcony near the table; curling up there sociably at meal times. Attached to a post near the sties is a strong chain. This is for Bibi - strong, black and whose favorite expression is the exposed fang, saliva-dripping look of intimidation. It is mating season and, after sleeping off the heat of the day, packs of dogs roam the streets at night fraternising in a manner that would make Lord Byron envious. A bundle of pent-up testosterone, Bibi spends the nights whining pitifully to try and con its owners into letting it out, barking frenetically to attract the attention of passing dogs, and yanking the chain from the post - which makes a dark, middle of the night trip to the bathroom quite an experience.

At a mere four months, kitten Mon is the baby of the family, to be cuddled, teased and shown off. I don't often see Mon who prefers to sit by the kitchen fire; when it

does appear on the balcony, it stays away, glaring suspiciously at me - I seem to be the only person who doesn't flick its ears or tease it into chasing its tail.

As in all families everyone eats the same food, if not at the same time. Leftovers - be they rice, noodles, meat or vegetables are mashed into a sludge and fed to the animals. One has to eat quickly here as food is not left lying around for long. Meals are prepared as two or three dishes to serve oneself from; rice a part of every meal, even if another staple such as noodles or potato is served.

On the second morning, Benjamin asks me if there are any foods I don't like. I reply that everything is fine by me. Half an hour later, breakfast appears: rice and liver. I had forgotten about liver. My grandmother once tried to serve it to me as a young child. She never tried again. Even submerged beneath the strongest-tasting vegetables, the taste of liver induces in me a desire to cut out my tongue. But it's a cold morning and I'm hungry. I munch away, hiding each piece of meat under a large spoonful of rice. It doesn't fool my tastebuds and I manage to eat only about half. I'd be grateful even for chillies, but although Benjamin has just bought six months supply from a neighbour, there are none on my plate ("Volunteers no like spicy!").

Most of the food is grown up at the plantation farms - only meat, condiments and cold drinks need to be purchased. Some families buy young pigs and fatten them up. When one is slaughtered, they sell the various cuts to other families in the village.

Consisting of fresh ingredients, the meals here tingle from the competing flavours, and I realise that most of the food I ate in Chiang Mai was mono-flavoured, perhaps often even processed. This is also the first place in Asia where I find decent potato. Dinner brings a dish of boiled herbed potato that tastes delicious. There are small brown flecks nestled amongst the potato pieces. I recognise the leftover liver from breakfast. Diced, salted and lightly fried, it is now, to my surprise, almost palatable.