

Gold in the Mountains



Tucked high in the mountains of southern Laos, in a narrow valley at about 3,000 feet elevation, lies the remote twin hamlets called ‘Tangyeuy Village’. This is the home of the ‘Trieu’ ethnic group, and their recently organized beginning literacy class.

This was my first trip to visit the new literacy teacher Ms. Weekham (literally: ‘Golden Comb’). She had managed against all odds to attend literacy teacher training, and then organize a literacy class for pre-literate women upon her return.

Her hamlet is a full day’s walk on mountain tracks beyond the district centre, among the mountains which form the border between Laos and Vietnam, a distance of about 47 kilometers (over 28 miles). “If we leave at dawn we arrive at dusk. It is a full day’s walk when carrying a baby”, she explained.

Above: Teacher Weekham at dawn, ready to teach her 6 AM literacy class. She is still wearing the flip flops she used for the trek to and from the district to attend teacher training in January.

We traveled by pickup truck, as the rains had not yet made the roads impassible. After crossing miles and miles of thickly forested mountain ridges on steep slippery red clay roads, a narrow river valley suddenly appeared. Beautifully tended emerald green rice terraces curved around the winding river, and thatched roofed hamlets dotted the narrow valley.

Tangyeuy is nearly the last village at the end of the road. It is then a two or three day walk through the deep forest of the Vietnamese border. The twin hamlets of oval thatched roofs which form Tangyeuy are on opposite sides of the narrow valley, separated by hand cultivated rice terraces.

Ms. Weekham had joined our one-week training for new literacy teachers in January 2010. She made the trek together with her infant son and mother who came to help care for the baby throughout the training. It took her two full days to reach the provincial capital of Sekong Province, the first day on foot, the second day on the ancient truck which is the only transportation serving the district.

Ms. Weekham had managed to get a third grade education by attending a one-room school house in the neighboring village, making her one of the most educated women in her village. This qualified her to be selected as the literacy teacher, and to be called 'Teacher Weekham' after she completed the training and organized her literacy class.

She greeted us with the surprising news that her class was on the last lesson in our new beginning literacy book 1. However she had only received the books and started classes two months previously. We knew from experience that the classes would need to meet daily to progress through the book in 2 months- very unusual for a brand new class which had a scarcely literate teacher.

"We meet from 6-8 AM daily, Monday through Friday", she said decisively. "We have ten illiterate people in the two hamlets, but only four show up for class, all women. Of those, three come regularly." We soon found that Teacher Weekham was very resourceful. In addition, she had the full support of the village chief and village education committee. She had borrowed a field hut which was perched on stilts in the rice field, remodeled it with plank benches, and outfitted it with blackboard.

The whole village awoke with the sun shortly after 5 AM. 'Thud, thud, thud' resounded from every porch, as women with their wooden pestles worked to de-husk the rice for the day's meals. Then the students and teacher scrambled down the bank to the irrigation canals to wash their faces and swung themselves up the wooden posts into the adjacent hut. By 6 AM the literacy students were settled into their rice-field-literacy-hut classroom.

The literacy hut was very crowded, the floor had a big hole in front of the blackboard, and students had to take care when sitting on the planks to avoid a see-saw effect, as there were no nails. Yet it was an ideal haven for the women back-country scholars who were shy about learning how to read.

The teacher had three scholars, and they all managed to concentrate on the lesson despite the over-crowding. This was caused by over a dozen spectators who breathlessly watched as the lesson unfolded. Literacy class served as the best show in town. Children of all ages, mostly girls, crowded into the rafters to get a better view of the blackboard. Older women stood in the rice field below to catch the literacy lesson. They were careful not to distract the lesson- only those truly interested in literacy came.

The results of the class? We found that each of the women students could read every lesson in the book. We were astonished to find they were ready to proceed to the next level. The results were better than any of the classes we had visited to date. Their progress provided important information as we were field testing the new literacy materials. The Ministry of Education had requested that we specify how many hours it would take to finish Book 1 if the class were to meet daily. We had estimated two months, but most classes do not meet regularly. This was a small class, compared to the government guidelines of ten students per class. However the success was phenomenal.

Later in the day I visited the women students in their courtyards to test their reading- they read aloud through the entire book. Children and relatives crowded around. One woman had seven children including a nursing baby gathered around her. Another, a young widow aged 30, was joined by her four children. The 25-year old had both a toddler and a nursing baby in her lap.

The women were delighted with their new reading skills. They had never imagined they would be able to learn to read. They had never owned a book before, neither had their children. Relatives and children crowded around as the women learners read through their literacy books. The audience paid as much attention to the simple line illustrations and stories as people elsewhere would pay to a fascinating story book with glossy pictures.

I learned that the only households which owned books were those belonging to these literacy students. The children in the one-room village primary school had already returned their books to their teachers to be re-used the next year. These were in short supply: children shared 1 book for 11 students during the 2008-2009 school year, and 1 book for 5 students in the 2009-2010 school year. Primary school test results had just been tabulated- not surprisingly, nearly the entire first grade class failed and will need to repeat grade 1 next year, some for the third time.

Teacher Weekham smiled shyly when I told her the results of testing her students, and complemented her teaching and the progress of her class. She was encouraged to hear that her hard work had born visible fruit. She had persevered teaching daily with no advice, encouragement, or monthly pay. One of her worries was that only four of the ten illiterate students had turned up for class. I assured her that to teach illiterate adults the basics of reading in two months was great progress. Hopefully the success of this first class would encourage others to learn to read.

This was the first time project staff had visited Teacher Weekham's class and tested her students. It was not the first attempt, however. They had made the difficult 2-day motorbike journey from the provincial capital the month before. When they arrived at the village outskirts, they found it had just been declared 'taboo' to outsiders. A villager had died unexpectedly, and no one could enter or leave the village for the duration of the three day ceremony. Those entering by mistake would not be able to leave until the completion of the three-day ceremony. Thus the project staff had no choice but to turn back without seeing Teacher Weekham and her literacy class, although that had been the purpose of their long journey.

Teacher Weekham was still wearing the same mis-matched flip flops, one blue, one tan, that I had seen in January. I had noticed her footwear when she described her 47 kilometer trek each way.

"Your shoes are still the '*one-cow-and-one-water-buffalo brand*' (i.e. mis-matched), I joked. "Aren't those the same flip flops you wore for that long trek back and forth to join the training in January?"

She was pleased I remembered, and smiled as she looked at her ancient flip flops, “Yes, as you know I am very poor. But soon I will get paid for teaching literacy. Now I would like you to take a picture of me, and please send it to me too.” Here are some of the pictures of Teacher Weekham and her students, both those registered as literacy students, and the many who come to observe her class.



Literacy Teacher Weekham (yellow jacket) and elderly village woman watch as student Nang Neuea (widow, age 30) writes her name and age on the blackboard below that of other students.



Above: Children watching the literacy class have a birds-eye view of blackboard from rafters. The terraced rice fields rimmed by forest and the thatched roofs of the hamlet are visible through the opening in the roof.

Below: The field hut makes a fine literacy classroom.



Below: Two young women too shy to join literacy class stand in the rice field where they can view the blackboard and teacher.

Right: Children watch Teacher Weekham from the rafters. The hole in floor makes it hard to write, but easy to gather ferns from the irrigation ditch to use as blackboard eraser.





Top: Tangyeuy Hamlet as seen from literacy class hut.

Above: Literacy students at home with some of their children. Student Nang Thit is holding 2 of her 7 children.



Above: Literacy student Nang Neuea reading through Book 1 with elder sister looking over her shoulder. Nang Neuea is 30 years old, a widow with 4 children.

Below Left: Student Nang Thit, age 33, smiles a greeting at the village fence



Below: Student Nang Thit reading through literacy book with youngest of 7 children tied to shoulder. Her daughters care for the baby during class.





Above: Audience of children watching the class from the rafters

Below left: Literacy student Nang Sonephom, age 25, proudly writing her name with Teacher Weekham (yellow jacket) looking on.



Above right: Literacy student Nang Sonephom at home with baby.



Above: The ancient 'truck-bus' which Teacher Weekham took (together with mother and baby) from the district town to the provincial centre- a one day trip in the dry season when we held training. They walked another 47 kilometers each way between Tangyeuy Village and the district centre.

During the rainy season the trip between the district and provincial centre reportedly can take up to three days. The passengers and driver often carry food, cooking pots, and firewood, ready to camp wherever the truck gets stuck.