

Hippie, interrupted

by N. J. Enfield

In the spring of 1976, a few months after the Lao People's Democratic Republic had been officially established by victorious revolutionary forces, a young man Mr. K. went out with friends in downtown Vientiane to catch a movie. Little did he know that instead of returning home later that evening he would be on his way to a remote lake island to begin a decade of detention and re-education, as part of a new government program to remedy the social ills left behind by a US-installed regime.

In his early 20s, Mr. K. had moved to Vientiane a few years earlier from a small rice-farming village in the deep south of Laos. Like so many young men on the move, his aim had been to find work, perhaps build a family, and take advantage of a growing urban economy to help his parents and extended family back home. But when he arrived in the capital city in the early 1970s, it was a case of no work and all play. For a small town, the place was jumping. A US-backed anti-communist government was host to a community of military and other expatriates. Vientiane remained somewhat of a haven compared to the chaos of the revolutionary-controlled uplands. It was a swinging scene for those young Lao men and women inclined to take part or take advantage. Mr. K. made friends with the American and European hippies who were pioneering the shoestring backpacking trail. He took to their hippy ways: long hair, bell-bottoms, sex, drugs, rock 'n' roll.

All this had to change when the communist government took charge in late 1975. Foreigners fled the country, and the new authorities began warning local kids to clean up their act. A first order of business was to rid the lowlands of their social ills, the urban vice that stood out as an emblem of the former regime's faults. Young Mr. K. and his hippy friends were ordered: cut your hair, burn your bell-bottoms, quit smoking pot. For Mr. K., it seemed like an empty threat, but on that spring 1976 afternoon, as he stepped out of the movie theatre and onto the street, he found a military truck parked on the sidewalk. Soldiers were rounding up those young people who had not paid attention. Mr. K. was a sitting duck, with his long hair and bell-bottom trousers an unambiguous sign of his misfit status. Perhaps oblivious to the irony of a hippy being locked up by revolutionaries, the only mildly rebellious Mr. K. was detained for his crimes of fashion and taken to a government re-education facility on an island lake North of the capital. Here he remained a detainee for ten years.

Along with a catalogue of other social undesirables—prostitutes, drug dealers, deadbeats—Mr. K. had been removed from Vientiane society to enter the new government's archipelago of re-education centres. The purpose of these centres was to fix the social and political faults of the old regime. Those who were guilty of petty vice were small fry in the larger scheme of things, and Mr. K's experience was a league apart from those detainees who had served the former regime's aim of thwarting the now-successful revolution. Many never made it out, not because they were executed, but because life was so tough that many detainees fell victim to poor health and disease. In the greater scheme of things, Mr. K. and his fellow detainees were luckier than many.

15 years after Mr. K's incarceration, European socialism had collapsed and Laos was coming out of what looked from the outside to have been a very heavy slumber. Mr. K. was finally released from his detention and re-education. He had come to feel that his earlier way of life had been a waste, and that he could—and should—make a better contribution to society. While in detention, he had learned the basics of medical care and had taken on new responsibilities by assisting with in-house medical facilities. Recognizing his proven civic responsibility, the authorities eventually released him and gave him a job. Around the 15th anniversary of the revolution, in the beginning of the 1990s, while many re-education centres had emptied, just a few were still operating, housing some of the big fish of the former regime. Mr. K. was the success story of a little fish: a good person, once a victim of bad influence, now re-educated and back on the rails.

But as Mr. K. applied himself to his straight and narrow life, the re-opened society of Laos quickly welcomed those old ills again, thanks to new economic conditions, and reactivation of the not-long-previous openness to outside cultural influences. With the good comes the bad, and there would soon no longer be a scarcity of sex, drugs, and rock 'n' roll. Today—now 35 years since Mr. K's detention on that Vientiane city sidewalk—vice flourishes in Vientiane and the rest of lowland Laos. Amphetamines and opiates are serious social problems. Drug tourism is vibrant. Prostitution thrives in a range of forms. AIDS is killing people. The current government, an over-ripened form of the fresh movement that had so avidly locked Mr. K. away, still talks the upright talk of anti-vice, but the approach to controlling it is more random, less avid, less systematic, and far more tolerant, as evidenced by the wafer-thin veneer of vice in today's Vientiane, well-fuelled by an influx of money from a variety of sources: overseas relatives who fled as refugees back when Mr. K. was in re-education, the lucrative development industry, and the spoils of a local capitalist economy.

With an overview now of the larger context, it is tempting to view the social clean-up that befell Mr. K. as a mere blip, a passing aberration. He might be justified in complaining that he was in the wrong place at the wrong time. He paid what might seem a very heavy price for small-time deviance. Now an older man with grown-up children, Mr. K. looks around to see a new permissive generation committing the same sins as he did, in the same neighbourhoods, yet without paying a dime. Does he feel cheated? Hell no. He's a reformed man.