

Empowered youth

A programme seeks to empower stateless youth through creative means.

Outlook, 01



CHILDREN ON THE MARGINS

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There is light in the eyes of these children as they laugh. It shines out of the darkness that surrounds them. Under the fluorescent glare, the youngsters are giggling or convulsing with laughter at the performances of their peers. One by one, they take turns staging one-of-a-kind shows — shadow and hand puppetry, a live theatre and singing skit, and even traditional ethnic Shan dances during which some appreciative audience members present the amateur performers with small cash gifts. The memorable night will no doubt be cherished by the youths for years to come. It's a rare opportunity for the 30 stateless children in Chiang Mai to spend three days learning the basics of art and producing this unique "festival" together.

Supported by Save the Children UK, the workshop called — in ethnic Shan — "Jum-pu-on-ho Joi-taem-kan" (literally translated as "A Meeting for Children to Work Together") seeks to empower marginalised youth through creative means. In the joint collaboration, three state and non-governmental organisations have recruited 30 youngsters,

most of whom do not have citizenship status, from the border towns of Fang, Muang Na and Chiang Dao (and one from Mae Hong Son). A Chiang Mai-based team called Wandering Moon Performing Group and Endless Journey was commissioned the task of drawing out and weaving together the innate talents of these greenhorn participants.

Judging from the show's finale, the potential is great. Despite limited time and resources to prepare for the show, the children revealed their amazing repertoire of wit, humour and perseverance to deliver their best show ever.

Few would realise, for example, that Mos, a Shan teenager, had just rushed back from visiting his seriously ill grandmother at a hospital in another district. His dubbing of a "monk" hand puppet who had a sudden urge to go to the toilet but discovered there was no lock in place drew a lot of hoots from the audience, old and young alike. The endearing monk finally had to resort to citing a string of Buddhist prayers while doing his "business" only to find a number of children praying in front of the toilet door when he came out. The comical gag was simple but wonderfully effective.

So was the creative use of props from carton boxes, patterned sarongs and newspapers pasted up and

Despite their humble upbringing, the ethnic children show tremendous innate talents and a positive outlook toward life. During a recent workshop held in Chiang Mai, they managed to turn simple objects into wonderful works of art conveying the message of love and world peace.

painted over with childish scribbles. The young players' initial shyness when speaking the central Thai dialect, and occasional blaring noise from a nearby party, posed no hindrance to enjoying the unique Shan fair of fun.

"Having worked with underprivileged children for years, we decided to explore creative art as another channel for them to present their own stories," said Warangkana Mutudol, of the Cross-border Project Against Trafficking and Exploitation of Vulnerable and Migrant Children, a unit under Save the Children UK.

"Art can serve both as a therapeutic exercise for the children, some of whom may have been victimised and wouldn't want to tell their problems directly, and as a platform for advocating certain issues among the children and society at large."

Warangkana mentioned shadow puppetry as one possibility — the young puppeteers can conceal their identities while still conveying the message from behind the curtain. Under the guidance of the Wandering Moon group, moreover, several other aspects of the art enable the children to reflect on themselves, their memories, dreams, fears and what they would like to see happen in their lives — were they able to choose their own road.

Taking into account the youths' modest upbringing, it is refreshing to see how these children have taken

such a positive outlook regarding their circumstances. In the very first session, when each was asked to make a list of their "fortunes", their perceptiveness offered food for thought for several of the grown-ups. Dao Daeng, a pale-faced pre-teen whose Shan parents work on tangerine plantations in Fang, wrote, "I'm lucky to be born in Thailand." Yim, a cheerful-looking girl from Muang Na, gave a long list of what she

considers to be her blessings: to have both parents take care of her, to be able to go to school, to have a healthy body and, last but not least, to be born a Shan.

In another painting session, 16-year-old Saengduen Loongta, nicknamed Fai, chose to portray herself as a small tree flourishing in the midst of a burning fire. "The tree is like me, having been through so many hurdles in life, but it'll never give up its struggles to overcome them," she said.

Fai's sense of determination is unmistakable. When asked to recreate a memorable scene from her past by using mould clay, she made one of a strawberry field, depicting green rows of plants, a worker and, next to it, a small human figure with a backpack standing inside some fenced compound. Fai explained how as a 5 or 6 year-old she was already out there collecting strawberries from 4pm to 6 in the morning, while envying her friends who had a chance to go to school.

"Every worker there praised me for being such a quick harvester. Even my mother was slower. We earned 5 baht for every bucket, and I could collect about 20 buckets per night.

"We had to be careful when selecting which

strawberries to pick: they must be ripe and reddish. We finished the harvest at about 8 or 9pm; after that we had to cut the tip ends of the fruit. Of course they used a lot of pesticides, and without protective gloves my nails were all cut and bruised. We usually finished this task at around 6am the following day. I would then feel very, very sleepy. Worse, I remember how utterly cold it was in Samoeng. I had to sit out in the open air with two to three layers of clothes and a big pile of strawberries in front of me. At the time I was thinking of all the other children my age who could snuggle warmly underneath blankets or in their parents' hugs.

"I could earn good money back then, but I didn't like it at all. For every harvest season, I would be taken out of school to do the job and had to repeat Grade



1 several times. So this strawberry scene I made here is to express my will that I will try my best not to go back to that stage of my life again."

Fai's status is typical of her peers. Born to ethnic parents who fled from the civil wars or economic hardships in Burma into Thailand, many of these children have had difficulties in accessing basic rights — such as education, health care and other social services. Often they have to move from place to place, as their parents or guardians seek work invariably as farm or construction workers or in the service sector. These children find themselves trapped in between: they have very little memory of Burma, and due to the lack of legal status do not feel accepted in the land they now live either. A few have ended up being exploited as cheap labour, lured into human trafficking rings, exposed to unhealthy environments or even abused by state authorities. Broken families, domestic violence or premature sexual experiences are not uncommon phenomena.

What would have been taken for granted by more well-to-do children has to be earned the hard way by their stateless counterparts. In Fai's case, she said she had her first spelling lessons from the scraps of Thai newspapers at the bottom of the strawberry harvest baskets. At the end of each day's work, the little girl would take some old papers back to her shack and, with a Grade 1 textbook borrowed from a friend, try to teach herself how to pronounce each Thai letter, word and sentence under pale candlelight.

Even when Fai was relieved from her farm work, she did not find the path to school an easy one.

"We had to climb up and down the hills to commute between home and school. Sometimes I had to walk through the woods by myself. I was pretty scared of the darkness, that I might get hurt along the way, etc. But no matter how hard the trek, I wouldn't be daunted

because I really wanted to study.”

What will happen to these children, say, in the next 10 years? The artwork of these ethnic youths is indeed a surprisingly cheerful vista of colours and suggests a lot of innocent hope for brighter days. In a session called “Monument of Dreams”, each group put together simple objects like colourful beads and pebbles, dough moulded into various shapes, plastic bracelets and sand, and built a miniature ideal world that even seasoned adults would be drawn into because of its beauty and imagination. When asked to describe their “creations”, the children spontaneously cited love, peace and harmony as their running themes. Will such simple wishes, though, ever be fulfilled?

At the moment, there is some effort to improve their living conditions from the ground level up. Adul Duangdeetaweerat has been working with ethnic Shan workers on tangerine plantations in Fang. It has not been easy, he admitted, but finally his team (some of whom are also of Shan descent) managed to convince a handful of plantation owners to allow some “health education” campaigns to take place on the site.

“We have provided basic medicines and other healthy tips, like how to minimise the impact of chemicals used by the workers. It took a while to show the owners that we are not involved with politics or labour issues, and that if their workers are healthy, then they will become more productive as a result.

“Now we can move on to working with the children of those workers. Since they have to go to school in the daytime and work on the weekends, we can only

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organise our campaigns at night. The plantation owners have allowed us to bring the children of parents who work on different parts of the large plantations to come together for such meetings.

“We train the older kids to take care of their younger siblings, how to take the sick relatives to nearby health centres, and so on. We also help coordinate the processing of birth certificates for newborn babies. A few women don’t dare go to deliver their babies at the hospital either because they don’t have money or a husband to help out. Some even resort to [self-induced] abortion.”

Attempts are also made to preserve the cultural heritage of the Shan people. Adul said some of the Shan youths have been practicing traditional dances and teaching them to younger children.

But there is a larger, looming question — that of citizenship status. Warangkana of Save the Children UK admits it may be very difficult for the ethnic children to be recognised as Thai citizens in the foreseeable future. However, she made note of a few recent laws and regulations that take a more favourable view of these stateless children. For example, after a long, vigorous campaign by human rights lawyers and activists, article 23 of the revised Nationality Act 2008 (BE 2551) now allows applications for citizenship by those born in Thailand of parents who were considered to be illegal entrants into the Kingdom after an announcement imposed following a coup d’etat in 1972. Another move is to push for the cancellation of an exemption clause maintained by the Thai government in its ratification of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) in 1992 — so that every child born here will be provided with birth registration. It has been estimated by Unicef that over a million children in Thailand do not have such a document, thus rendering them people with no legal identity whatsoever.

There is definitely a lot more work to be done. Warangkana said the training programme will continue for three more years, involving other child representatives from the Mekong sub-region who will learn how to integrate creative art into their advocacy forums so that their voices may eventually be heard by the powers that be.

At least for now the children have learned that they are not alone, that there are many brothers and sisters out there who share their plight, and also some adults who do care and will try to support them in their struggle for equality, she said. And perhaps the dreams of an ethnic child like Fai, to become a

nurse or a doctor and a national of the country she was born in and grew up in, may not turn out to be an entirely hopeless dream.



Montatip Soksopha, of the Wondering Moon Performing Group and Endless Journey, explains the purpose of this creative workshop where ethnic children, most of whom do not have citizenship status, come to learn about the basics of art together.