

HeRD #4 - Pa Wan, Training School, Night School

It's hard enough trying to recover information about northern Thai Christian men. It is even more difficult when it comes to women. One woman of some potential importance was PA WAN ("Pa" meaning auntie). Here's what I know about her:

The North Laos Mission started its Theological Training School in 1889, on the assumption that the school would train men for evangelistic and pastoral work. In its second year, however, Pa Wan joined the school. She wanted to improve her Bible knowledge. The school's principle, the Rev. W. C. Dodd, described her as an "intelligent, zealous woman" who was working at the Mission Hospital as an evangelist. She, in fact, seems to have been something of a chaplain, visiting patients and teaching them about Christianity. She was a leader. Dodd reported in 1891 that the students of the school were beginning to show such zeal in evangelism that they were having an influence on others. He singled out Pa Wan as an example and wrote, "So earnest became this spirit of personal work that it was seen to extend itself beyond the members of the school. Especially did Pa Wan, the only woman in attendance, draw to her and associate with her a number of other women for work among women." Pa Wan put her theological education to use. Dodd reported in 1890 that she was in charge of the Mission Hospital's "night school" that had started up in September of that year. The school's pupils were primarily hospital patients and their families, and she had an average of 13 students, ages 8 to 50, in attendance. The school was open every evening but Sunday. She taught reading and religious subjects. The school continued on for the year 1891 with a fluctuating attendance that went as high as 15 to 17 and as low as 6 or 7. After 1891, the school disappears from the records of the mission as does Pa Wan herself.

Our glimpse of Pa Wan, thus, is limited to the years 1890-1891. Even this glimpse, however, reveals a great deal about the role of women in the church and provides a bit of an insight into a remarkable woman's life. Northern Thai women, traditionally, had no leadership role in religious activities (except in certain animistic rites). Pa Wan, however, broke that mold and the mission (and her fellow students) were willing to have her to do so. It is most remarkable that a woman of her time would seek, let alone receive, a theological education. It is perhaps equally remarkable that a woman would teach reading and religion to others, including men. We should also focus on the fact that she apparently ran the night school on her own. There is no record of any missionary taking formal charge of it. This makes her one of the first independent northern Thai educators, male or female. We should also note, finally, that the mission and church allowed her this role. In the context of northern Thai society this is remarkable enough. It is also surprising that ordained American clergymen of the 1890s would tolerate a woman enrolled as a full and equal theological student.

[Dodd, "Report of the Cheung Mai Mission Station For the year ending November 30, 1890,," 1 December 1890, v. 22, BFM; McKean, "Report of the Medical Missionary Work in Cheung Mai, Laos for the Months Jan'y 21 to Nov 30, 1890," v. 22, BFM.; "Report of the North Laos Mission Training School for the Year 1891," 23 February 1892, v. 9, BFM; McKean, "Report of Cheungmai Station of The North Laos Mission For the Year Dec. 1, 1890 to Dec. 1, 1891," v. 22, BFM.]