

# Isan Father-in-Law



*Lawrence Whiting*

[www.bangkokbooks.com](http://www.bangkokbooks.com)

## **ISAN FATHER-IN-LAW- A FAMILY'S ROOTS IN NORTHEAST THAILAND**

1st edition 2011; ebook

**Text by** Lawrence Whiting

Originally published in 2007 as Part 2 of Looking for Mr Rin in paperback (ISBN 978-974-88157-4-9) by Falling Rain Publications 12/1 Tambon Phana, Amphur Phana, Amnat Charoen Province Thailand 37180; Copyright ©2007 Lawrence Whiting

All photographs are from the private collection of Lawrence and Pensri Whiting

eISBN 978-616-222-074-6



**E-book published by** 

**Internet:** [www.bangkokbooks.com](http://www.bangkokbooks.com)

**E-mail:** [info@bangkokbooks.com](mailto:info@bangkokbooks.com)

**Text Copyright**© Lawrence Whiting

All rights reserved.

No part of this book may be reproduced, copied, stored or transmitted in any form without prior written permission from the publisher.

\*\*\*

Interested in publishing your manuscript or selling your ebook on iTunes, iBooks, Amazon, Google, Barnes & Noble, Borders and [bangkokbooks.com](http://bangkokbooks.com)? Contact us at [info@bangkokbooks.com](mailto:info@bangkokbooks.com) or visit [www.bangkokbooks.com](http://www.bangkokbooks.com)

\*\*\*

**CONTENTS**

INTRODUCTION: The historical background	4
Chapter 1: Mr Rin's Beginnings	16
Chapter 2: Teacher Training	29
Chapter 3: Rin Starts to Teach	36
Chapter 4: Head Teacher	50
Chapter 5: Family Affairs	76
Chapter 6: Hard Times 2491 – 2500 (1948 – 1957)	106
Chapter 7: Major Developments	134
Chapter 8: Phana, 2003	165

## INTRODUCTION: THE HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Pensri told me she and her family came from Ubon. And she always talked about her village, Phana. What she means by Phana, however, can vary. There is an *Amphur* Phana, the District Town of Phana, which has a population of just under thirty thousand. The District is divided into three *tambon*, one of them called Tambon Phana. Each *tambon* contains about twenty *ban*, or villages. One of the villages in *Tambon* Phana is *Ban* Phana. Until quite recently *Amphur* Phana was situated in Ubon Ratchathani Province. Now it is part of the recently-created province of Amnat Charoen. Pensri's home is in Ban Phana, Tambon Phana, Amphur Phana.

Pensri also said she was Lao, and that she spoke Lao as her first language. Yet Ubon is in Thailand. In order to understand how it comes about that Pensri and everyone else in Phana can consider themselves both Lao and Thai, it is necessary to know something of the history of Phana and the political changes that took place towards the end of the reign of King Chulalongkorn, when Rin was born.

Ta Rin told the story of the founding of Phana in a booklet he prepared to mark the restoration of Wat Phra Lao:

*Around B.E 2231 (1688) after the death of Chao Suriyawongsa, the king of Vientiane, an aristocrat, Praya Maungsan, tried to rule the country and caused civil disorder. For their safety, many people migrated down south along the Mekong River and many reached as far as Nakhon Champassak. Among these groups there was a well-respected monk called Chao Prakru Phonsamet who was accompanied by three fellow monks, Prakru Thi, Bhikhu Kaow, and Bhikhu Inn. These three later settled down at Ban Phopankhan, in Roi Et Province.*

*Those lay people who followed Chao Phonsamet to Nakhon Champassak, settled down in The Pho Marong Valley north of Nakhon Champassak at a village called Ban Makhamneang. There*

were three Headmen named *Si-nham*, *Kumdaongta*, and *Khaoarsa*. All three later on were appointed to be *Nai Quang* (head of Province) by *Chao Soisisamut*, who ruled *Nakhon Champassak* at that time. The villagers of *Ban Makhamneang* were mainly animal hunters. Among these hunters, the two brothers *Pran Thi* and *Pran Tong* were quite important. Both of them had many followers.

One day, the two brothers and their men went northwest for hunting. They had been travelling for many days when they reached a huge forest next to a vast area of fertile land. Nearby there was a very big pond and a few rivers. They agreed that this location would be very good for a new settlement. So they went back and later on moved all their families and friends to settle down as a village at the edge of the forest called *Ban Saimoon* (now *Don Chao Poo*) with the older brother *Pran Thi* as the Headman. The second brother *Pran Tong* and his men settled at the south-eastern edge of the forest at a place called *Ban Don Nhong Muang* (a ruin at present). Each village had its own temple. The temple of *Ban Sai Moon* invited *Pra Sar Phroum* from *Nakhon Champassak* to stay at the temple.

The three monks, *Prakru Thi*, *Bhikkhu Kaow*, *Bhikkhu Inn* who stayed at *Ban Boupankhan*, *Roi Et*, decided to come to visit the two brothers after learning that both had started new villages. Later on they advised the two brothers and the villagers to move to a better location near the big pond (*Kud Phra Lao*). Everybody agreed. Then a temple was built and *Prakru Thi* was invited to become the Abbot.

The story that *Pensri* was told by her great-grandmother and her mother when she was young was slightly different:

*The two brothers and their villagers had been settled down in their new villages next to the forest for a few years. Then there was an epidemic (possibly cholera), and many of the villagers died. Some of their men were sent to see Prakru Thi and the other two monks and invited them to come to the villages to give advice.*

*When Prakru Thi arrived he realized that the only way to save the villagers was for them to desert the villages and move to build a new village next to the big pond (Kud Phra Lao). They burnt everything that was left over at the old villages. The new village was built on the site of the present Ban Phana.*

The monk Chao Phrakru Phonsamet is said to have paused at That Phanom on his way south from Vientiane in order to repair and restore the *That* there; or at least to make a start to the restoration. A *that* is a tower-like structure built to house relics of the Buddha or an important religious person. Writing in 1893, Étienne Aymonier says that the “present *That* dates from 1714”. It is a similar structure to the That Luang at Vientiane, and is the most important religious site in the whole of Isan. The connection between Chao Phrakru Phonsamet, his followers and their descendants in Phana possibly explains why That Phanom has been of particular importance to the people of Phana.

Chao Phrakru Phonsamet died in 1720, the date usually given for the founding of Phana, aged 90. Until the death in 1737 of King Soisisamut, Champassak remained independent. But by 1777 it had become a vassal state of Siam.

For most of King Chulalongkorn’s reign, from 1868 to 1910, Siam was divided into three administrative ‘circles’. First there were the inner provinces which were administered from Bangkok, and in the northeast reached as far as Nakhon Ratchasima (Khorat). Beyond this were the outer provinces, including most of the Khorat Plateau, which came under Siamese control in the second half of the eighteenth century. Finally there were the tributary states which were on the periphery of Siamese control. These included Vientiane and Champassak, two Lao states that people in Phana felt some considerable affiliation towards.

The city of Ubon was founded in 1820 by Chao Pa Tha who had fled from Vientiane because of the oppression of the King, Chao Anou. Later he helped the Siamese in their attack on Vientiane,

which led to its being destroyed. From the time of its foundation Ubon has been considered a Siamese city, owing allegiance to Bangkok, even though it was populated by Lao people.

Throughout most of the nineteenth century, the King of Champassak continued to pay tribute to the Siamese King. The people of 'the outer provinces' were recognised as being ethnically different to the Thai people of central Siam, their separate ethnicity underlined by distinct cultural and linguistic differences. The whole area of the Khorat Plateau was known as 'Lao' because of the linguistic and ethnic origin of the vast majority of its population. But in 1893 France forced Siam to sign a treaty acknowledging French control over the lands east of the Mekong. France took over the administration of the remaining Lao kingdoms of Luang Prabang in the north and Champassak in the south, and set up the capital in Vientiane, all as part of their newly-invented 'French Indo-China'. This prompted a shift in the way that King Chulalongkorn regarded the people of the outer provinces. He realized that by insisting that the people were Lao he ran the risk of France claiming the areas these Lao lived in as part of the Laos state they had created. Official policy shifted from seeing Siam as an empire in which there were dependent states of different races and languages. Instead, from 1899, a unified 'Thai Kingdom' was established and the tradition was abolished by which rulers of tributary states had paid gold and silver to the King in Bangkok. At the same time, the outer provinces which had formerly been known as the White Lao Provinces (*Hua Muang Kao*) were given the new name of Monthon Isan, of which Ubon Province was a part.

For a few years there was also the anomalous situation that part of the old Champassak which was west of the Mekong, and this included the town of Champassak itself, was regarded as Siamese territory, and governed from Ubon. This was resolved in 1904, though not to the liking of Siam, when France claimed the residual areas of Champassak. From this time Phana found itself much more

firmly under the control of Ubon and cut off from Champassak in any administrative sense.

Once a more rigid and European view of borders was imposed by the French, the Thai administrative system was forced to evolve to take account of this new way of relating to the people near the border areas who had felt no strong allegiance to Bangkok.

These changes were not readily accepted and there were risings in all the areas most affected; that is, in the north, the south, and the far north-east. These risings were not linked or co-ordinated in any way, but they clearly arose from a shared reluctance to change a way of life which had been settled for a very long time despite periodic upheavals.

In the first months of 1902, a popular movement spread throughout the Ubon region and across the Mekong into Champassak. It was led by an Alak tribesman from the Saravane region of southern Laos who claimed supernatural powers, which he expressed primarily in Buddhist terms. The prophecy spread that the “end of the world as we know it” was near and “Thao Thammikarat (a Lord of the Holy Law) would come to rule the world. Another prophecy which proved disastrous for many people was that silver would be turned to gravel and gravel turned to silver.

There were several of these ‘Holy Men’; one of them, Ong Man, seized the town of Khemmarat, only 34 kilometres from Phana, sacked it, and then began marching on Ubon. The Siamese (Thai) authorities were quick to suppress the insurrection on their side of the Mekong, and more than three hundred rebels were killed and four hundred captured. Pensri’s great-grandmother told her about a rising of *kha* (hill-tribe peoples) and said that men from Phana had been ordered to help fight against them. The treaty that had been signed with France required the Siamese government to de-militarise a strip of land twenty-five kilometres wide from the west bank of the Mekong River. So a militia had to be raised and the rebels fought and defeated just outside Phana. One of the men

who had led rebels on the eastern side of the Mekong in 1902, Ong Kommadam, led another uprising against French taxes in 1934-1935. He was killed in September 1936 and two of his sons were captured. One of his sons, though, went on to become a Pathet Lao leader, so the family tradition of rebellion against authority was maintained.

In the last twenty years of his forty-year reign, King Chulalongkorn started to make administrative and educational changes, largely as the result of studies of Western government systems that were made in the 1880s by Prince Damrong, one of his brothers. These reforms were carried out by Prince Damrong and another of his brothers, Prince Wachirayan. Prince Damrong was responsible for setting up a new system of provincial government which ensured a single, centralized control exercised by the Bangkok court and bureaucracy. Prince Wachirayan was initially charged with reforming the organization of the Buddhist monkhood but this was inextricably tied up with education, particularly in rural areas.

From 1898 Prince Wachirayan was promoting the funding of village schools. For hundreds of years basic education had taken place in the village temples. It was centred on individual monk-pupil relations and had little or no secular content.

From the turn of the century the new schools started using a standardised syllabus and textbooks in the Thai script and language in place of local scripts and languages. Western-style maths and science were also introduced into the curriculum.

The increasingly centralized control of its territory which these reforms instituted resulted in a shift towards the way in which the northeast is seen and referred to by the government and people in Bangkok today. The area is no longer thought of as Lao, but as a region of Thailand, Isan.

Isan is often referred to as the north-east of Thailand. The word *Isan* is said to be derived from *Ishana*, the Hindu god of death. It

is the largest of the regions, about a third of the total area of the country, and is a neatly-bordered area, consisting mostly of the Khorat Plateau, bound in the west by the mountain range which runs south from Petchabun, in the south by the Veng and the Dongrek mountains that border Cambodia, and in the north and east by the great Mekong River.

According to The Institute of Population and Social Research in Bangkok, Isan covers an area of 168,854 square kilometres (64,000 square miles), which is approximately one third of the area of Thailand. It is also home to about one third of the total population, a ratio that has remained remarkably constant. In 1911, when the first modern census was taken, the population of Thailand was 8.25 million and that for Isan was just under 3 million. By 1960 Isan had a population of nearly 9 million out of a total of 26.3 million, and by 1993 out of a total population of 58 million, Isan's population was 19.5 million.

For centuries, Isan has been populated by Lao-speaking people who greatly outnumber the Lao on the other side of the Mekong. Excluding the Bangkok metropolitan area, it is the region with the highest population, and yet because of its vast area it is also quite thinly populated. Its population is made up of indigenous people who are mainly of Mon and pre-Cambodian Khmer ancestry, as well as Lao who were forcibly resettled after Thai / Siamese attacks on the former Lao kingdoms centred on Luang Prabang and Vientiane; and some who have migrated of their own accord like those who founded Phana.

The southern part of Isan, stretching from Khorat through the provinces of Buriram, Surin, and Sisaket to Ubon and on to Champassak in southern Laos, has a rich heritage of ancient Khmer temple ruins. These remnants of Brahman-class Hindu culture date from the Indianized Angkor culture and were constructed when Isan was part of the Khmer empire. Buddhist temples, images and shrines also indicate the strength of religious and cultural influences