

## **Lane Xang – In the Land of a Million Elephants**

*The Asian elephant is in danger of extinction. The reason: humans. Its last hope: also humans. A journey across Laos.*

The sky was filled with cirrocumulus clouds when Mr. Peng saw little Moon crying. It was shackled, its legs tied with rattan loops. It was locked away in a bamboo cage, separated from its mother who was held at bay by two elephants. She roared panic stricken. She kicked at the men, who had taken her calf. The entire village had gathered to witness Moon's taming. To watch the shaman fly a chicken on its back to expel the evil spirits and demons and to drive out its wildness. Everybody applauded enthusiastically and cheered during the course of the ceremony and they laughed when Moon struggled trying to defend itself. Only Mr. Peng, then 12 years old, saw the tears coming from those tiny eyes. The elephant calf struggling in its cage was named Chang, which means moon in Laotian. It was Mr. Peng's first working animal. He is a Mahout, an elephant man. He has spent his entire life with those animals. And when he tells the story about Moon, his voice is struggling to sound even – some 43 years later.

His sadness is justified. Laos used to be called Lane Xang – land of a million elephants. *Elephas maximus*, the Asian elephant. That is the one with the funny ears, a little smaller than its African cousin. A hefty eater who consumes 250 kilograms of plants and can weigh up to 5 tons. A strong animal costs up to 12,000 EUR and can be worth around 3 mil Baht - 60,000 EUR for the owner.

Houses displace the jungle, the refuge of animals. Nowadays, Laos's elephant population is no longer in the millions but closer to 1,500, with less than 1,000 living in the wild. The rest are imprisoned, doomed to work, work, work. Out in the forests where precious woods grow like weeds. Rosewood and teak. In a country where people are destitute, wood excavation is highly profitable. Hence, the mighty working animals destroy the very habitat their fellows need to survive. A vicious cycle that cannot easily be broken. Empathy has never ever satisfied anybody's hunger.

“We have lost respect for the animals”, says Mr. Peng. They are seen only as huge ATMs who are supposed to work. “That is all that counts.” If we continue on this path, we will witness the last generation of pachyderms in Laos, meaning that the earth's largest mammal would be extinct within the next couple of decades.

Mr. Peng lives in the village of Hongsa, a two day trip and numerous potholes outside the capital of Vientiane in the Sayaburi province in the north-east of the country. This region is said to have the highest population of working elephants. The few herds of wild animals are spread out across a couple of refuges all over Laos. One finds them foremost in areas largely untouched by humans – if one is lucky. An odor mark of an Asian continent that claims its existence. And when a wild herd stampedes through the fields of poor rice farmers that doesn't mean that the animals interfere with humans. Rather the other way around, since the elephants don't have anywhere else to go.

On the way to Sayanbouri, a picture of Asia as depicted in movies rolls by the window. For many wonderful hours: Jungle, rice paddies, water buffalos, huts on

stilts, bamboo forests. Small villages with crooked fences and unpaved roads. Beautiful girls pass grilled goods through the window. Chicken, fish or rat. A postcard from another far away world, preserved through war and communism, which no longer exists anywhere else but here. Mercilessly beautiful. Reason enough to take a closer look. Sometimes you see Mahouts riding their elephants. And the falang, as foreigners are called here, along with the natives presses his nose against the window of the decrepit Jeep, which is struggling to make its way up the steep hills. In silence, excited just like the audience at a theatre premiere. With faces full of respect and curiosity because of an animal that once graced the royal emblem and which every child in Laos knows about from legends and tales.

The jungle lives. It rustles, screeches, hums, whistles and buzzes. It is humid. The air sticks to one's body. Beads of sweat cover Mr. Peng's forehead and dark spots appear on his khaki-colored shirt. And then suddenly, they are directly in front of us: Buaban, Serth and Bunthom. The elephants are chained and pull teakwood trunks up the hill, as reliable as pistons in high quality engines. They grumble and sigh. Bamboo sticks crack on their 2 inch thick skin. „Pai, pai. Tchoo, tchoo“, the Mahouts bark their commands – “Stop, stop, pull, pull!”.

Mr. Peng, 55 greets the Mahouts. Everybody knows each other. They exchange cigarettes, tell jokes. We sit down in the forest path plowed by the elephants and their burden and Mr. Peng rummages in the past back when the elephant represented the nation's pride and life in the village was defined by the animals' rhythm. He imitates the chains' rattling. Clunk, clunk, clunk. This is what it sounded like when they pulled the massive logs over the dirt roads called streets. The soundtrack of his childhood. Back then, Mahouts caught wild elephants in the jungle bordering the village, tamed them and trained them as working animals.

There used to be hundreds of animals in the forests around Hongsa. “It was not uncommon to have an elephant in the garden.” Upon waking up in the morning what did you see when looking out the window? “Right, elephants.” Yet, this is the past. The idyll of the village of his childhood has vanished. The grey giants have disappeared. Today, only 70 elephants are damned to work deep in the jungle. Most children have never seen one in their life.

Although, they should, since they are so much like us, says Mr. Peng. Elephants become excited when they see a human who they like again. Every animal in its own way. One may click its tongue or another may wiggle its ears. They trumpet, whistle or hold you tight with their trunk. Only when they are lovesick and they get a hormone boost called Musth, should you not get too close. They could act aggressively. ‘Just like humans.’ Mr. Peng should know. He has slept in the forest nestled between the elephants' legs, treated wounds, petted trunks, cuddled, cut toenails, scraped soles and was never afraid of 4 tons of meat, muscle and bones.

Still, an elephant can be dangerous. “You can train them all you want. There will always remain a kernel of wilderness.” About 20 people are killed by elephants each year – due to carelessness. In early February, an animal attacked a Mahout's cousin in Saybouri and trampled him. He was dead immediately.

In fact, the Laotian elephant has much better chances of survival than its fellows in Thailand, Vietnam, Burma or India. There is enough forest left here. 14 % of the country is designated National Protected Areas (NPA), where there are no game keepers but small ethnic groups who earn their living through hunting and felling, and who live in small settlements. The government lacks the money to offer alternatives and maybe also a little bit of political will. The elephants' habitat keeps on shrinking. Poachers who consider the animals' meat a delicacy and their ivory a gold mine get a free ride. The natives' menus read like a Washington's list of endangered species, from snake over leopard to Asian black bear.

Mr. Peng wants to introduce somebody. 83 year old Noy Lao is a shaman and retired elephant doctor. More like a funny goblin than an old man with grey hair and furrows on his face as deep as canyons. When he laughs, the chair on which he sits rocks. Elephants determined his life. When one got bitten by a snake "they would call me". Or when a foot got crushed by a log. In cases of purulent tumors, pregnancies, broken limbs. Noy Lao was called every time. Once he had a patient that had stepped on a mine. The shaman would always have the right medicine mixed together from herbs and barks from the forest, secret recipes, passed on from father to son. Mostly, it helped. Today, he is no longer needed. "There are hardly any left for me to treat." And he is too old anyway, he says and rather drinks lao-lao, a hot rice whisky or sits on the porch and smokes away the hours. However, he says he is a little disappointed that his grandson prefers to study in Vientiane rather than studying the old recipes.

"A sip of rice wine for the guest?" Then he opens a book filled with drawings of elephants. The captions underneath explain the old rituals. They are written in Tam, a language so ancient that the young don't understand it. Then he offers two brown pills which look like clay pellets and have a strong odor. "Good for virility", says the goblin. I swallow them with a mouthful of lao-lao. "That is what we give the elephants, too", says Noy Lao and can hardly contain his laughter.

There is one story every Mahout in Laos knows about. It shows that humans cannot always force their will upon the elephants. It is about a village down in the South, which the farmers call Ban Na. Years ago, representatives of a sugar refinery visited and explained to the farmers who until then had grown only rice and vegetables that sugar would be more profitable. The farmers took that to heart and started to grow sugarcane and before long they had TV sets in their living rooms and mopeds instead of wheel-barrows in front of their houses. Except, nobody had thought about a herd of wild elephants that lived in the surrounding jungle. The animals liked the sugarcane so much that they broke into the fields and threatened the newly won wealth of the farmers. So, the people were faced with a dilemma. To go back to growing vegetables and sell the TV? Or to kill the animals? That was not the answer either. It would not be good karma. In a deeply Buddhist country, this is a strong argument. What to do now, for Buddha's sake? Ecotourism was the magic formula.

For years, war and communism have cut Laos off from the outside world. Slowly, however, international tourism has started to get interested in the small southeastern Asian country. "Just like Thailand 30 years ago", run the travel companies' slogan, wild and original. Temples, cloisters and waterfalls. Monks in brilliant orange. One

can also find a couple of elephants. Travel companies learned that there is money to be earned with the animals. Be a Mahout for 2 hours? Wade through rivers and forests while riding on their backs? No problem. "Come visit one of our new baby elephants", the signs read. Other agencies offer excursions to elephant camps, where Dumbo can be seen playing football, sitting up to beg, or making a slam dunk with its trunk. Tourism entertainment and adventure programs for visitors with a little time and a lot of money. The only thing that is missing are elephants in the wild since there are too few. Tourism as the last hope to preserve species?

"Oui, but please not like that", says Gilles Maurer of the French aid organization Elephant Asia and buries his face in his hands. "When will people finally learn that meaning well is the opposite of doing good?" He sits in a small office, crammed with brochures, catalogues, posters, medicine, pills and syringes, on the outskirts of Vientiane. He is preparing the annual Elephant Festival scheduled for February. Its aim is to reestablish a bond between the people and the heraldic animal. Visitors are expected in the tens of thousands. Tourism is the last chance for the Asian elephant. But please without circus acts, says Maurer. Mahouts and animal owners need to understand the importance of breeding programs. Talk about the danger of extinction harvests disbelief and derision. Such a big animal? Impossible. "Most people are so occupied with trying to survive that they don't really see what is happening around them."

It is most important to preserve and if possible to increase the population. "That can mean money, and they understand that." Since, most of them intend to live on and with the elephants over the next 20, 30 years. And that includes today, but a pregnant cow is unable to work for 2 years. In the short term that means a loss of earnings for owner and Mahout yet in the long run they will have another elephant. And in the meantime, mother and calf can work in tourism, voila." However, that will only work if once in a while you have a bull mount a cow." Yet, as of today only 20 elephants in Laos work in tourism, compared with 1,200 in Thailand.

However, it is not that easy. Gilles Maurer rummages in a drawer and pulls out a thick file. He flips the pages until he finds the one he is looking for: A horrible statistic. Over that past year, 10 deaths were recorded compared to only 2 births. In the entire country, there are only an estimated 46 imprisoned cows of reproductive age, "A drama about to unfold. If nothing is being done, the Laotian elephant will be extinct in 50 years." What about the animals in the wild? "I have no idea. Nobody has begun to look into that." Though, one thing is for certain: Their population is also on the decline.

Mr. Peng and his Moon have meanwhile retired. Six years ago, they went on a national tour along with 3 other elephants to draw attention to the animals' situation. They crisscrossed the entire country, from the North to the South, 1300 kilometers in 3 months. One day, he says, he watched a documentary on television. "Did you know that there are elephants in Africa and that they are doing much better than their relatives in Laos?" They live in huge reservations where they are protected. We need something similar here: restricted zones, which are closed off to humans. Mr. Peng's gaze wanders into the void and upwards to the mountains. There are cirrocumulus clouds in the sky just like when Mr. Peng saw Moon crying.