

Celebrating and Claiming Our Heritage

The above title is the theme of the 7th section of the seminar held in Chiang Mai, Thailand from 21.10.2007 to 24.10.2007.

I attended the seminar and was very delighted and satisfied with all the subject and discussion during the three day seminar. I wished that many could have attended the seminar especially our younger people (our next generation). All the papers and topic presented are relevant to the theme we set for the seminar.

In the opening night dedication worship service we have the privilege to listen to a cultural song presented to us by a young Karen Artist, Saw Chi. This is not the first time I happen to meet Saw Chi. He came to Singapore in 2005 December together with a Karen Cultural group from northern Thailand to perform and present the Karen Cultural Songs using only a small harp, during the Christmas Celebration in Orchard Road, Singapore. After the celebration, the Thai Karen Cultural group visited our Karen Baptist Church, Singapore's worship service. As a special item during that worship service, we have tasted his cultural music with just a single song. Since then I never see him again until I attended the above mentioned seminar.

On the 25th Oct, after the last day of the seminar I was invited to visit Saw Chi's place, which was slightly at the outskirts of Chiang Mai, by Saw Chi's father-in-law, Rev. Timothy. When I arrived at their place and was seated by the guest room, I was attracted by a particular photo among the numerous photos hung on the wall. That was the picture of Saw Chi and some part of the articles around his picture. It was an extract article from the magazine "The Pioneers" which was published in Chiang Mai in December 2005. The heading of the article is "KAREN MUSICIAN UPHOLDS CULTURE". In Burma we now have a famous concert Band call "Kloh and Kweh" organized and leads by Professor Dr. Yahalaylayla of Karen Baptist Theological Seminary, KBTS.

I tried to read through the article on the wall in the frame and without hesitation I requested Rev. Timothy to request his son-in-law, Saw Chi, to make me a photocopy of that article to enable me to put it in our annual magazine to highlight and foster the affection of the readers far and near especially our Karen people. Although this article was narrated and written in northern Thailand ethnical context, I strongly believe that it will also speak to our Karen people who are now in the midst of diasporas all over the world today.

Dear our Karen readers, do you have the heart to voice out like Saw Chi if you are given the opportunity? Will you voice out your concern for your people without hesitation?

I would like to highlight a few phrases which Saw Chi said in the article as follows:

“Even though we cannot use arms and artillery to fight for our freedom, we can fight with our richness in culture, showing our love and upholding the heritage our grandparents handed down to us”.

“When I was young, I didn’t dare let Thai people know I am a Karen. I did not want them to look down on me as a rural person from the mountain. Most Thai people misunderstand us and think we are bad people,” Saw Chi, age 25.

“Some Thai people look down on Karen people who live in Thailand as a hill tribe people who has no country,”

“Our people have a weakness in that we often feel discourage to do something”

“In my mind , I am not a singer, I am a person who speaks and send news for Tais and others to understand Karen people.”

The journalist gave a remark as follows:

“It is good to have a Karen Singer like him to educate Thai people to understand Karen culture.”

“He is a Karen who always says that Thai people must respect Karen culture.”

Dear readers. I hope that you will want to continue to read the extracted article which was documented by Sunday Htoo in THE PIONEERS and come out with some self critic questions to yourself.

My question is “What responsibility do I have as a Karen to uphold and claim our heritage?”

Rev. Saw Fuad Poka

"Even though we cannot use a gun to fight for our freedom, we can fight to show our culture, to show our love and keep the heritage our grand parents give us. I use my harp and my music as my weapon" Said Karen musician Saw Chi

“My father used to play the harp and explain our culture to Thai people. But my father said if they wanted to know more about Karen people, they should come to our village. But nowadays, traveling time is shorter and everything has changed. As for me, I take the job that they – my father and his generation – did, and go to the cities and towns and explain about our people.” said Saw Chi.

Saw Chi is the nickname of Sae Gaw Htoo, the name of a bird that lives in the forest. He is a famous Karen singer in Chiang Mai, and started singing when he was 17. Saw Chi was born in Mae Sai Township, in a village called Mu Hsay Kee. Of the 19 families in Mu Hsay Kee, 17 were Karen. He is currently studying at Chiang Mai University, and says that his community needs more education in order to develop.

Saw Chi sold 5,000 copies of his VCD, Toe Lwee Mi a Ta Tha We (Song From a Wild Bird), which he produced himself. He plans to release another VCD next year called “Song of the harp” But he is not the first in his family to be an artist – his father was also a musician in his village.

“ I studied to become an electrician when I finished my high school, but later I knew that if I continued to pursue that career, it would keep me far away from my community. So, I went to university to in order to help my community.

“One weakness of our people is that we often feel discouraged to do something. But we need to think carefully and realize that we must have a lot of knowledge about our environment,” he said.

He preferred performing traditional songs to writing contemporary music and often the theme of his songs are on environment, education and religion.

“In my mind I am not a singer. I am a person who speaks and sends news to Thais and others to understand Karen people. Karen people are from the mountain and we need to have peace to protect our environment,” said Saw Chi.

His favorite song is a traditional Karen melody, ‘Pa may dwa ler kaw ku der, daw pu wen keh lark eh ler’, which means, “If we look back to our early ancestors, we are all siblings.”

“It is good to have a Karen singer like him, to educate Thai people to understand Karen culture. Thai people often think that Karen people in Thailand and from Burma are different, and that they do things like cut down trees,” said Wandee Suntivitimetee, editor of Salween news network.

“He is a Karen who always says that Thai people must respect Karen culture.”