



บริษัท ไทยไทรเบิลคราฟท์สแฟร์เทรด จำกัด

Thai Tribal Crafts Fair Trade Co.,Ltd.



Making A Difference In The World



In the decade of the 1960's - Several American Baptist women missionaries based in Chiang Mai who were working with Karen and Lahu tribal people became very concerned about the poverty of those they were serving in Northern Thailand. Because of their dedication to serve these people at every level, including their economic needs, the missionaries decided that perhaps they could help the tribal people by seeking ways to market their beautiful craft products which might provide them with much needed cash income. Thus, these women added to their primary responsibilities in mission work, the acceptance of tribal crafts on consignment and sought places where they might sell them.

During that time, Chiang Mai began to attract tourists from around the world. The missionaries took boxes of tribal handicrafts to the hotels and guest houses and got permission from the managers to spread their wares out where the guests could see them. As tourists are always looking for authentic local items to take home for their own collections and to use as gifts to family and friends, the missionaries were quite successful in selling the unusual tribal items.

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This was during the time of the American/Vietnam war, and there were thousands of American military personnel stationed in Thailand making air sorties over Vietnam. Chiang Mai was a favorite place for these military people to go for Rest and Recreation, and chaplains took groups of service personnel there for Religious Retreats. Some of the chaplains invited missionaries to come to the places where they and their soldiers were staying to tell them about the colorful tribal people in northern Thailand and the work they were doing among them. This made an ideal setting for selling tribal handicrafts to the military personnel who were always looking for items typical of that area to take back as gifts to their families, sweethearts, and friends.

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About that time one of the missionaries was invited to speak to the women's society of the International Church in Bangkok where people from many countries around the world meet for worship. The missionary told them about the lives and customs of the tribal people and the work being done among them by the missionaries. Then he described the severe economic needs of many of the tribal people, most of whom had been pushed up into the mountains where their fields are on steep slopes and the soil is not very productive. He showed them hand-woven cloth, colorful shoulder bags, basketry, and other items that the missionaries were selling in Chiang Mai to help alleviate their needs, and encouraged them to consider how they might find ways to market the crafts in Bangkok as well.

Those women responded to the challenge by organizing a monthly Hilltribe Handicraft Sale, and finding people



to participate in it. They encouraged people of the church to come and shop, and also advertised it widely among the foreign population of Bangkok. The women in Chiang Mai packed boxes of crafts and sent them to Bangkok each month, and the Bangkok church women arranged them attractively for sale. Each month interest in the sale grew, and the number of shoppers increased.

Before long the Hilltribe Sales attracted large numbers of both foreign and Thai people, and proceeds steadily increased. Eventually many others in the foreign community joined with the church women to help with the large amount of work that was needed to handle all aspects of the project.



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These sales proved to be a major factor in the development and success of the marketing of the crafts of hilltribe people, and have helped to alleviate the poverty of many.

Much to the surprise and delight of all those involved, another quite unsolicited avenue of sales developed. By this time the crafts from the various sources had been pooled, and an outbuilding at one of the missionary residences became a little shop, with some of the merchandise being displayed on the patio. Occasionally a group of beautifully dressed women came to view the hand-woven and embroidered fabrics, and purchased the very finest pieces in stock. The missionaries were quite overwhelmed when they learned that those women were ladies-in-waiting for Queen Sirikit, the beautiful queen of Thailand. They came to the little backyard shop during the cold season when the king and queen were in residence at the royal palace on Doi Sutheep, the beautiful mountain just a short distance west of Chiang Mai.



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Her majesty was delighted with the fabrics produced by the Karen, Mien, Hmong, Lahu, Akha, and Lisu tribal people and had her designers and dress-makers produce beautiful gowns from the tribal fabrics. Not infrequently, pictures of the Queen would appear in the press and on TV wearing suits and gowns made of or decorated with those fabrics when she attended various official and social events. Those involved in the marketing of tribal crafts were, of course, both astounded and delighted to have the royal stamp of approval on those products.

This interest of the Queen in tribal fabrics brought them to the attention of the extensive Royal Family and upper-class women, as the Queen, in a sense, is the trend-setter of Thai society. It must be said here that their royal highnesses, the King and Queen, were also concerned for the welfare of the poor and needy people of their kingdom, and so it would seem that the Queen's desire to help the tribal people also figured in the attention she paid to their crafts.

Her majesty was delighted with the fabrics produced by the Karen, Mien, Hmong, Lahu, Akha, and Lisu tribal people and had her designers and dress-makers produce beautiful gowns from the tribal fabrics.

Up until that time, very few high society women had shown much interest in the tribal handicrafts. It seemed that they were sure that those "ignorant, unwashed mountain people" surely could not produce anything they would be interested in! One can imagine their surprise when they became aware of the Queen wearing beautiful creations made of tribal fabrics. They could no longer ignore the tribal people, and they too began to look for tribal hand-woven and embroidered fabrics, and to admit their worth.

The time had come to acknowledge that the marketing of hilltribe handicrafts had considerable potential, and that it deserved being made a major part of the ministry to the hilltribes. A number of interested people, including tribal leaders and missionaries met together to organize a hilltribe craft marketing outlet. Thai Tribal Crafts (TTC) was chosen as the name, and a small shophouse was rented.

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A document which was called the Rules of Operation for Thai Tribal Crafts, was drawn up. This document specified that Thai Tribal Crafts would belong jointly to the Karen Baptist Convention and the Lahu Baptist Convention on a partnership basis. It is specified that at the end of each year any excess earnings beyond what is needed for the operation and expansion of the program will be donated to one or more projects for the development of hilltribe people.

The Board of Directors was to be composed of representatives of the Karen and Lahu Baptist Conventions, some of the founding missionaries, and representatives from the Chiang Mai community.

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Missionaries served as manager, bookkeeper, buyers, and promoter, and the young woman who had previously been hired served as the primary sales person. Business started to pick up since the shop was more visible to the public. The mission decided that since none of the missionaries had had much experience in business, that the cooperating mission boards should send to Thailand an experienced business person to be manager of the shop. Soon a husband and wife team from Australia was sent to serve in that capacity.

After a period of time, it seemed that the couple from Australia did not agree with some of the policies that had been established, so they withdrew from TTC and joined with some of the Karen people who decided they would prefer to establish their own shop. So at the annual meeting of the Karen Baptist Convention they convinced their Board of Directors to agree with them. They purchased a shophouse near TTC and set up their own handicraft marketing outlet, taking with them the goods that were from the Karen people.

However, the Maesariang Association, one of the associations of the KBC, decided that they would prefer to continue to be related to TTC. Items that had come from them as well as all the items that were in the Lahu inventory were considered to belong to Thai Tribal Crafts. It was found that 80 percent of the resulting inventory came from the Lahu and 20 percent from the Maesariang Karen. Thus, ownership of Thai Tribal Crafts was established as 80 percent belonging to the Lahu Baptist Convention, and 20 percent belonging to the Maesariang Karen Baptist Association.

“One of the Baptist missionaries served TTC as the manager for a period of time, but later Khun Sakda Hasuwan, a well-educated Lahu man was appointed to be the manager by the TTC Board. He has served in that position from the early 1970’s until the present time.”

Sales flourished, making it necessary before many months to move to a much larger building at 208 Bamrungrat Road in Chiang Mai. For many years TTC rented the building, but later it became possible to purchase the property, thanks to grants given by various Christian organizations, and TTC has been located in this 3+ story building until the present day.

Through the years the missionary presence in the operation of TTC has been decreasing, and the participation of the tribal people themselves has increased. At the present time there is a missionary presence on the Board of managers, but the operation of the business is entirely in the hands of tribal and Thai people.

Certain international organizations that have as their purpose to help and encourage the development of the economy of needy people around the world have been tremendously helpful to Thai Tribal Crafts. This includes World Vision, SERRV, Ten thousand Villages (formerly the Self Help program of the Menonite Church), TEAR CRAFT of England, and others. These organizations not only purchase large amounts of merchandise from TTC, but they also make helpful suggestions. Some of them even send people to live in Chiang Mai for periods of time and help in the designing of new products, advising the use of current color schemes, and making suggestions with regard to marketing.



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Computer experts have helped by computerising the accounts and the inventory. A web site has been set up describing TTC and its purpose and pictures of the items that can be ordered. New products are pictured on a separate page, and when articles are discontinued they are listed.

Tremendous progress has been made by Thai Tribal Crafts since its founding many years ago. Crafts are now sold from not only the Lahu and Karen, but also from the Akha, Lisu, Hmong, Mien, Lawa, and Thai Leu people.

“The purpose of this whole enterprise, as it is spelled out in Rules of Operation, is to improve the economy of the hilltribe people of northern Thailand, to make it possible for children to attend school and get an education, to help the churches by increasing the income of their members, and in general to make it possible for the people to live happy and productive lives. It is a self-help non-profit endeavor, and was never intended to make anyone rich, but to help many to have a good life.”

There has been another result of the work of Thai Tribal Crafts that none of its founders had anticipated. Many of the tribal people had given up wearing the traditional dress of their people, and some had forgotten how to weave, embroider, or make baskets and other craft items. It had become easier to purchase plastic implements, ready-made clothing, etc. and they no longer really valued the skills of their ancestors. However, when they observed that people from many different societies - the Thai, who had always looked down on them and anything they produced, people in America, Europe, and other countries had developed great appreciation of their crafts and admired them for their skills.



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They were now able to earn money through their skills to meet some of their basic needs, and to send their children to school. These people, who had lost much of their sense of self-respect, began to straighten their shoulders and to realize that they had valuable skills that others admired and valued. They now realize that they have valuable contributions to make to society. What a difference it has made in their lives!

At one time TTC had a project to send some of the most skilled among them to villages and teach the people the skills of their ancestors that had nearly disappeared from their cultures. This caused many of the people to want to resume wearing their distinctive dress on special occasions, to re-learn their native stories and dances, and to reclaim the good things from their ancient cultures. This has brought about a revival of all these valuable arts and practices, and the society where they live is the richer for it.

There is much more that could be said about Thai Tribal Crafts, but perhaps this is enough to help people to realize what a blessing it has been to thousands of people throughout northern Thailand. Let us hope that the high standards that were set at the time of founding this enterprise will always prevail. May it always be the purpose of TTC to lift up the poor and needy, to help people to reclaim their value as worthy human beings, and to bring the fullness of life that God wishes for all human beings to the tribal people of Thailand.

by Elaine T. Lewis

July 2004



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