

2008 Report 2 from Hong Kong
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Sompheng's story

Wiry, muscular, short of stature with a beautiful light brown complexion like most from Laos, 30 year old Sompheng Thiempavat is in my class on Church Planting. Perhaps he should be the teacher and I the student!

Sompheng was born into a Christian family; but when his parents had to move to another area of Laos, they converted back to Buddhism under intense community pressure. His father still included Jesus along with other divinities in his prayers. Sompheng wanted very much to be a policeman. He had not gone to High School because his parents had no money to send him. Policemen did not need to have a High School education.

At the age of 19 he and his father walked several days to the capital so he could take the test for a policeman. It was over Christmas so they went to a Christian worship service...and Sompheng was moved deeply. He failed the test for policemen and decided that was God's way of calling him to the Christian faith. Now instead of his early childhood aspiration to become a monk in the temple, he decided he would go to Bible School to become a Christian Pastor.

He asked the church members, where LaoMoon was the secretary (also my student), to teach him how to pray and what Christians believe. In this church they dispensed medicine to the ill who came there for it. Sompheng set himself in a room they had to pass through in order to get to the nurse and medicine. He has brought healing to many of them, he says very humbly. He has converted over 1,000 to the Christian faith there. This number I had to pry out of him.

After 2 years of Bible school training he has become a leader in the Lao Evangelical Church who gathered money along with the Finnish Lutherans through the Mekong River Area Ministry (which Friends of LTS supports) to send him for more education here at LTS, Hong Kong. Last year I spent many tedious hours helping him with classes and language. This year we can count at least 8 Thai people he has converted to the faith on the streets of Hong Kong.

Whenever he meets me he bows deeply with hands in a praying position in front of him. I am the one who is humbled by his gracious smile and large witness.

Table Talk

On the Chinese National Holiday, October 1, there were no classes. I had just returned from Pilgrim Hall across the mountain Tau Fong Shan where 16 of us had breakfast together and "Table Talk." What a wonderful exchange of ideas and fellowship! Martin Luther was famous for his students eating breakfast with him, as he also used it as a way to teach. These students were from the Philippines, Myanmar, Indonesia, Nepal, Laos, Mainland China, Malaysia and Viet Nam.

I asked them to tell the group their favorite hymn and why it was so important to them. Then each one sang it in their own language. There were beautiful stories connected to many of them.

I was very surprised that nearly all of them said it was **the words** and not **the music** which was meaningful to them.

Sompheng Thiempavat from Laos told how he has converted over one thousand to the Christian faith in his homeland. And how just last week he convinced 8 here in Hong Kong to be baptized. He told it very humbly. He is one I am preparing to return and plant a new congregation. I think that he should be teaching me!

Several years ago when I did the same exercise in a table talk, a woman from Viet Nam told of her favorite hymn which she always sang in the toilet! She said that her tiny village had just one toilet with just a curtain for the entrance. When on the toilet villagers would sing loudly to prevent others from entering. Evidently the hymns were quite moving. Perhaps upon leaving she could sing: *On Our Way Rejoicing*.

The National Day of the People's Republic of China

(traditional Chinese: 國慶日; simplified Chinese: 国庆节; pinyin: Guóqìng Rì) was October 1.

It is a public holiday in the People's Republic of China which celebrates its national day since the PRC was founded on October 1, 1949 with a ceremony at Tiananmen Square. The National Day marks the start of one of the two Golden Weeks in the PRC and is celebrated throughout mainland China, Hong Kong, and Macau with a variety of government-organized festivities, including fireworks and concerts. Public places, such as Tiananmen Square in Beijing, are decorated in a festive theme. Portraits of revered leaders, such as Sun Yat-Sen, are publicly displayed. When the anniversary is a multiple of five (e.g. the 50th, 55th, or 60th), large scale official celebrations may be held, including an inspection of troops on Tiananmen Square.

Meals are Served

One 40 year old man prepares the lunch and dinner for around 200 students. It is amazing. He works very fast, cooks everything in huge woks and also does all the purchasing of the foodstuffs. Breakfast is a table spread with bread for toast, jelly, peanut butter, powdered milk (with melamine), Quaker Oats, hot water, tea and coffee. Tuesday is "egg day" when a student boils a bunch of them and Wednesday there is sometimes meat.

Lunch and dinner are very similar. For each table of ten there are two whole fish (head, tail, eyes and all) a vegetable in season (now it's cauliflower and eggplant); a meat dish like pork or chicken chopped up, bone and all, in tiny pieces; and rice, always rice! Sometimes there will be a "surprise soup" in a large pot. You dip in and get a surprise of chicken feet, animal bones, yesterday's leftovers, etc.

I carry a bottle of hot chilies to a table and quickly gain many friends who want to eat next to me. We eat with chopsticks, retrieving the food with special larger chop sticks from serving plates in the center of the table. There is often a race to see who gets the eyes of the fish.

There is no food served Saturday evening or on Sunday. I keep instant "cup of noodles" in my room and a hot water electric thermos. This time I have a working refrigerator so I have apples,

dragon's heart, instant oats, crackers, peanut butter and “German Water” forbidden in the dorms.

Chung Yeung Holiday

Yesterday was the Chinese Chung Yeung holiday. It is called the “double nines day” because the date is 9/9. Ching Ming is a similar holiday in the spring. Many come up this mountain to visit the Christian cemetery located nearby. They bring a picnic lunch, wash the grave of their ancestors and set off some fireworks. The Buddhists burn paper money at the grave site. The fire department is very busy all day! I can see little plumes of smoke all over the mountain. They share the food they bring along, especially Chinese cakes, ko, which is a homonym of the word for “top.” Some believe that those who eat these cakes will be promoted to the top.

It is also a day for hiking. The Chung Yeung Festival commemorates a Han Dynasty (BC 202-AD 220) legend, which tells how a soothsayer advised Woon King that he should take his family to a high place for the entire ninth day of the ninth moon. Upon their return, the Woon family discovered all living things in their village had been slaughtered. Today, many Hong Kong families head to the hills to picnic during the Chung Yeung Festival.

I used the day to hold a 9-to-5 retreat for my class on Inter-Personal Relationships and Congregational Conflict. They get the same number of contact hours as if I stayed the whole semester. In the retreat we spent the morning drawing our Johari window and in the afternoon we decided our temperament: Artisan, Guardian, Idealist or Rational. Then everyone took the test called “Christian Introspection Sentence Completion Form.” This retreat makes up for my leaving before the semester is over.