

= Santikhiri =

The village of Santikhiri (Thai : ?????????) , formerly known as Mae Salong (Thai : ? ? ? ? ? ?) , is in the Thai highlands on Doi Mae Salong mountain of the Daen Lao Range , in Mae Fa Luang District , Chiang Rai Province , the northernmost province of Thailand . The area has an alpine @-@ like landscape and climate , and is known for its hill tribe villages , tea plantations , and cherry blossoms .

Santikhiri 's early history centered on the Golden Triangle 's opium trade , in which its distinctive population ? the " lost army " of the Republic of China Army 's 93rd Division ? became involved . At the conclusion of the Chinese Civil War in 1949 , some remnants of the anti @-@ communist Kuomintang (KMT) forces refused to surrender , including 278th Regiment of the 93rd Division and 709th Regiment of the 237th Division (led by General Li Kuo @-@ hui) . The troops fought their way out of Yunnan in south @-@ western China , and its soldiers lived in Burma 's (now Myanmar) jungles . The army grew and part of it returned to Taiwan under international pressure . The remaining troops were led by Gen Tuan Shi @-@ wen (also known as Chiwan Khamlue) and sought asylum in Mae Salong later . In exchange for their asylum , they fought for Thailand until 1982 , helping to counter the communist insurgency on the Thai frontier . In reward , the Thai government granted citizenship to most of the KMT soldiers and their families .

Cash crops , especially tea , have now replaced the growing of opium poppies , and Santikhiri today is a tourist attraction known as " Little Switzerland " .

= = History = =

The origins of the Santikhiri community go back to the end of the Chinese Civil War . In October 1949 , after Mao Zedong 's communist party victory in China , the defeated Kuomintang (KMT) armies led by Generalissimo Chiang Kai @-@ shek retreated to Taiwan , except for the 3rd and 5th Regiments of the 93rd Division , which refused to surrender . Fighting between the communist and KMT troops continued in some remote parts of China , including Yunnan in the south @-@ west . When the communists marched into the provincial capital of Kunming in January 1950 , 12 @,@ 000 troops from the 3rd and 5th Regiments , commanded respectively by Generals Lee Wen @-@ huan (Li Wenhuan) and Tuan Shi @-@ wen , fought their way out of Yunnan and escaped into Burma 's jungles .

The soldiers ' war did not end after their own " long march " from Yunnan to Möng Hsat in Burma 's Shan State . The Burmese soon discovered that a foreign army was camped on their soil , and launched an offensive . The fighting continued for 12 years , and several thousand KMT soldiers were eventually evacuated to Taiwan . When China entered the Korean War , the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) had a desperate need for intelligence on China . The agency turned to the two KMT generals , who agreed to slip some soldiers back into China for intelligence @-@ gathering missions . In return , the agency offered arms to equip the generals to retake China from their bases in the Shan State . The KMT army tried on no fewer than seven times between 1950 and 1952 to invade Yunnan , but was repeatedly driven back into the Shan State . The ending of the Korean War in 1953 was not the end of the KMT 's fight against the communist Chinese and Burmese armies , which continued on for many years , supported by Washington and Taiwan and subsequently funded by the KMT 's involvement in the Golden Triangle 's drug trade .

= = = Refuge in Thailand = = =

In 1961 , Tuan led some 4 @,@ 000 battle @-@ weary KMT troops out of Burma to a mountainous sanctuary in Mae Salong in Thailand . In exchange for asylum , the Thai government allowed them to stay on the understanding that they would assist in policing the area against communist infiltration . As a result , most of the village 's inhabitants today are ethnic Chinese and direct descendants of those KMT soldiers . At the same time , General Lee of the 3rd Regiment established his headquarters at Tham Ngob , north @-@ west of Chiang Mai . The KMT army was renamed "

Chinese Irregular Forces " (CIF) and was placed directly under the control of a special task force , code @-@ named " 04 " , commanded by Bangkok .

After the soldiers reached Mae Salong , China and Thailand struck an agreement to transfer the administration of the group to the Thai government . The provincial governor of southern Thailand , Pryath Samanmit , was reassigned as the governor of Chiang Rai , to oversee the KMT division , but upon taking up his position , Samanmit was killed by communist insurgents . Soon afterwards , the KMT division was ordered to assist the Thai government to counter the advancing armies on Thailand 's northern borders and the internal threat from the Communist Party of Thailand . Fierce battles were fought in the mountains of Doi Laung , Doi Yaw , Doi Phamon , and Mae Aabb , and the communist uprising was successfully countered . The bloodiest operation was launched on 10 December 1970 , a five @-@ year @-@ long campaign that claimed over 1 @,@ 000 lives , many from landmines . It was not until 1982 that the soldiers were able to give up their arms and were discharged to settle down to a normal life at Mae Salong . As a reward for their service , the Thai government gave citizenship to most of the KMT soldiers and their families .

Despite the Thai government 's attempts to integrate the KMT division and their families into the Thai nation , the inhabitants of Mae Salong preferred for many years to engage in the illegal opium trade , alongside the drug warlord Khun Sa of the Shan United Army . In 1967 , Tuan said in an interview with a British journalist :

We have to continue to fight the evil of communism , and to fight you must have an army , and an army must have guns , and to buy guns you must have money . In these mountains , the only money is opium .

According to a CIA report in 1971 , Mae Salong was then one of the largest heroin refineries in south @-@ east Asia . Only in the late 1980s , after Khun Sa 's army was finally routed and pushed over the border into Myanmar by the Thai military , was the Thai government able to make any headway in taming the region ? part of which involved crop substitution plans and giving the area a new name . Santikhiri meaning " hill of peace " was introduced by the Thai government in an effort to disassociate the area from its former image as an established opium zone . King Bhumibol Adulyadej and other members of the royal family made regular visits as a sign of their support for the old soldiers who had fought against their own country for Thailand .

= = = Santikhiri today = = =

As late as the mid @-@ 1970s , Doi Mae Salong was strictly off @-@ limits to outsiders . Since 1994 , Santikhiri has capitalised on its unique history and has developed into a tourist attraction , with its narrow winding streets lined with inns , noodle shops and teashops . As a result , Santikhiri has become one of Thailand 's top ten destinations among backpackers today . The former soldiers had settled down , some of them having married ethnic Chinese brides who crossed the border after the fighting stopped , and others having married local Thais . The old soldiers carry on their normal lives peacefully now , but still retain their Chinese identity ; the main language spoken remains Yunnanese . Among their local @-@ born descendants , some have adopted a Thai identity and no longer identify with their Chinese ancestry . As of 2007 , General Lue Ye @-@ tien , aged 90 and Tuan 's former right @-@ hand man , is the leader of the group , after taking over the leadership on Tuan 's death in 1980 .

The crop substitution programs successfully encouraged the cultivation of tea , coffee , corn , and fruit trees , replacing the opium poppies that had previously been grown . New fruit orchards and tea factories were also set up , followed by production facilities for fruit wines and Chinese herbs , which are particularly popular among Thais and tourists from China , Taiwan , and other ethnic Chinese communities in south @-@ east Asia .

Santikhiri was chosen as the filming location for the subplot The Fortitude of the Buddha in the 2005 film 3 Needles . Although the narrative is supposed to be set in the rural southern province of Yunnan , director Thom Fitzgerald stated that difficulties in obtaining permission from the Censorship Authority resulted in the decision to shoot the segment in Santikhiri instead . The segment , which stars Lucy Liu as a heavily @-@ pregnant blood merchant , depicts the blood @-@

selling scandals in China from the 1980s @-@ 2000s in which hundreds of thousands of people , mostly rural poor , contracted HIV through government sponsored campaigns to increase blood supplies . The traditional costume of the Akha people features heavily in the segment , however the blood selling scandals mostly impacted rural villagers in Henan province .

= = Geography and climate = =

Santikhiri is a hilltop village in the Mae Fa Luang district of Thailand 's Chiang Rai Province , about 80 kilometres (50 mi) from Chiang Rai . Santikhiri is on the highest peak of the Doi Mae Salong range of mountains , at an elevation of 1 @,@ 134 metres (3 @,@ 722 ft) above sea level . It has an alpine @-@ like climate , with crisp cool air all year round and chilly in the winter months of November through February . Santikhiri is accessible via two routes ? Route 1130 from Ban Basang and Route 1234 from the south , which until being paved were only accessible by pack horses . Now regular minibus services , running from 06 : 00 ? 13 : 00 , are available from Chiang Rai to Santikhiri .

Santikhiri has long been the home of many hill tribes such as the Akha , Yao , Karen , and Hmong that originated from southern China and Myanmar . Each tribe has its own language , and follows animist customs and practices . Living among the native inhabitants are the ethnic Chinese , who form the majority of Santikhiri 's estimated population of 20 @,@ 000 .

= = Landmarks and attractions = =

Santikhiri is noted for its high mountain oolong , a high grade traditional Chinese tea , which makes up about 80 % of all tea production in Chiang Rai . The province produces about 200 tonnes (200 long tons ; 220 short tons) of tea a year . The combination of climate and soil conditions at Santikhiri is ideal for growing high quality oolongs (" black dragon " in Chinese) . Such teas are cultivated at elevations ranging from 1 @,@ 200 to 1 @,@ 400 metres (3 @,@ 960 ? 4 @,@ 620 ft) . In 2005 , Santikhiri was selected by the Tourism and Sports Ministry as an OTOP (" One Tambon One Product ") tourism village in recognition of its fine oolong tea . The goals are to stimulate the grassroots economy , increase the number of tourists , and develop Thailand 's products and services . Taiwanese experts work alongside local farmers in tea processing plants which produce top @-@ quality tea for both the local and export markets . The number of tea plantations in the village has increased significantly since the mid @-@ 1990s , and includes Choke Chamroen Tea , Wang Put Tan , and 101 Tea .

From 28 December to 2 January each year , Santikhiri hosts the annual cherry blossoms festival , which is organised by Mae Salong Nok Tambon Administration Organisation in association with Mae Fa Luang District . The festival celebrates the culture of the hill tribe people from the Chiang Rai area , and includes a handicraft sale , a light and sound show , a parade by the tribes people , and a beauty contest .

General Tuan Shi @-@ wen died in 1980 , and was buried in a pagoda @-@ like tomb on a hilltop reached via a 300 @-@ metre (984 ft) climb . From the top , there is a panoramic view of the village . There is also a memorial to the KMT soldiers who died in their fight against communism , The Martyrs ' Memorial , a museum whose wooden panels bear the names of the dead , set on an altar in the main building . It was constructed in the style of a large Chinese shrine like the National Revolutionary Martyrs ' Shrine in Taipei . The museum also features exhibits describing the struggles of the KMT soldiers and the development of the Doi Mae Salong valley .

Phra Boromathat Chedi is a chedi built on a hill near the village , in honour of the late Princess Mother , Srinagarindra . There is an excellent view of the Myanmar frontier from the top , an area that was off @-@ limits when it was under the control of the warlord Khun Sa .