A GALLERY OF PICTURESQUE PERSONALITIES

William J. Gedney

I don’t have a serious scholarly paper like the other ones we’ve heard. Some people have to leave and they thought this was going to be important and it’s not. It’s very light and trivial compared to these very heady papers we’ve been having yesterday and today. This you’ll really have to regard as kind of a chaser because it doesn’t amount to much. This is how I decided on my topic, called in the program “A Gallery of Picturesque Personalities.” What happened was that in Washington at the AAS meetings [Association for Asian Studies, March 1980] several of you told me that you were going to be participating in this conference, which was very nice to hear. But then, driving back through Pennsylvania and Ohio, thinking about that, it suddenly dawned on me, “My God, I’ll probably have to get on my feet at some point, and what will I do? What will I say?” I can’t say, “Thank you for the gold watch,” because there probably won’t be any gold watch, and actually these papers have been worth lots more than a dozen gold watches. I can’t say, “I’m going to miss you all after I retire,” because I’m not going anywhere. Now that I won’t have to teach classes and go to department meetings and silly things like that, I’ll probably see more of all of you than before.

So what to do? Well, thinking about it as I drove along—-and I got a speeding ticket as a result of not having my mind on my driving—-I thought about the fact that during the last few months so many people have been asking me about those early years in Thailand. I’m not one to think about the past; it’s always so horrible that I’d rather think about the future! But recently people have expressed a great deal of interest. I went to Thailand first in July of 1947 and stayed continuously for six and a half years, and came back with Choy in January of 1954. When I first went to Thailand I was the only academic, and so for the first year or so I had the whole place to myself, and it was just great. During those early years I did meet a great many very, very interesting characters. And so I thought I might tell you about some of them.
William J. Gedney

I decided, along about Akron I guess it was, that I would eliminate all of the foreigners because so many others met the various foreigners, although some of them are very interesting: old Mr. Wood and Mr. Hutchinson, two elderly British gentlemen in Chiang Mai who were amateur historians; Josie Stanton, the wife of the ambassador—I used to say that she looked like a Hapsburg and acted like a Vanderbilt. She was the queen of the American establishment, and is still alive, of course. There was also Jim Thompson, the silk king. But as I say, I decided to eliminate the foreigners because so many other people did meet the foreigners, and some of them knew them better than I did. I also decided to eliminate the prominent Thai people that so many other foreigners met, like Prince Dhani, Prince Wan, Prince Prem, Phya Anuman, and so on. I tried to pick people whose names are known in the political or cultural or literary history, but whom very few if any other foreigners—and very few local people, for that matter—had a chance to get acquainted with. I ended up with five people. Two are Cambodian and three are Thai. Two are women and three are men. They are all dead now.

Let me start with the Cambodian “Picturesque Personalities.” One was very much anti-establishment, that was the rebel leader Dap Chuan, and the other was very much traditional establishment, that was Princess Malikaa. Dap Chuan was named “Chuan,” and “Dap” was his military title from the days when he had been in the French army, like the Thai expression naay dàap, “lance corporal,” I guess. I came to meet him, as I was already telling some of the rest of you, purely by accident, on one of my many visits to Angkor. I used to go there whenever I was sick and tired of my studies and wanted a break, and it used to be very cheap. You could go and stay in the French hotel at Siam Reap and knock around looking at the ruins, and spend much less money than one spent day-by-day in Bangkok, especially if you bought your Cambodian money on the black market in Bangkok before you went. That made it even cheaper. On one of my many trips I decided that, having seen all of the major ruins, I would like to visit a very famous temple called Banteay Srei, which is off to the northeast of Angkor.

At that time I had a little tiny car, just a little tiny car. I think it was a Morris, what used to be called a touring car, with two seats and a top that we always had down. I went all over Thailand and all over Cambodia in that little thing. I used to break the springs all the time until somebody discovered that Jeep shock absorbers would cure that, so with the Jeep shock absorbers I could go anywhere without
A Gallery of Picturesque Personalities

breaking the springs. Well, I looked over a map and I headed off. To the north of Angkor there are two huge, dried-up, water reservoirs, which presumably once held water for the capital city, much like the Sukhothai arrangement that we heard about this morning [see "The Ancient Settlements of Sukhothai," by Srisakra Vallibhotama, this volume]. They are dried up, and, I suppose, have been for centuries, and are now filled with sand. And I got stuck. I don’t remember whether it was going to or coming back from the visit to that temple, it’s all forgotten now, but I got stuck. I got stuck in that sand, and the more I tried to get out, the deeper I got stuck—Woody [Hiram W. Woodward, Jr.] tells me he got stuck in the same place on a bicycle! And, while I was struggling with the darn car, suddenly I was surrounded by men with guns! And, to make a long story short, they “took me to their leader,” who was this fellow, Dap Chuan.

He had his headquarters there in the jungle nearby, just a short walk from the place where I got stuck. He had a very nice pavilion. It was very simple, with a dirt floor, and poles and a thatched roof, but airy and comfortable and spotlessly clean, and there were other very simple structures around for sleeping, and eating, and so on. He spoke pretty good Thai, and he had a wife there with him. He must have been forty-five, and she must have been about forty. She was a typical country woman from northeastern Thailand, so of course she spoke Thai. And for a couple of hours we had the most wonderful conversation. I'll never forget it. He was a very gaunt fellow. Hollow cheeks, sunken eyes, very thin. I heard stories that he was tubercular, but I sometimes wonder if people didn’t assume that he was tubercular because of his looks.

He was much interested in me: here I was knocking around in this little car, interested in the ruins, and so on. But of course we got to talking about politics. This must have been about 1949 or 1950, and, as I recall, at that point it wasn't clear yet that the United States was going to come down squarely on the side of the French, who were trying to recover their control in Indochina after World War II, and he was one of the men fighting against this, fighting for Cambodian independence. The gist of his talk, and he repeated this again and again and again, was, in view of the American experience, having fought a war of independence against the British, why was it that the United States was not on their side now—Ho Chi Minh, and himself, and the other rebel leaders—in their war of independence against the French? And, of course, I told him that I couldn't agree with him more, but then he would go on with the same sort of talk.
William J. Gedney

He finally told me that if I was going to knock around Cambodia in this way I might get shot by some of his men or people of some other rebel group because they would assume that I was a Frenchman. He told me I should have an American flag on the car. So, when I got back to Bangkok, and before I went to Cambodia again—I didn’t want to go to the embassy and ask for a flag; they would want to know what it was for and they probably would have said, “No, don’t do that; don’t run around in this way”—I went to a tailor and drew a flag and he patched it together, and it worked! For some years I used that whenever I went to Cambodia. I did run into some trouble because of this, going through towns. The French stopped me a couple of times. The questioning was something like, "Embassy?" No. "Consulate?" No. "Take it down." So, I developed a practice of taking the flag down as I approached a town, and then when I got through the town I’d stop and get out and put the flag up again. Well, I never got shot at!

My next encounter with Dap Chuan was perhaps a year later. I was in Cambodia again, again looking at the ruins, taking a vacation from studies in Bangkok. Everyone used to go to the lounge in the hotel, after a long hot day looking at the ruins, for a drink—cognac and soda we usually drank—and there was M. R. Kukrit [Pramoj]; he was fairly young then, a journalist, and was with a group of his fellow journalists. I had heard that Dap Chuan was coming into town for a funeral; a cease fire was being declared between the rebels and the French so that he and some of his men could come into the town for the funeral. And I told Kukrit that I had heard this, that I had happened to have met the man on a previous occasion, and asked if he would like to meet him. “Oh yes!” he said, he would. So we went out. Somebody told us where to go and watch for Dap Chuan and what time, and we went out and sure enough he came along, and I stepped into the street as he came along and asked if he remembered me. “Oh, yes,” he said, he remembered me, and so I introduced them and walked away, and I’ve always thought that Kukrit had his doubts about Gedney after that! How come Gedney happened to be such pals with this guerrilla leader?!

My next encounter with him—well it wasn’t so much an encounter at all—was later on, perhaps in another year or so. I was in Phnom Penh, staying for some weeks, studying. Again I stayed at the French hotel, and suddenly one evening as I was in my room working or studying or whatever, I heard shooting all over town and I went down to the desk and asked what on earth was going on. They