

# GROWING UP AT THE RED RICE MILL

BY RANGSI RATANAPRAKARN

ARTWORK BY CH'ING KIAH KIEAN

100 years ago, rice farmers near Songhkla, Thailand would send their freshly-cut rice to the Red Rice Mill to be processed for sale. That's where Rangsi Ratanaprakarn's father ran the mill and raised his family across the street. The following is an excerpt from his short autobiographical book, *Growing Up at the Red Rice Mill*, featuring stories from his childhood.



Rangsi Ratanaprakarn was actually born on the 20th of May 1934, but because of a mix up after World War II, the government recorded his official birthday one year later, in 1935. His parents thought it wiser to keep him "officially" one year younger (although his mother always gave his real birth date when visiting the local fortune teller). He graduated from the Chulachon University in Bangkok in 1959 and then earned a Master's from the University of Illinois Campaign Urban (USA) in 1957. He returned to Bangkok and started a civil engineering company until retiring and returning to Songkhla. He is 7th generation Chinese-Thai.

## The Red Rice Mill

The Red Rice Mill is four stories tall. You can see lots of very small, square windows on the outside. They were built for ventilation. Back when the mill was in operation, there were people who worked on each floor. Their job was to make sure the belts and pulleys, connected to the steam engine, worked correctly. But it got hot inside, so they could open these windows and the air would come in and cool them down. There wasn't any electricity so the windows also provided light. There are corresponding windows on the lake-side of the rice mill. Back then the original roof was much lower. If you go upstairs on the inside, you can see where the original

windows open up and how they correspond to the windows on the street-side of the mill.

In the morning, my father would leave the house and walk across the street to the mill. He'd go through two small doors, now to the right of the Songkhla Heritage Society's glass office. He walked through the old doors, which were converted about 20 years ago by my brother-in-law to a car park. He'd walk to his office towards the back. We had an old staircase which went to what was then the 1st floor. You can still see where the staircase was attached to the smoke stack. It ran along the bricks. Now we've moved the staircase to the inside of the building (where the Smart Center is today).

I remember walking into the rice mill. They burned rice husks to heat the water boiler. The smoke went up the stack but because of the turbulence in the air, you could smell the smoke throughout the rice mill. It didn't smell bad - not like burning plastic today - but it wasn't very pleasant either.

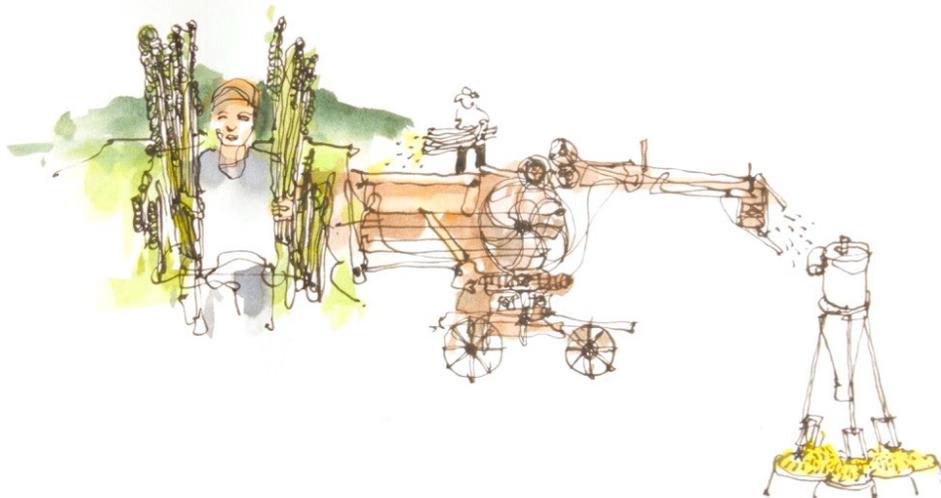


Right from the beginning there was a mistake in the design of the rice mill. The smoke stack you see today looks so nice, but it was never used. When my father's uncle designed the rice mill, he ordered a steam engine from England. Before it arrived, he decided to go ahead and build the smoke stack they would eventually need to attach to the boiler. That way, when the engine and boiler arrived, they could get started

right away. They imported high quality bricks from India for this first smoke stack. It was a good idea, but for some reason, the Chinese carpenter didn't read the plans correctly. The first (and still existing) smoke stack was built in the wrong place. They had to put the boiler and engine on the other side of the rice mill (where the stage is now). That meant that they then had to build another stack so they could get a draft to the boiler. This second stack was the one they used for so many years, but it was made from cheaper, local bricks. It wasn't as strong as the first stack made from bricks imported from India. So after the steam engine was no longer needed, they decided to dismantle the second stack. They thought the cheap bricks would be too dangerous to leave up, so it was dismantled. The smoke stack you see today was the one made from Indian bricks, the first stack, which was never used.

The breeze would come (from the lake) about 6 or 8 months out of the year. so it helped to blow and send the draft through the boiler and through to the stack.

The working boiler and engine were set up on the other side of the rice mill. In the corner, there was a boiler. With a fire, they boiled water which powered the steam engine. The steam engine turned one big wheel. From this one wheel there were many pulleys running throughout the rice mill. This was how they ground the rice. Today you can still see many places where the pulleys and belts ran. The roof in the main hall was much lower than now. Then in 2491, this area (the old roof) was demolished and rebuilt in concrete.



It was very noisy in the rice mill at all times of the day. You could hear a boom, boom, boom. That came from the steam engine. There was only one cylinder in the steam engine and it would shake the ground like a drum. It had a very low tone. The noise didn't bother me much but you could feel the ground shake. I could feel it at the house too. It went on all day, all night - but not all year. They only ran the engine about 8 or 9 months a year. Then they had to stop it and clean the boiler. They did this every year. Years later, when they stopped using the engine, people in the neighborhood complained that they missed the low sound and beat of the engine. They said they couldn't go to sleep without that drum-like rhythmic beat.

In addition to the boom, boom, boom - you would hear the clack, clack, clack of the belts and parts turning all around the mill.

The workers didn't talk much. They knew what they were doing. There was no yelling, but they did have to speak loudly to be heard over the noise of the engine and mill. They would change shifts every 8 hours. My father had a bell that was rung to signal the shift change. I still have this bell, which was made in England.

Originally, the pulleys and belts went up four stories high. They utilized gravity to mill and sort the rice. They carried the rice up four stories and then let it go. At one spot on the 2nd floor, the rice would enter a cyclone where it was separated - the light materials and the rice grains.

The separator was on the 2nd floor. This saved energy. If they had kept the separator on the ground floor they would have had to bring the rice up first. So they put the separator up way up and saved many steps. Finally, there was a shoot and three different bags which were lined up together. The different bags held, perfect rice, broken rice, and then some other things like the rice husks. The cyclone is still there. It used gravity to separate the rice. When it turned, the light things just got out on the top. and then they come down. The heavy particles, like rice, went through. Everything came to the bottom. This was the last step.

When the rice was processed there would be big bags on the warehouse. Each rice bag was about 100 kilograms. The workers had to carry them outside on their shoulders.

The main entrance, which most people use today, was modified after World War II. My father raised the entrance so trucks could easier come in and out. They used the rice mill to store rubber after World War II.

This boat you see close to the stage is a pleasure boat my father had built. He used it on the lake but didn't go out too far. There isn't any roof on the boat. There was just a little cover to protect him from the sun and a little cabin to steer the motor. He would go with two boat boys to help him. It drew a lot of water, because it was very heavily built. He didn't used a boat builder. My father designed it himself. He was very good with his hands. When he felt relaxed, he would go out with the boat. My mother would

put boiled eggs and rice in a cariole and go out on the boat and cook. I was very young.

I remember when my father started exporting rubber. This boat was built before that.

The current dock was built after World War II. Before that it was a wooden pier. It was much shorter back then. In those days, the water was quite deep. Even after World War II it was deep. I measured then at 6 feet. Now it's only 4.5 feet deep. It is silting up after the government built the sea port, which blocked the current. As a result, the water moves too slow. The natural flow of the water has been interrupted.

The little red building on the dock was also built after the war. When they knocked down the original roof, they used the old material. This little building was the cold storage, to keep ice for the fishermen. Originally, there were only 2 or 3 ice factories in Songkhla and they made big blocks of ice. So we had to order ice in advance and keep it in this building. How did they keep it cold? There was a side wall and my father put in some sand, which acted like an insulator to keep the temperature down. Then they crushed the ice. This was about 2530 (1987) - about 30 years ago. After they stopped exporting rubber, we used the rice mill to supply the fishing boats. Twenty years ago there were 500 fishing boats on the lake. Now there are only about 100 left.

The upstairs behind the glass Songkhla Heritage Society's office was remodeled three years ago to make space for toilets. Before that, there was a water tank there. It was quite thick. We had to pump water up there for the water boiler. The water from the lake was too salty to use in the boiler so we had to use fresh water from our well at the house. There are two shallow wells at my house and there is a pipeline under the road. Back in those days, the street was just dirt, so it was easy to built the pipeline. The water tank here was just extra because the two wells from the house weren't enough. We piped freshwater up and then all the way across (the street) to the other side where the rice mill is. It was very complicated. They didn't use the water tank at the mill much. Use to there wasn't any traffic here. We used steam engine to run a small pump.

## **Family Life**

I don't know if it was normal for those days, but my family was very peaceful. We lived the old-fashion way. We had to pay high respect to our father. He was way up high. Whatever he said we had to do. No questions asked. That's all. I couldn't talk to my father. That's why everyone was close to our mother. Our father did not talk much, but he gave good advice. He gave good reasons for what he said and kept things short. Don't do this, and why and so and so. I never got into trouble with him. He never beat us when we did something wrong. Instead, when the family went on vacation or a picnic at the beach, he wouldn't allow me to go. I had to stay at home as punishment.

I never had any arguments with my father, because I never questioned what he said. Everything he said I should do, I thought they were good things. He didn't not talk much. Three days would go by and he wouldn't speak a word with me.



We lived on the third floor. My father got up quite early in the morning. In the morning he came down to the 2nd floor and would go to his corner and read a book. I had to go down and prepare a cup of coffee and go to serve him. That was my chore. However I made the coffee, he never complained. At that time we used condensed milk. Sometimes I put two spoonfuls in. Sometimes one spoonfuls. Sometimes three spoonfuls. He never complained. He never made any comment. He was easy going. Then, everyday, we had to clean the ground floor and open the windows. No exceptions. Afterwards I'd go up to take a bath and go to school.

During the day, I never saw my father. He would walk across the street to work. He didn't want me to come over because it was dangerous. Back then there was a steam engine. It drove lots of belts and pulleys all over the mill. It was very noisy. Dusty too.

My mother never went out. She always stayed at home. We had two servants to do her work, but she did do the cooking. Sometimes she worked on fine materials for clothes. She would always take a nap after lunch. That's what I remember. I had to make sure not to make any noise.

We had a pump organ at home. I learned to play the organ.

After school, I normally played. A group of friends would come over and we'd go to play at different places. When I was 14 and 15 we played a lot of football. I didn't play after sunset. I stayed home and did my homework.



I didn't have any crushes during high school. In the old days, the boys and girls didn't go together. Even in college, I didn't have a girlfriend.

### **On the Lake**

When I was young, the other side of the lake looked much further away. Perhaps that's just my personal feeling. But now there is lots of development there. Back then I didn't see any buildings at all. It was just green. People who committed crimes, escaped from Songkhla and had to go to that side to hide.

The water in the lake was much cleaner then. You could see a lot of fish swimming by. Every time you came to the dock, you would see seahawks who dove all over the place catching fish. Now there are no birds, just pigeons.

The boats who brought the rice were Chinese junks which sailed around the lake. They would come in for one week and had to wait for the right wind to sail back home. Some came from the ocean, but only for a short time. Normally they came only by the lake - not from the open sea. Out there, there was no shelter.



I was quite good on the boat, paddling a canoe. I got my close friends together and we went many times out on the water. There were only three or four of us. One sat at the stern to steer the canoe. One time we were on the far side of Koh Nu Island and there was a swelling sea. We saw a cave and my friends wanted to take a closer look. They were so excited because they had never gone on my canoe. So I steered the canoe closer and just then a wave came up and pitched the boat inside. It was dark in the cave and we could see that the water was moving up. It all made a lot of noise and I had to steer very carefully. The light was coming in from under the boat in the water. Suddenly we hit a rock and get stuck. It was only a short moment the wave and the canoe leaned on one side and take in water and we were lucky because when we hit the rock it automatically took us down we slipped off the rock and out of the cave. After that we were very quiet. Later that night, I woke up and was sweating all over. For many years. I would wake up with nightmares. This is one of my most vibrant memories. I didn't know if any of my friends could swim. At that time nobody had life jackets. We were just kids. I think we were 14 or 15. And very lucky to get out.

I went almost everywhere by canoe. I'd go out half-a-day on the lake. My father would sometimes have to use the motorboat to go out and find me, but he never beat me. He just said "You have to tell me when you go and when you plan to come back. Let me know where you are planning to go". The way he talked, I knew it was very serious. But, he never beat me. I never stayed overnight. I didn't sail when I was younger, but my father gave me a small dinghy, 12 feet long, called "Heron". It came from England. At that time, however, I wasn't interested in sailing. It was too slow. You had to pay a lot of attention to it, watch how to set the sail, control the steering, and keep your balance. It wasn't any fun for me at that time, but I enjoyed sailing when I grew up. I gain a lot of experience and learned that you have to respect the sea. The boat is still with me. It's upstairs, in the loft.

## The Neighborhood

There were many business all around the rice mill - mostly wholesale businesses: There was silk from China, fine ceramics, and a Chinese medicine store. This Chinese medicine store (the building) is the only still there, more or less, as I remember it.

There were a couple of hairdressers in town, maybe five places where women would go, like today, to get their hair done. My mother used to go too, but not like now. Today, women have to go regularly to the office. Back then, women worked mainly at home, so my mother used to go only once a week.



There were three blacksmiths in XX road. I always liked to go and see what they were doing. It was very noisy and that captured my attention - the fire and red hot steel. Two or three men would hit it with a big hammer, banging on the steel. I enjoyed watching them as they worked, when I was about 10 years old.

There wasn't a candy store back then. There were Chinese street sellers. They carried their deserts on their head, like on a big plate. Mostly it was young girls, and they beat a stick to beat to let people know they were coming. Sometimes they had a monkey or a chicken. Their deserts were in a pot to keep them warm. When someone wanted to eat something, they'd take it down. They would make a mold and at the end you could eat the whole thing.

I remember when they paraded the Chinese gods through town. They gods swayed and they'd go inside the rice mill. That frightened me. They even came inside the house. I didn't appreciate what was going on at the time. I was only about 12 or 13. I would run to my mother. I was scared.



## **Learning to Drive**

Our family owned a car, which was a little unusual. I think it was an Austin, from England. More important was our truck. Because of the rice mill, we had to have a truck to carry the rice back to the customers in the countryside. My father ordered a Mercedes (Benz) diesel, a two-wheel drive with a double set of wheels. It was a work truck and so it didn't have a body or padded seats. The seats were wooden. The truck was just intended to deliver goods.

Sometimes, I would go with the driver to deliver rice. I loved that, to see the countryside. The roads were dirty, everything was dusty, and the country houses were made from cheap materials.

The driver taught me how to drive but I was too short to sit on the seat and change gears. I had to stand up to reach the accelerator and press the clutch while I rested my butt on the edge of the seat. The wheel was very hard to turn. There was no power steering in those days. The wheel was very heavy.

Of course I never went alone. I always went with a driver. My father knew that I was driving, but then people started coming to him to complain. They were scared I would cause an accident. That's how I learned to drive when I was 12 years old.

## **Graduating High School**

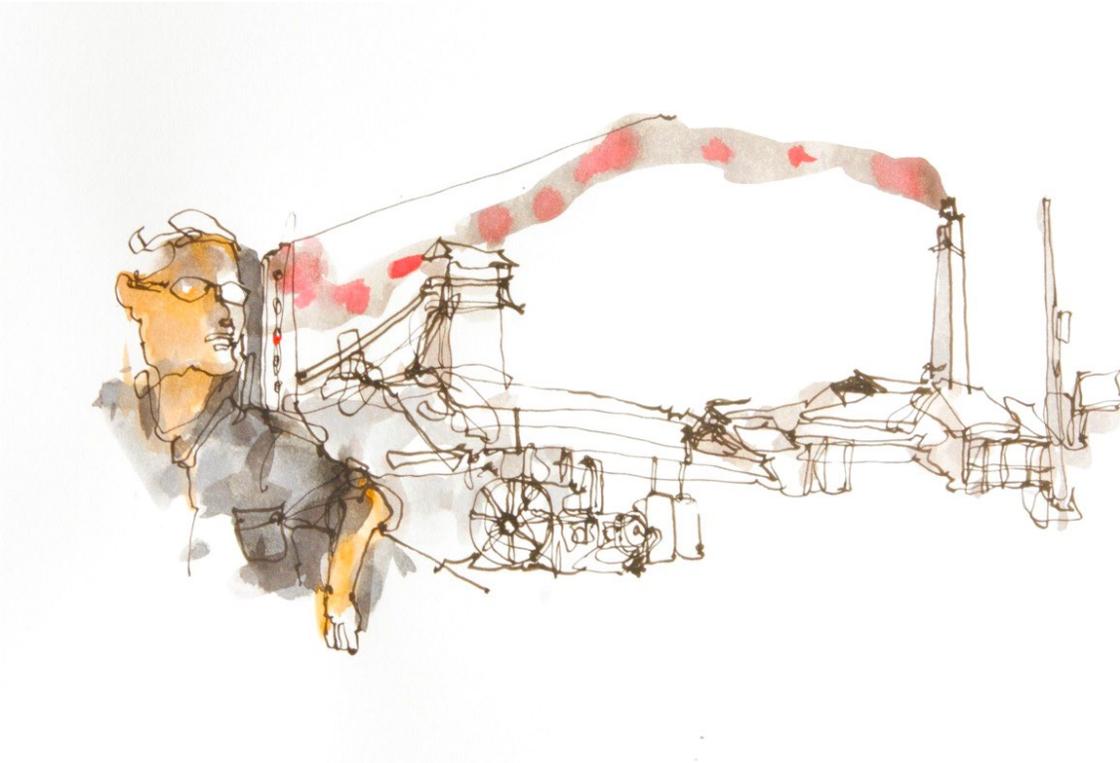
My father thought going to college was a good thing. He said he didn't have the chance to go to college, which is why he was interested in funding schools. He was a self-educated person. He could read, write, and speak English, Chinese, Yawi, and Sanskrit as well. Most Chinese stone tablets found in the Songkhla lake basin were translated to Thai by my father. Prince of Songkhla University gave him an honorary degree (PhD) in Business. They gave him two honorary degrees, because he donated to schools and gave to their gift funds.

Most of the children bought things to eat right outside the school, but not me and my cousins. My mother cooked, and she had a driver to bring food to me everyday. In the beginning the other kids made fun of me. Later on they got used to it. A driver brought lunches from home.

I didn't feel that our family was wealthier than the other families, because the way we did things wasn't too much different than the others. I think we ate better food. Looking back, I think we lived a little better than other families.

After graduating high school, I kept coming back every year, but communication and transportation is not as easy as it is now. The train never came on time.

At that time there weren't any airplanes to go to Bangkok. You had to take the train. Today's Songkhla train station looks like I remember it, but back then the station and the trains were very noisy. The trains were pulled by steam engines. All the windows were open but you had to take care when looking out. Burning cinders from the engine would fly in and burn a hole in your shirt, if they landed on you. Smoke from the engine always blew inside while you were trying to look out. What I remember most was the way they rang the bell - two or three times - as the train started moving out from the station.



When I went to Bangkok to take the entrance examination, we went by train. At that time, there was a man at the station who looked after everything. They took us somewhere and organized everything for our group. The father of another boy took us on the train. Before they departed, the train blew the horn then the locomotive started moving. I think they carried too many wagons. I could feel a bang-bang-bang, from all the wagons being pulled one after another, but our wagon did not move. I think the wheels on the locomotive were spinning. There were twelve wagons - goods and passengers combined. Later, it was just passengers, but in the first few years, I think it was combined. The cargo was always in the back. Smoke kept coming in. There was no air-conditioning. I got cinders on my shirt once and burned two holes in my shirt.

At the entrance examination in Bangkok, there were five people who sat with me. I was the only one to become an engineer. The others became doctors. In Songkhla at

that time the girls school and boys school were in different locations. There were many boys in the graduation class. There were 20 of us in the graduating class. I still have the list. I think more than 50% went to college.

We think we stayed in Bangkok almost one month. We didn't go to a hotel. My father had a friend and we stayed with them. It was very crowded, and we needed a mosquito net at night, but we enjoyed it.

On the way back, my father thought it would be better for me to go by ship. My father knew the captain of a coastal ship. It was a combined cargo and passenger ship. The first class had a deck with a beautiful view. In the evening, we had to dress up like in England. I'd dress up and go to dinner at the same table with the captain. The second class passengers weren't not allowed to come up. There as a partition. I enjoyed the trip, because they stopped at Koh Samui and unload and load cargo. On the way back they had to load coconuts. From a barge they would throw coconuts - one, two, three.... one by one. It looked funny but nice - the way they did things. There were lots of coconuts. That's all they did on the island all day long. At night the ship weighted anchor and cruise on to Bangkok.

We lived in that house (in Bangkok) for a couple of months and then my mother went to check for a private lodging, like a dormitory, for college. and I moved into that place.

## **The Japanese Invasion during World War II**

My father heard that the Japanese were coming the night before the invasion. He and a small group of men drove to the beach and saw their ships preparing for a daybreak landing.

My father was a squad leader of Songkhla Security Guard. He drove his car out in the middle of the night with couple of his subordinates who came to report that there were many ships coming in from the high seas. All the (Japanese) ships anchored off shore had their navigation lights turned off.

My father rushed back by car to civil officer club about 300 meters away from the beach to telephone to a military battalion located at Hat Yai, 25 kilometer away. When he came down from the club to drive the car back home. Japanese soldiers were at the foot step of staircase, he had to turn back, climbed Khao Noi (a hill) behind the club and hid there for two days. After two days they were hungry and had no other choice than to come back down. They knew they would be arrested by the Japanese. Finally he was arrested at gunpoint. After intensive questions they let my father free.

The morning the Japanese invaded, my family (without my father) left town and crossed over the lake to our property in Hua Khao. The next night we escaped further by a boat to Koh Yor and stayed on a small lakeside pavilion in the a temple grounds.

My father showed up soon after with many scratches on his forearms and a deep cut by barnacles on his foot. Blood was dripping when he walked up from a pier.

It turns out that the Japanese spy, XXX, had intervened and saved my father. After he and the other men came down from Tangkuan hill, they had been arrested and questioned by the Japanese. The spy knew my father from town and argued to the Japanese military that my father didn't pose a threat. He wasn't involved in any military actions. So the Japanese military let him go. After he was released, my father started to ask around where we had gone to. He hitched a ride to where we were staying.

The weeks and months after that were very difficult times for everyone. Everyone became poorer. There wasn't any money, no food, and no medicine. Cases of Malaria increased. People left town. We also moved even farther away, to Bang Klum. We didn't fully trust the Japanese. No one could communicate with them. My father thought it would be better to move farther away but he wanted to stay close to the water. If we had to escape even farther or live off the land, he wanted to be close to the sea. He knew the sea. He could sail and fish.

My father started traveling in the countryside around Songkhla. It was hard to get around but he visited his agencies who still owed him money. He was trying to collect on old debts, but of course the farmers didn't have any money either. In the end, he wasn't very successful in collecting on the debts. I don't know how he made money but somehow we survived.

From time to time my father chanced it and visited the rice mill. He came back to Songkhla during the daytime to check on his property. He'd always return in the evening to stay with us. He also somehow found a radio so he could listen to reports by the BBC. In the end we didn't go very far away. We all adjusted. The Japanese didn't mistreat us or others in Songkhla. So people slowly came back to Songkhla. Some came back to sell what food they had to the Japanese to make money, but even with that you couldn't buy anything.

A Japanese doctor had moved into our house opposite the rice mill, and the rice mill was turned into a medical storage depot. I think there was even a red cross painted on the roof. The doctor could speak English as could my father, so they could communicate directly with one another.

After three years - during the fourth and last year of the occupation - we moved back to the rice mill. My family and I stayed in a corner of the building - exactly where the Songkhla Smart Center is today. The upstairs was full of old machinery so we lived on the ground floor and slept under mosquito nets.

Everything in town was closed - including school. There wasn't any school, and for a young boy like me - that was great. I didn't have to go to school and even played with the doctor's son. His family gave me candy and chocolate. Of course I didn't really

know what was going on. However, while I played in the street, my parents worried. They were moody sometimes. Even at that age, I could see the concern in their faces.

When the Japanese left at the end of the war, we cleaned up our old house and moved back in. The Japanese doctor didn't take any of our valuables. That wasn't the Japanese way. School reopened and everyone was passed to the next grade without taking final exams. That's what I liked most.

One day, one of my father's friends came to see him and said, that the Thai police were looking for him. Again, he was afraid - this time because of the Thai authorities. He thought the Thai police would accuse him of being a collaborator with the Japanese. He was, after all, somewhat friendly with the Japanese doctor. It turns out it was exactly the opposite. They asked him to please re-open the rice mill. The people all around Songkhla were now - after four years of war - very poor. They had no rice to eat. Some of the farmers were growing rice but they took it to the Malaysian border and sold it there. They could get a much better price there and besides there weren't enough rice mills open to mill all the rice.

My father told the Thai authorities, he couldn't do much but suggested that they set up a co-op. He argued that without regulation and restrictions, Thai farmers would continue to export the rice across the border where it was sold at a higher price. That was good for individual farmers and rice mills but bad for the people in Songkhla who didn't have enough rice to eat. My father said only with a co-op and restricting competition could they set up a system to supply rice to Thais in and around Songkhla at a reasonable price. My father was quite smart and very giving. I think he could have earned a lot of money without the co-op but he did what he thought was right for the people. That's one thing that made my father well known in this part of the country.

## **The Future**

I don't think too much about my age. I think I will be here a couple more years. As long as I can help myself, that's ok. I enjoy life and have a lot of friends. I don't think too much, travel a lot, have lots of friends, and take it easy. My life is both in Bangkok and in Songkhla.

If I don't take care of the rice mill and fix it up, it will quickly be gone after I die. This is an old building. I run it now at a loss. If the building was gone tomorrow, I would feel so sad but I wouldn't rebuilt it.

Everything you do, you have to make sure it lasts a long time and is prosperous.

My time is over. Now I want to support my son and family and the Songkhla community to make their dreams come true. This is my legacy. I think about my father and mother when I am here. My father didn't have a chance to go to college. He

wanted to - but his uncle, who ran the rice mill back then, said he better come and work for me. So my father obeyed and became a clerk for his uncle. He earned a salary of 20 Bhat a month. When he married and had children, his uncle raised his salary to 50 Bhat.

But that didn't stop him from learning and educating himself. He taught himself to speak and write English. He could speak Sanskrit and some of the local dialect Malayu. He read newspapers and magazines to learn about how steam engines work, how to improve the rice mill, and become a better businessman. I think that is why he donated money to the local universities when he got older. He thought education was important in order to be more prosperous and happy in life.

My father loved this place so much. I want to keep it to now hand it over to my children. Because of the Red Rice Mill, my father and our family had a good life. I could go canoeing on the lake. Learn to drive a car. I went go to college. All the stories I told you. Later, I started my own company and have travelled all around the world. This was all made possible because my father and mother worked hard - and because of the Red Rice Mill. I learned from my father the importance of a good education, working hard, and of helping other people.



Now, I want to give back to Songkhla, my hometown. When I retired and moved back to Songkhla, many families here in the street had moved out. Now - also together with the Songkhla Heritage Society - we are trying to improve the neighborhood. We help preserve Songkhla's history and repair the old buildings. Songkhla's old town and the Red Rice Mill should be a joy and happy place for Songkhla's people and our visitors. Perhaps others will be inspired by my family's story and the Red Rice Mill. I want everyone in Songkhla to have the chance to live a happy and prosperous life like I did.

There are lots of rich people in Songkhla but just being rich is no good. Nobody lives alone. We are all here together. You have to be part of the community. With the support of my friends here in Songkhla, we work together to make the old town and the Red Rice Mill a good place to visit. I can't do everything but I can help to kick things off. Hopefully other people in Songkhla, who think the same way, will work together. We will work together to make the old town a place that inspires others to live prosperous, happy, and generous lives.

s to make sure the belts and pulleys, connected to the steam engine, worked correctly. But it got hot inside, so they could open these windows and the air would come in and cool them down. There wasn't any electricity so the windows also provided light. There are corresponding windows on the lake-side of the rice mill.

The artwork for the "Red Rice Mill" is by Ch'ing Kiah Kiean from Pinang, Malaysia. Although Kieran trained as an architect, he decided to focus his energies on bringing old buildings to life with his unique style of "urban sketching" instead of instead of designing new houses.

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