

Human i 2

We are in Chiang Rai, Thailand, in what is known as the Golden Triangle where Myanmar, Laos, and Thailand intersect. A place where a century ago, an estimated 100 thousand elephants roamed freely. Today, perhaps 2% of that number exist in the wild and an equal amount lives in captivity. What happened to the revered spiritual and national symbol of Buddhism and of Thailand? In short, they were employed, worked to death, and then the jobs were outsourced to machines which is roughly the same evolutionary path that is facing mankind. The elephant, as a beast of burden, was the prototypical war machine and logging



tool. Their strength and intelligence combined to make them invaluable and when paired with a mahout, who is basically an elephant whisperer, the potential value increased. Over time, however, the wars ended and heavy machinery was used in the logging industry and the surviving elephants received their pink slips. The mahouts and families who owned the elephants, which were essentially small independent businesses, retained the burden of feeding and caring for an

A female
elephant

animal who could no longer generate cash flow. Enter the era of trained elephants who were shipped off to zoos and circuses around the world. In Bangkok, mahouts would wander the streets with their two-ton burdens, begging for people to buy bananas for feed. This still happens today in the rural/touristic areas. Elephant camps were set up where tourists could come to ride, wash, eat and cuddle with the elephants, in the process conditioning them to lose all of their natural survival instincts. There are still hundreds of these places in Thailand, but nowadays, a new generation of rehabilitation retreats are attempting to educate people and de-anthropomorphize the elephants in order to reverse the extinction process and train them how to be elephants again while providing areas of native habitat to live in as they were intended. We went to one such location near Chiang Rai called Elephant Valley, which is essentially a retirement community for our very large friends. We learned a lot about the intelligence, sensitivity, and history of the residents and felt good about ourselves for supporting the process.

Now, this is where I do what I do and take one of my analogy tangents. Despite the fact that in Asia, my size may make me feel like an elephant, I wonder if it goes further than that. Are we all destined to a future of purposeful obsolescence as we are retired from the workforce? Are there parallels between the Phoenix Valley of the Sun and Elephant Valley in Chiang Rai? When our constructive working lives come to an end do we need to be taught how to re-socialize in order to live out our days with dignity in harmony with others? On a larger scale, is Artificial Intelligence a part of the same relentless wave of progress and destruction that began with the industrial revolution? Are we all destined to become a part of the 'elephant in the room' that we recognize but don't want to talk about? Is that why we are compelled to care about the fate of elephants? Do we see ourselves and futures in their past and present?

Wat Rong Khun, perhaps better known to foreigners as the White Temple, is a contemporary, unconventional, privately-owned art exhibit in the style of a Buddhist temple in Chiang Rai Province, Thailand. It is owned by Chalermchai Kositpipat, who designed, constructed, and opened it to visitors in 1997

We learned today that elephants are very socially sensitive creatures who try to hide their feelings while just trying to fit into a parade and feel good about themselves so that they can relax and be happy. That sounds like most of the people I know which makes it important to remember that whatever 'Valley' we find ourselves in, we are all in this thing together. A quote by Peter Corneille, a 17th-century French Dramatist stated that: 'If anyone wants to know what elephants are like, they are like people only more so.'



**The White Temple
near Chiang Rai**