

Perspectives on Thailand 2004

Chulalongkorn University, Bangkok, Thailand

Final Report

This special summer study program, also entitled “The Culture and Society of Thailand,” was conducted under the joint auspices of the Department of Asian Studies and the College of Extended Studies, San Diego State University, and the Continuing Education Center at Chulalongkorn University from June 14 to July 23, 2004. Eleven participants registered and were accompanied by the program director, Dr. Allen Wittenborn.

The aim of the program was to familiarize students with a major Asian country and its position within the context of the Far East. Thailand was chosen in part due to its likely growing role as a leading political, economic, and military power in Southeast Asia. There is every indication that over the next decade and more Thailand will join the ranks as a Newly Industrializing Country (NIC), rivaling Malaysia and Singapore in Southeast Asia, and possibly competing with Taiwan and South Korea. I also realized that Thailand is “visitor friendly,” being safe, clean, efficient, and inexpensive.

Working closely with SDSU’s College of Extended Studies, and Chulalongkorn University’s Continuing Education Center, the 2004 summer program in Thailand was an immense success, meeting all the goals that I had envisioned, and more. It was an excellent balance of classroom lectures, language instruction, off-campus activities, long-distance travel, and free time for students to explore on their own. The cost was reasonable and the host institution particularly accommodating to the needs of the participants.

Following is a more detailed breakdown of the program’s different components.

Classroom Instruction

Students were provided with 23 lectures by 19 different instructors. Each lecture was three hours in length, and in all covered virtually every aspect of Thailand, including its culture, history, economics, political and legal systems, art and architecture, contemporary literature, religion, education, and the various ethnic tribes. Also covered were the problems of organized crime and money laundering, the impact of globalization on Thailand, Thailand’s role in ASEAN, and the issue of terrorism in Thailand and Southeast Asia. Two lectures dealt with the different perspectives of Thais and Americans on Thai-US relations.

Most of the lecturers were senior professors from Chulalongkorn University (“Chula”), including three department chairs and one dean. All had received their Doctor’s Degrees either in the United States or in England, and all were highly published, with several of them enjoying an international reputation. In addition, the instructors included a Constitutional (Supreme) Court justice, a member of royalty and senior official in the Ministry of Culture, an elected Member of Parliament, and two NGO officials who worked with the hill tribes.

According to student evaluations, not all instructors were rated well, which is not unusual among students. In my own personal view, I found all the lecturers to be far better than average, and with only three exceptions, the level of English was quite good or excellent. In any case, many of the lectures turned into dialogues or conversations, and the students were welcomed and encouraged to speak up and ask questions.

The lectures were held in a small meeting room around an oval table. Most lectures were accompanied by PowerPoint and/or slide presentations. About half the instructors handed out articles or book chapters that they had written. As noted above, all lectures lasted for a full three hours, some though not all broken up with one short break.

Language Instruction

The aim of the Thai language lessons was not to develop any level of language fluency, but designed as an introduction to the culture and to provide the students with a modicum of language facility, e.g. “survival Thai.” Students met with the same language teacher for eleven ninety-minute sessions for a total of 16.5 hours. The concentration was on using Thai for basic needs such as directional instructions, shopping, telling time, counting, and ordering in a restaurant. A final presentation included each pair of students writing five dialogues each based on a short paragraph describing a particular situation.

Most, though not all students, enjoyed the lessons. The main criticism was that too much grammar was introduced, and not enough work on pronunciation. It should be noted that Thai is a tonal language, and includes many long vowels. Mastering these sounds is crucial to being understood by Thais even if grammar and vocabulary are severely limited. Therefore, it is recommended that next time more attention be paid to pronunciation and to sentence patterns and less to grammatical rules.

Off-Campus Activities

These included excursions within and in the vicinity of Bangkok. Their aim was twofold: First, to allow the students to visit important sites and learn both the history and the currency of Thai culture led by the instructors or professional guides. Second, to reinforce classroom lectures with onsite “real world” observations. For example, a morning lecture on Thai politics was coordinated with an afternoon visit to the Thai Parliament where students were escorted by one of its elected members; a lecture on Buddhism was followed by a visit to Wat Po, one of the most venerable Buddhist temples in Thailand; a lecture on Thai education led to a visit to an elementary school; and a lecture on Thai classical art and architecture was complemented by the same instructor conducting an extended tour of the Royal Palace.

Other activities included a very interesting visit to a Thai medium-security prison. After a brief but informative introduction by the Deputy Commander of the prison, our group was allowed to visit every area of the institution, including the living quarters of the inmates. This was a most valuable addition to the program which had not been originally planned. Another unplanned activity was to the National Defense Studies Institute, a senior military facility similar to the US

War College. The group was first briefed by an aide, and then questions entertained by various officers, mostly generals, and by the institute's Commandant, a four-star general. A third unplanned excursion was a full-day trip to the 19th-century royal palace of Bang Pa In, and to the ancient ruins of Ayutthaya, about forty miles outside Bangkok. It may be noted that these extra activities entailed no additional costs to the students.

Weekend Travel

Two weekend trips were included in this program. The first was an overnight visit to the southern Thai beaches at Cha Am and Hua Hin, the latter considered Thailand's oldest resort and where Thailand's king and queen currently reside. Several sites were visited on the way to and the return from Hua Hin. These included a Buddhist temple and several royal palaces built during the 19th and early 20th centuries by various kings, and a stop at the Sofitel Central Hotel, the original railway station hotel and where several movies have been filmed, including "The Killing Fields." These two days proved a good blend of learning history and enjoying free time.

The same could be said of the second and longer four-day weekend bus trip to the north of Thailand. On the first day, the group reached the historical parks of Si Satchanalai and Sukhothai, the location of kingdoms that preceded Ayutthaya by about four centuries. The second day included a stop at the elephant camp at Lampang and time spent in the markets of Chiangmai, where the group would stay for two nights. Saturday's excursions included a visit to the temple area of Doi Suthep, a mountain retreat, and stops at arts and crafts workshops. That evening the group attended a special cultural performance featuring Thai classical dance and a traditional Northern dinner. However, much of the time in Chiangmai, the major northern city and Thailand's second largest, was spent in the students venturing on their own, especially to the famous night market. Some proceeded north to the famous Golden Triangle area.

In addition to the sites visited on both these trips, a good deal of contemporary Thai life was witnessed since the bus stopped regularly at local eateries and shops. The change in terrain and the different flora and fauna could also be seen, showing the wide range of Thailand's landscape and climate.

Free Time

Students from the outset were encouraged to use their free time to explore as much as possible Thailand and the surrounding region. Even with the regular schedule of lectures, language lessons and off-campus activities, students had ample time to be on their own, including afternoons, evenings, and three weekends. Bangkok was quickly scouted out as students covered most of the day and night life, meeting local Thai young people in the process. Very quickly, the group became accustomed to Thai daily lifestyles and began immediately to gain a new perspective on their own personal situation.

Longer trips were made on the weekends, including short jaunts to Burma (Myanmar) and Cambodia, principally to Angkor Wat. Others extended their northern weekend stay to visit Northern Thailand, while some spent weekends at Ko Samui, Ko Chang, and Pattaya. It is my

understanding that every one of the group made at least one long-distance trip. These trips were made individually and on their own. At the end of the program, several students extended their stay by several days or as long as a month. Some students have indicated to me their deep interest in returning to Thailand in the near future.

Accommodations and Meals

Students were housed in the Sasa International House, an on-campus facility for putting up official visitors to the University. Normally, students would be assigned to a dormitory, but because it was already filled and due to the small number of our own students, they were upgraded to Sasa, at not extra cost to them. These rooms were hotel-like, average size, comfortable, with a small refrigerator and a veranda. The rooms were attended to and provided clean sheets and towels daily. In general, the rooms were far superior to regular dormitory living. (Any future programs will likely be assigned to the dormitory.)

The program included all breakfasts for six weeks and lunches and dinners for the first week only. This was intended to encourage students to experience the wide range of cuisine in Bangkok, both on and off campus. While this adds to the overall cost to the students, food prices in Thailand are exceptionally inexpensive.

Students had mixed reviews about the breakfasts. It seems that some students were unable to deal with Thai food in the morning, although I had no problem with the meals. In any case, the canteen that served the breakfasts was very accommodating and would provide Western fare upon request. In future, I hope that participants will be less averse to accepting Thai breakfasts.

Institutions

A point should be made that the great success of this program was almost entirely the result of the excellent administration and support provided by SDSU's College of Extended Studies and the Continuing Education Center at Chulalongkorn University. The former made initial program registration and paperwork easy and uncomplicated. Chula's Center was absolutely unparalleled in its efficiency and thoroughness which resulted in a most outstanding program. The program that I initially envisioned was met, and much much more. While I have refrained from mentioning specific names, I cannot avoid pointing to Vikki Serrano-Ruiz and Kevin Carter at SDSU who were always on call and available for the most minute questions, and upon whom I relied heavily to work out many last-minute details.

The director and staff at Chula's Center was equally outstanding. In particular, Dr. Surapeepan Chatraporn and her two assistants, Napasorn Bovornkitti (Bua) and Kritiya Sutticheun (Noon) were available 24 hours a day. These three individuals, and the center for which they worked, were instrumental in making this study program such a phenomenal success. I do not have the space to discuss each and every service they provided; suffice it to say that they never missed a beat and carried out their very onerous tasks with a most pleasing disposition. I cannot but be grateful for all of these people and their exceptional contribution.

As a result, I heartily recommend that this program be repeated in 2005.