

NUS X CRRU

20TH
FIELD
STUDIES

PEACEFUL VIBES

2023 / 2566

Introduction: Field Studies



Dr. Sornchai Munghthaisong, President of Chiang Rai Rajabhat University



Students at the President's Meeting



Dr Nattaphon Santhi



Dr Carl Grundy-Warr

Introduction: Field Studies

“As a craft, research methods can best be learned through experience.” (1) The most effective and meaningful way to learn through experience is to understand the challenges, obstacles, and joys of doing fieldwork. Students may learn through online and published materials. Those materials may provide important historical, social, and political background and a conceptual toolkit for students to help them think about their respective experiential contexts. However, it is through actual field-based projects that students have to make decisions for themselves when undertaking their research.

Field studies is a course designed to introduce students to field-based learning. Students keep individual notebooks, engage in group projects, and immerse in inter-cultural exchanges. A key aim of the course is to provide students with opportunities to engage in fieldwork, and to apply knowledge and skills from courses they have taken in university. Whilst the field studies was initiated as a geography course, students from different academic backgrounds, faculties, and disciplines have participated since the course was initiated in 2001. For instance, in 2023, we have students from Geography, Environmental Studies, Psychology, Social Work, Mechanical Engineering, Medicine, Global Studies, Political Science, and Southeast Asian Studies.

A basic aim of Field Studies is to build students' confidence to undertake out-of-class research and to engage in projects within a variety of environmental and social contexts. Field Studies provides opportunities for students to apply and deepen a variety of necessary soft and hard skills. These skills are often taken for granted, but should actually be practiced, applied, and deepened. They include taking focused notes and making sense of notes taken; how to record and transcribe interviews; how to utilise the complimentary skills that different project group members have; how to work within and across cultures; the importance of accurate translation and transcriptions within cross- and multi-cultural contexts; how to use devices and apps to enhance fieldwork; and working alongside team 'buddies' from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds.

Introduction: Field Studies

Before students enter into actual field-based contexts, it is essential to provide them with health and safety workshops, basic language classes, and readings related specifically or the places where their field-based learning is situated. Those preparatory workshops are vital to help students appreciate the necessity of safety, well-being, and responsibility for each other and for the whole group when travelling and staying in unfamiliar settings.

Prior to fieldwork, the course coordinator and helper team engaged in a 3-day Wilderness First Aid course run by ARIS Medical. Students engaged in health, safety and risk assessment workshops. The students also attended some Thai language classes too, which equipped them with the essential vocabulary needed during their travels.



Wilderness First Aid: Water rescue exercise



Introduction: Field Studies

After a three-year lull due to COVID-19 pandemic, it has become possible to resume field-based experiential learning modules. FS23 has focused on northern Thailand (Chiang Mai and Chiang Rai). The 20th iteration of the field module was devised to incorporate three key sections requiring different forms of experiential learning.

Section One was based in the city of Chiang Mai where students engaged in small team-based projects within the city and its environs. The aim of this section is to test students' abilities to undertake basic fieldwork, including observations, interviews, and small team-based learning. Before their fieldwork, students had a field trip to Akha Ama Living Factory and a film on the Mekong presented by a filmmaker and journalist.



Sharing by Akha Lee in the Akha Ama Living Factory



Lecture by Dr Carl & Tom Fawthrop on "Bird Egg" Island

Section One: Chiang Mai

The following section focuses on the group projects undertaken by students in Chiang Mai.

Locally-sourced coffee in Chiang Mai

The team began an investigation of the different strategies that Akha Ama Coffee and Ponganes Coffee Roasters undertake to promote Thai-grown coffee.



The project begins with the inspiration for their investigation at Akha Ama Living Factory, where Lee Ayu's sharing on his social enterprise shaped the project's target population, scope, and motive: to investigate how local coffee brands promote locally-grown coffee to its consumers. To achieve this, a comparative study was conducted to compare the different promotional strategies of various local coffee brands in Chiang Mai.



Section One: Chiang Mai

Lee Ayu's social enterprise recognises "agricultural entrepreneurs" and helps communities to develop. The coffee packaging displays the faces, names and/or villages of the Akha farmers who grew the coffee. This sparked our interest in the different approaches undertaken to recognise locally-grown coffee, and develop the Akha community.

To prepare for their investigation, they conducted pre-fieldwork research on social media to identify other local coffee brands and their social media strategies as a basis of comparison. Through this process, they found their second coffee brand for comparison, Ponganes Coffee Roasters. Social media research also allowed them to form initial impressions of how Akha Ama and Ponganes Coffee present themselves to the coffee community.

Social media research helped them understand how Akha Ama and Ponganes each present their coffee brand to consumers and their focus on marketing locally-grown coffee: Akha Ama emphasises the humans behind the coffee whereas Ponganes' features the more technical coffee making process and its coffee machinery.

They compared the landscapes (location and aesthetics) of the two brands' physical stores, surprised to find that Ponganes was a takeaway counter instead of a sit-in cafe like Akha Ama. Akha Ama is located on a busy main road with high volumes of repeat customers, whereas Ponganes is on a quieter street with sporadic customers. Both stores received foreign customers, though interestingly, more Hong Kong customers visit Ponganes, while Akha Ama sees more European and Korean customers.



Akha Ama Coffee



Ponganese Coffee Roasters

Section One: Chiang Mai

Mobilities and Disabilities in Chiang Mai

Their project aimed to investigate how a holistic ecosystem of infrastructural and service provision toward accessible mobility for persons with disabilities (PWDs) in Thailand can be achieved. Their research methodologies involved finding local contacts, empathy research using a wheelchair, interviews, and secondary research.



They had the privilege to interview Mr Johannes, a representative from Rajanagarindra Institute of Child Development (RICD), and Ms Yaay, a PWD employed at RICD. They also toured medical facilities and workshops that repair and customise wheelchairs. Additionally, they visited the Northern Region School for the Blind and interviewed Ms Kulnuchit, a specialist teacher.



Section One: Chiang Mai

They observed the physical and social obstacles toward mobility and some of the innovative and localised solutions tackling immobility. Empathy research allowed them to understand the realities and constraints that the majority of PWDs still face today. They personally experienced the obstacles that persons with disabilities (PWDs) face when manoeuvring through Chiang Mai on a wheelchair. The unfinished sidewalk, open drains, potholes and lamp posts make pavements impossible to traverse. When navigating the poorly constructed streets is impossible, the roadside becomes a dangerous, yet unavoidable alternative. Despite various efforts to empower PWDs, the reality is that mobility is still an issue for a majority of them.

Despite improvements, city planning is yet to be inclusive on a wide scale. Moreover, societal attitudes shape the lives of PWDs, Yaay shared how Thai parents are still overprotective of their children despite them seeking for independence. This results in many of them being confined to the household instead of being freely mobile.

As an Robert Hensel, a PWD once said “There is no greater disability in society, than the inability to see a person as more.”

For mobility improvements to be carried out on a large scale, societal attitudes have to change. No amount of royal decree or legislation can cover all the mundane yet challenging daily routines of PWDs. People’s mindsets must be changed from the ground up in order to improve both their physical and social mobility and we strongly believe that visibility and awareness is crucial to achieving this goal.



Section One: Chiang Mai

Indigenous Ethnic Groups: Representations and Realities

Ethnic minorities are commonly misunderstood and misrepresented by the Thai government and overall Thai community. It is reductionistic to wholeheartedly believe national narratives (findings in The Highland People Discovery Museum) and the accounts of our interviewees (Akha Lee and Mimi). Everything we view is partial and situated. It is important to consider our positionality and think critically of the information presented. By challenging them, we can form a more objective and holistic understanding of Thailand's ethnic groups.



The group was inspired by the stories of the ethnic people who strive to improve the quality of living of others. They continue to uphold righteous values, fostering sustainable social entrepreneurship. Additionally, they defy the convenient and superficial social norms of merely disseminating profits, by ensuring the younger generations are aware of sustainable crop cultivation techniques and are taught ethical tourism.



Section One: Chiang Mai

Ethnic costumes are visual representations of cultures, symbolising a consistent sense of belonging and cultural pride despite designs varying over time. They are more than superficial fashion statements. We must be mindful of commodifying them as our touristic ignorance causes ethnic minorities to over-rely on tourism, hence devaluing traditional cultures.

The sale of fairly-priced handicrafts from seven tribes, improves their quality of life through sufficient wages supporting tribal employees. Nonetheless, the lack of proper certification of such shops by the World Trade Organisation (WTO) and the influx of WTO workers embarking on “rescue missions” highlight forced assimilation instead of integration.



The above sight of Shan migrant workers draws similarity to the migrant workers in Singapore and their unsafe working conditions – the lack of proper transportation and congregation beside roads. Thai employers’ biases in hiring the Shans highlights the deeper issue of the three divisive types of citizenship that give preferential treatment for some ethnic groups.

The project observed comparisons on the spectrum of ethnic minorities, from migrant workers on one to successful entrepreneurs who empower their communities on the other. It is crucial to view how these differences have arisen, and how their lives could be intertwined despite being on different ends of the spectrum.

Section One: Chiang Mai

Which Wat is What?

Wats are really unique places in Thailand that influence people in various profound ways. Such influences are mostly intangible, and the question of locating the source of peace not only resonates with the catchphrase of Field Studies, "peaceful vibes", but also illuminates the spiritual landscapes that arise from people's connections with wats. In addition, we often assume that the actions performed by people in wats, possibly to find peace, are of the Buddhist religion in nature. However, this project aims to be critical of this assumption and explore the many roles wats perform for their respective communities.



Finding peace is not an entirely passive process; it requires active learning and practising on one's part. Opportunities to learn and experience a variety of things in wats make for an active and valuable experience of finding peace ourselves. The wide range of roles played by wats were also explored. Recognising nature as a sentient being and one with humans deepens the group's spiritual and sacred relationships with wats. They were enlightened by the connection Buddhism offers between them and the biosphere.

Wats in Chiang Mai remind us, through providing a visual narrative of past struggles, that peace is built on bloodshed and should not be taken for granted. This illustrates the necessity of wats as architects of peace within the community by imbuing Buddhist values into their visitors.

Section One: Chiang Mai

Despite having received Buddha's past teachings, dramatic changes in modern landscapes and contexts have rendered these lessons archaic. Today, the environments where we practise Buddhism have changed vastly, signalling that we have strayed away from the "original" path of Buddhism, in our journey to obtaining the answers we seek.



Are all monks equal? Much like many modern communities, temple monks also abide by a hierarchy. Senior monks seemingly possess the liberty to be more lax, while younger monks are expected to be disciplined in their conduct and posture. The display of respect by lay people for monks also reinforces the social status of monks. Perhaps we envision monks in a wat as a uniform group - all wearing robes, holding similar statuses and performing the same old rites. That may need revision. Are all those without robes not monks? Could monks be abiding by a hierarchy that reinforces current norms in Thai society?



Section One: Chiang Mai

Animals: Human Relations and Tourism

The three major themes that the project focused on were conservation, human-animal relations and exploitation as well as accompanying concepts such as non-human charisma and flagship species. One key area investigated was the diversity of agencies that have been reduced to a singular category of 'animals' (Lorimer, 2007).



As Lorimer explains, different animals receive different extents of support for conservation, which could be attributed to anthropomorphic aesthetic charisma of mammals such as elephants and monkeys that are likely to garner more attention and sympathy against cruelty for their human-like features, while snakes, reptiles or animals consumed as food do not have the same charisma and receive less sympathy. Another area is the relations between elephants and mahouts as they evolve over time to navigate a cruelty-free tourism industry and find a suitable balance between conservation and business. They also show the tourism industry's duality in ethical conservation as opposed to mistreating animals for human satisfaction, which cater to different sets of audiences.



Section One: Chiang Mai

At Chiangmai Elephant Sanctuary, elephants are trained to pose in certain positions that would make good photos. The workers use voices to instruct them, shifting away from hooks and chains, helping to foster good relations between the mahouts, elephants and tourists, encouraging greater understanding and a desire to conserve them.

The sanctuary provides unique experiences like preparing food, feeding, walking alongside and bathing elephants are provided at this sanctuary. As flagship conservation species, elephants with their forward-facing eyes have aesthetic charisma that attracts more tourists to volunteer ecotourism. Through the activities, elephants and tourists acted as equals; the elephants were fed, bathed, scrubbed and they even sprayed us with water in exchange for pretty pictures and interesting poses, allowing both human and animal to connect.



The project also explored the topic of exploitation, particularly in monkeys. At the Monkey Centre Maerim, monkey shows last about 15 minutes and involve about 5 trained monkeys. The poor monkey, Sam, who, while chained to the neck by a metal collar, was forced to perform tricks like walking on its two feet, shaking hands with audience members and playing basketball, all while its hind legs were visibly shaking. It was truly a disturbing show involving these gentle monkeys. There was a deeper sense of sadness watching the monkeys as compared to a similar show involving snakes. Although exploitation of intelligent animals in tourism is longstanding, we should recognise animals as sentient beings as our awareness towards their welfare increases. Therefore, when it comes to animal-human relations in tourism, ethical considerations are never black and white and we can only strive towards a better understanding.

Section Two: Chiang Khong – Houay Xai – Chiang Saen and the Mekong River

Through film and readings, students were provided with materials addressing the history of the Thai geo-body and the creation of the Sino-Indochina frontier (3). We discussed the geopolitical and geo-economic changes in the Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS).

Students learn about the historic upstream-downstream and cross-river trading networks that existed prior to the creation of modern territorial states in zones where multiple and overlapping sovereignties existed between non-bounded kingdoms and chiefdoms (4).

In the era of nation-states and hard boundaries, the Mekong River became both a 'national', 'transnational' and 'cross-boundary' river shared by China, Myanmar, Thailand, Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam. Prior to visiting the Chiang Khong-Houay Xai River borderscape, students engaged in a workshop at Chiang Mai University about the contemporary (1990s – present) development of the Mekong River.

In the Legend of the Golden Boat, the river's historical function was a connector and source of commerce between riparian communities in the mid- and upper reaches of the Mekong, in the hill-valley zone lying between current day Laos, Thailand, Myanmar and Southwest China. Following the end of the Cold War in the 1990s, the river became central to new transnational economic imaginaries as an 'Upper Mekong Economic Quadrangle' (5). These developmental ideas eventually led to the development of major cross-border highways and 'economic corridors' promoted by the Asian Development Bank (ADB).

Since the 1990s, there have been multiple cross-border, national, and sub-regional projects that are impacting upon the economies and societies to the GMS. In particular, students were provided with background materials relating to the intensive hydropower developments, beginning with a cascade of dams unilaterally constructed on the Chinese Lancang Jiang (Mekong in China), and the various cascade projects in the Mekong Basin in Laos and Vietnam-Cambodia tributary systems. Thus, students gained an appreciation for the ways in which large-scale capital, inter-state visions, and international development agencies have impacted on a vast area from Southwest China to the Mekong Delta.

Section Two: Chiang Khong – Houay Xai – Chiang Saen and the Mekong River

As we discussed how hydropower projects are part of a regional energy grid that prioritised energy flowing to regional capitals and powers industrial centres (6). Materials were provided about the ways in which these mega-developments are having cumulative implications upon upstream-downstream flows, ecosystems, and upon the hydrological flood pulse of the Mekong (7). Thus, students were provided with a necessary historical, economic and geopolitical overview before and during their learning journey to Chiang Khong, Chiang Rai province, Thailand, and to Houay Xai, Boko Province of Laos PDR.

Bridge, River, and Fort

Fieldwork in this area comprised of a river exploration of the Lao and Thai islands in the middle of the river. These are of ecological significance as seasonal refuges, spawning grounds, and habitats for a variety of migratory fish species. They have been culturally significant as sits where local fisherman can rest, meet, and mend fishing gear. We visited “Bird Egg Island” for an impromptu lecture about the seasonal biophysical changes associated with the monsoon dynamics and higher water-levels which normally occur in the wet season (June – October).

However, hydropower development have caused less predictable flows in different parts of the Mekong Basin. Students appreciated the fact that we were travelling on one of the great international rivers of the world. Through their readings, they could also make some connections between the mid-Mekong River boundary between Laos and Thailand with the Lower Mekong Basin (8). On a tranquil uninhabited island in the Mekong, students discussed the implications of altered slow regimes for the populous rural, farming and fishing communities of the Tonle Sap (Great Lake of Cambodia) and the problems of reduced sediment loads and nutrients reaching the Mekong Delta.

On our boats we passed underneath the with relatively recent Thai Laos “friendship bridge” which links up to a highway that serves trucks, lorries and buses from Southwest China all the way to Bangkok (8).

Section Two: Chiang Khong – Houay Xai – Chiang Saen and the Mekong River



Thai Laos “Friendship Bridge”

Section Two: Chiang Khong – Houay Xai – Chiang Saen and the Mekong River

When we were last in Chiang Khong with the students, the bridge was under construction. There was great anticipation about the protestial pros and cans of the bridge for the local communities on each side of river-border. The people speculated that Houay Xai would receive more direct economic benefit from China, and this would mean that tourists would bypass Chiang Khong to stay in Houay Xai before taking river boat trips to Luangprabang (9). Several years form the construction of the bridge we observed that Chiang Khong has relatively few visitors compared to our previous field study stay. The COVID-19 pandemic adversely affected business. We saw very few tourists and several shops closed.



Chiang Khong

One of the purposes of the learning journey section of Field Studies is to link readings with specific field sites. One such location is Fort Carnot in Houay Xai, which is a reminder of French Indochina and the Kingdom of Siam's contestation over the Mekong. In the 19th century, the French sent exploratory missions up the Mekong River in the hopes that the the river would be suitable for trade. This 19th century imperial mission was blocked by the sheer force of nature in the form of thousands of islands, rocks and rapids in teh Siphandon riverine archipelago of Southern Laos.

The river used to delimit modern political boundaries separating areas under the control of French Indochina (in current day Laos) and the Siamese Kingdom. During the end of the 19th century and beginning of the 20th century, the Siam kingdom and rival colonial powers France and Britain were actively engaged in boundary-making, creating new bounded territories, replacing the previous non-bounded kingdoms (3)

Section Two: Chiang Khong — Houay Xai — Chiang Saen and the Mekong River

Fort Carnot was built by French forces around 1900 following the acquisition of Laos into French Indochina in 1893. The tower of the fort commands excellent views of the Mekong River and surrounding territory. At most times there would be only a couple of French officers stationed at the fort alongside around 30 Vietnamese and Lao soldiers.

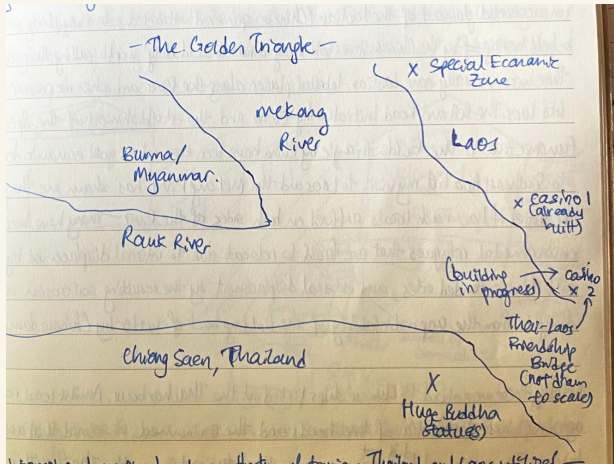
The French colonial authorities preferred to use Vietnamese as workers and soldiers, and so in the 1940s Vietnamese people made up a large proportion of key towns in Laos, including Luang Prabang, a 2-day slow boat ride downstream from Houay Xai. The fort represents one of the frontiers of French Indochina, and its location is symbolic of the geopolitical significance of the Mekong River.



Fort Carnot

Section Two: Chiang Khong — Houay Xai — Chiang Saen and the Mekong River

Students on the learning journey portion of the FS2023 were tasked with writing in their field notebooks during their journey, including a Mekong River (and its cross-border section), Chiang Saen and the Golden Triangle tri-point area of the river.



Student Notebook (Courtesy of Charmaine Leong)

Across the river from Chiang Saen is a Special Economic Zone (SEZ), within which is a casino complex and several high-rise buildings at odds with the peaceful vibes in this section of the Mekong.



View overlooking the point between Myanmar, Laos and Thailand

Section Two: Chiang Khong – Houay Xai – Chiang Saen and the Mekong River

Cold War Geopolitics and the Kuo Min Tang History of Mae Salong

Our next stay was in the mountains and Doi Mae Salong. The 20th century history of Mae Salong is associated with revolution in China, the Golden Triangle and the movement of the Kuo Min Tang (KMT) Army from Yunnan through Burma into northern Thailand.

The National Chinese were unable to withstand attacks from the Red Army of the Chinese Communists and fled into the Shan hills of northern Burma. In 1950, remnants of the KMT 93rd Division, the 26th Division and General Li Mi's 8th Army entered into southern Shan states near the Thai border. They recruited soldiers from upland ethnic villages and provided them with military training (10). The KMT Army received funding from the Taiwan government and the US. Further, the Burma Army was sent into Shan States to try to remove the KMT forces. In 1953, the number of KMT soldiers in Shan States was about 12,000 strong.

The Golden Triangle's main currency was the opium poppy, which was a highly lucrative cross-border business. Different drug warlords and armies in the Shan States were funded their activities through the transnational drug trade, including the KMT forces. Fierce fighting between rival groups, ethnic armies, the Burma Army and the Communist Party of Burma meant that many villages became pawns in the geopolitical imbroglio. This resulted in the need to secure resources, food and recruits. In Mae Salong, students visited the memorial for the KMT 93rd Division, 5th Battalion Commander, General Duran Xi-Wan.



Section Two: Chiang Khong — Houay Xai — Chiang Saen and the Mekong River

In 1961, Duan's troops arrived with KMT soldiers. There were orders for only the old and those not fit for combat to remain in Thailand. Mae Salong commands views across mountains and valleys up to the Thai-Myanmar borderland. Its close proximity to Myanmar made it a suitable base. General Duan aspired for the troops in Mae Salong to become Thai citizens rather than refugees, and efforts were made to form good relations with the Thai state and military. As KMT were viewed as anti-communist by the Thai military, they were eventually awarded Thai citizenship (11).



Kuo Min Tang Museum

Students were given mini-lectures by a former KMT soldier called Ja Ta who travelled with the group on this section of the journey. Ja Ta has previously hosted field studies students in the early 2000s and most recently in his home village of Ban Rak Thai in northernmost Mae Hong Son Province on the Thai-Myanmar border.

Section Two: Chiang Khong – Houay Xai – Chiang Saen and the Mekong River

Another geopolitical field trip was to Ban Thoed Thai (“Village to Honour Thailand”), formerly known as Ban Hin Taek (“Village of Broken Stone”). This town was one of the bases of Khun Sa, a notorious Chinese-Shan leader during the 1970s to 1990s. Khun Sa became the commander-in-chief of the Shan United Army (SUA), one of several Shan militias. In 1985, Khun Sa overran the Tai Revolutionary Council (TRC) 2nd Brigade Headquarters, leading to a new alliance with SUA. This created the Mong Tai Army with its base in Homong, Langkho district, Southern Shan State, near to Mae Hong Son, Thailand. Homong was another of Khun Sa’s military bases which became a centre for his drug, gemstone, and other cross-border businesses. Homong is very close to the current day KMT village of Ban Rak Tai, and Ja Ta remembers fierce battles against Khun Sa’s forces when he was a young soldier.



Ja Ta speaking to students at the memorial

During the late 1970s, Khun Sa used Ban Hin Taek (Thoed Thai) as a base for his cross-border operations. Many local people honoured Khun Sa as a benefactor helping to build the first paved roads, a school, and a modern hospital staffed by Chinese doctors. Khun Sa’s period of residence also enabled the development of water and electricity in the town. This was paired with PM General Kriangsak Chamanan (1977-1980), who viewed Khun Sa as an ally against communists. When General Prem Tinsulada took over (March 1980 – August 1988), Khun Sa was viewed with suspicion as the Thai Government was pressured by the USA to tackle the cross-border drug problem. The Thai Army and Border Police finally managed to force Khun Sa and his troops back with Shan State in 1982, continuing his business projects in mining and construction.

Section Two: Chiang Khong – Houay Xai – Chiang Saen and the Mekong River

In the 1980s, Khun Sa had earned the nickname of “Opium King”, and the US Drug Enforcement Agency considered him to be number 1 on their most wanted list. At the height of his power, he commanded an army of 20,000 soldiers, the largest private army in Burma at that time. By 1996, Khun Sa disbanded his armed forces after “surrendering” to the Myanmar military government. Many of his soldiers joined the Shan State Army – South under the command of Yawd Ser, a Shan ethnic and political leader. Meanwhile, Khun Sa effectively retired in Yangon. After his death in November 2007, a memorial service in honour of Khun Sa was held Thoe Thai.



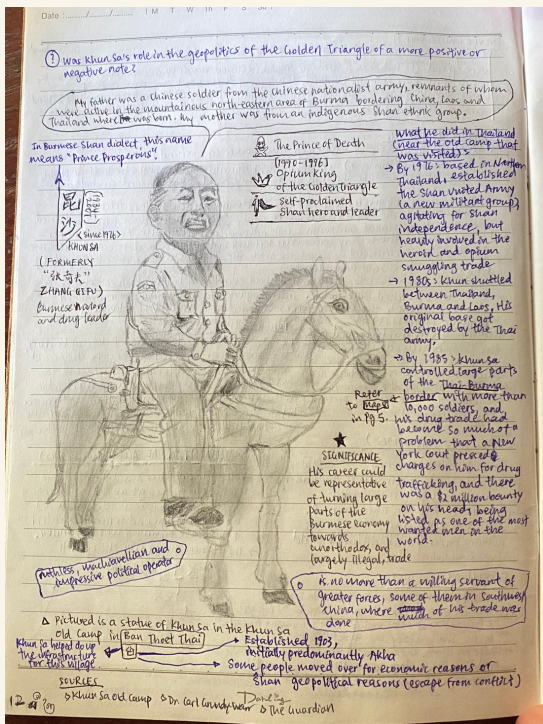
Khun Sa Old Camp



Map of the Shan State

Students visited a former military camp of Khun Sa at Thoe Thai, where they were able to get a sense of Shan State geopolitics in the Cold War period, and of the ways in which the drug trade was central to some of the geopolitical in-fighting and cross-border events that have helped shape this part of mainland Southeast Asia.

Students' field notebooks covered the learning journey in Chiang Rai Province.



Student Notebook (Courtesy of Vincent Bong)

Section Two: Chiang Khong – Houay Xai – Chiang Saen and the Mekong River

In between formal field trips and their field notebooks, students were also able to explore the Chinese mountain town of Mae Salong, visit tree plantations and an Akha village – Ban Mae Ter – which has hosted students in village homestays in 2005. We visited Mr Asa, the former village headman and his family, where he greeted all our students with bananas and fresh coffee from his mountain farm. Asa is one of the suppliers of coffee to Akha Ama coffee in Chiang Mai, and knows Lee who discussed this concept of Akha Ama's community engagement and sustainable coffee social entrepreneurship.



A visit to Mr Asa's home



Section Three: Chiang Rai

Homestays, Buddies, and Fieldwork

The most intensive period of the Field Study program in organising and engaging in team-based projects. Singapore students work with students from the Chiang Rai Rajabhat University (CRRU), which also included a small group of Shan students alongside Thai buddies.

This year students split into groups according to their interests, based upon information gained from the respective village sites prior to the start of the program. This year teams were focusing on youth and education; community health; water supply; religion and spirituality; the role of women; and physical geography in the farming lowlands and village uplands. Four village sites were chosen in Mae Suai district of Chiang Rai, including a Thai village, one Lahu and Akha village, one Karen village, and another Lahu village. Homestays for one week enables our students to have an immersive engagement in the places and field sites.

At the time of writing, these projects have yet to be formally presented in the CRRU. The following details had been provided by our students to reveal the different projects and type of work they have been doing during the period of 7th to 14th June 2023.

The physical geography project was coordinated by Dr Gretchen Coffman, who joined our team for six days of intensive fieldwork. The projects in the ethnic uplands were based upon contacts developed over time by Dr Carl and previous field studies in one Karen village called Ban Mae Yang Min. Many villages still have photographs of NUS and CRRU buddies from field studies in 2017 and 2018. Developing empathetic and friendly bonds with village leaders and villagers is an essential aspect for organising field-based educational projects.

The emphasis this year has been to try to engage in projects that could have practical and community-level significance, rather than to produce purely academic reports. Student groups are tasked with the responsibility of undertaking “pilot” investigations that raise important questions for future research, and to consider how their fieldwork could potentially help the village communities if more resources could be made available.

Section Three: Chiang Rai

Video and slide presentations are to be followed by a formal research proposal with evidence-based material supporting their fieldwork. Essential to the whole learning experience are the ways in which students engage with each other in the field, their innovations, adaptations, combining team-based skills within unfamiliar environmental and cultural contexts. Students from NUS and CRRU communicated together in English and Chinese, and students also developed their Thai-English-Thai communication skills. The CRRU buddies also adapted to villages where vernacular Karen, Lahu, and Akha are also forms of communication. Within our team we had Lahu, Akha and Karen facilitators to help overcome some language barriers.

The following section focuses on the group projects undertaken by students in Chiang Rai.

Youth and Education



Youth and Education

The research aims to investigate the situation of the youth communities in Ban Mae Yang Min Mai and Ban Phaya Kong Dee in Mae Suai District in terms of how their living and schooling environments influence their future pathways. The main objective is to relate the living conditions, schooling experience, and developmental environments of the youth to their personal *raison d'être*. The project was carried out through a combination of semi-structured interviews, paper questionnaires, and immersing ourselves in children's lives through participant observation to obtain and understand the thoughts and opinions of various parties pertaining to our research question.

Section Three: Chiang Rai

Water

The project aims to understand the issues with and propose improvements to the existing water system in Ban Mae Yang Min village. The team has conducted interviews and surveys, and has gone on a research expedition which has allowed them to build a strong foundation of understanding. Moving forward, the team will conduct water testing to discern the effectiveness of the current filtration system. The team hopes to create a plan that will improve functionality and lifespan of the water system to ensure the good health of the residents of Ban Mae Yang Min.



Water



Religion

Religion

The team conducted a visual ethnography of religious practices in the villages of Baan Paya Kong Di and Baan Mae Yang Min. The team aimed to investigate how different religions can coexist in a single space, and how religion in the village has changed over time. They conducted interviews and walk-along sessions with village chiefs and leaders of Christianity, Buddhism, and traditional Lahu/Karen religions to learn about religious development and inter-relationships. Their photographs present stories of the sacred spaces of worships, and the wider issues pertaining to these changes.

Section Three: Chiang Rai

Rural Healthcare

The project on rural healthcare intends to learn more about the different environmental, social and economic factors that determine healthcare outcomes in the Banmaeyangmin and Phayakongdee Villages in Chiang Rai. To investigate this, the group compiled both qualitative data from interviews with villagers, and quantitative data on basic health indicators that we obtained from the villagers via a blood pressure (BP) monitor, a weighing scale, and measuring tape. Through this project, they aim to discover some of the causes of poor health and limitations in healthcare to formulate possible solutions to improve the healthcare situation at the individual and village-wide scale.



Role of Women in Hill Tribes



Rural Healthcare

Role of Women in Hill Tribes

This project focuses on the roles of indigenous women in hill tribes regarding their hierarchical standings and influence in decision-making processes. The team hopes to empower them in socio-economic aspects where they express desires for improvement. They visited several households and conducted semi-structured interviews with men and women in positions of privilege and those less privileged. The group also looked at various intersecting forces that could undermine gender balance, such as their education levels by visiting local schools and their involvement in religious practices. Moreover, they observed individual behaviours from different age groups to look for contrasting perspectives regarding gender roles.

Section Three: Chiang Rai

Communities, Conservation and Catchment Connectivity

Physical Geography Field Studies 2023 by Dr Gretchen Coffman

Water, water everywhere, yet not a drop to be found. This immersive experience focuses on students exploring the importance of water in agricultural communities of ASEAN – for clean drinking water, irrigation of crops and biodiversity of stream systems. Living in village homestays with small shareholder farmers, students discover first hand why water is critical to their livelihoods. However, water quality in these agricultural landscapes is greatly threatened by nutrient pollution and our changing climate – too little water during the dry season, more frequent droughts and flooding during the monsoon season. Experiential learning is critical to NUS Geography students investigating water issues in order to understand deeply and explore potential management solutions.

The four main learning goals of this project during the Field Studies course include:

- 1) To learn and practice field sampling skills in natural streams/rivers and riparian ecosystems in agricultural landscapes of ASEAN.
- 2) To understand the importance of water in agricultural communities of ASEAN through living with a village homestays for one week.
- 3) To discover the complexities of aquatic ecosystems, agricultural land use, and their connectivity through a river catchment.
- 4) To contribute to problem solving of community water and biodiversity conservation issues through designing a physical geography team project to share with both the scientific community and the homestays farmers.

Students in the FS 2023 Field Course explored the issue of water quality, agricultural crops and climate change in the Mae Tong River catchment. The aim of their project was to understand the impacts of village waste water and adjacent agricultural land use practices in the streams of this catchment from upstream to downstream. They sampled water and soil quality in natural riparian ecosystems adjacent to headwater streams compared to rivers upstream and down stream of villages as well as in adjacent floodplain terraces planted with rice, corn and bananas. Through living and working with village farmers, students discovered that water pollution and climate change may be affecting the agricultural productivity and types of crops they can grow. Finally, students worked with these farmers to help them come up with solutions to their water issues, such as planting riparian buffer areas to uptake nutrient pollution from streams.

Section Three: Chiang Rai

At the start, students conducted **background research** through site visits and interviews to find out the needs of villagers in terms of agriculture and water. This includes finding out the characteristics of the Mae Tang MinCatchment through Google Earth and conducting recces to find out the extent of human alteration on the catchment and plausible field sites.



Students also **interviewed** various village headmen to find out the environmental, social, and cultural history of their villages. For example, village livelihoods and lifestyle were altered when their area was declared as Doi Luang National Park.



Based on interviews, students found out that farmers are inclined to use fertilisers to increase yield, compounded by the fact that climate change has made the rainy season more unpredictable and infrequent. This has motivated students to narrow down their **pilot research** into 2 key research questions:

1. How ideal are soil properties among different agricultural fields?
2. How does land use change influence soil and water pH along the river?

Section Three: Chiang Rai



Before they embarked on their pilot research, students concurrently learnt first-hand how to operate a variety of field equipment for **soil sampling** and vegetation sampling. For the former, they utilised the soil pH meter, soil ribbon test, the Munsell soil colour chart, and the soil moisture meter to find out the types of soil that are in farmlands and riparian areas.

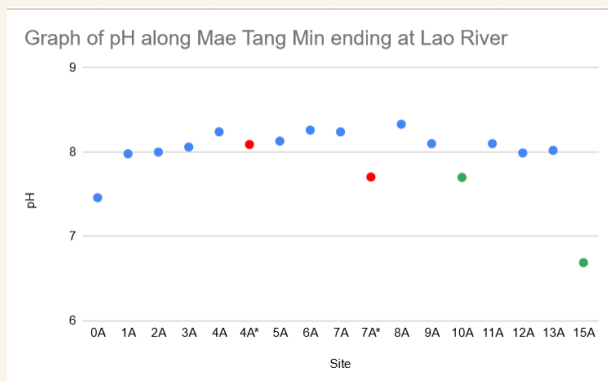


Section Three: Chiang Rai

Similarly, **vegetation sampling** is conducted to find out the characteristics of the catchment such as canopy cover, tree height, and diameter at breast height.



Students input their results into **graphs** to make them more palatable. One of their key findings was that soil pH initially increases in upstream areas but sharply decreases downstream. A possible explanation for this may be perhaps due to the use of alkaline detergent upstream and excessive use of fertilisers downstream, making waters more acidic respectively



Section Three: Chiang Rai

Amidst the complexity of environmental, social, and political issues related to the catchment, students advocate for more prudent use of fertilisers in downstream cropland areas so as to maintain soil quality whilst also achieving desired crop yield. This also ensures that downstream water users are also able to access clean water for drinking.



In the future, Field Studies students can conduct further tests on water quality and how they change across the catchment. Overall, this was an invaluable experience in conducting primary research in physical geography. Most importantly, students had fun in the field!



Past and Present

By: Matthew Lu

(Enrolled in FS2018, student helper FS2019)

Although I had first heard of Field Studies from seniors at my Geography Freshers' Immersion Camp, I didn't consider it too seriously until Natural Resource: Policy and Practice in my second year. Not only did that course expose me to many ideas about the lives of indigenous peoples across Southeast Asia, it also introduced me to Dr Carl and his unquenchable passion for the field.

Just a few months later, I found myself in the Baan Tup Ta Wan in Phang Nga Province, Thailand, visiting the very seaside shrines and burial sites I had only seen in Dr Carl's lecture slides. I was captivated by the resilience and community-spiritness of the village's Moklen people, which had braved tsunamis, evictions and encroachment by powerful hotel and aquaculture industries. Field Studies 2018 had begun! Not a single day- from the arrival of our 27-strong class in Phuket to the poignant finale at Chiang Rai- passed without challenge, excitement or adventure. Most importantly, that first experience influenced me to become a more collaborative and less competitive person. The strong friendships forged, both with one another as well as with Thai buddies, remain significant to me and my coursemates. (insert Tuptawan/ Ranong pictures from FS18)

I returned to Field Studies in 2019 as a student teaching assistant. At first, I was hesitant and wanted to take an internship during the summer after my third year, thinking that I could wait till after graduation to be a student teaching assistant. Little did I expect FS to be suspended for the next three years!

Despite a shorter duration overall, Field Studies 2019 was just as ambitious, spanning locations in Cambodia, Thailand and Laos and involving collaborations with both Cambodian and Thai universities. Despite being a lean team, we were reinforced by a revolving door of additional crew members. Influenced by the uncompromising work ethic of previous helpers, I tried to take a hardline approach towards safety. However, by the end of the Field Studies, I had learned to trust students and to make the best of the fluid, sometimes unpredictable nature of coordinating fieldwork.

Past and Present: Matthew Lu (FS2018 Alumni)

Although I had first heard of Field Studies from seniors at my Geography Freshers' Immersion Camp, I didn't consider it too seriously until Natural Resource: Policy and Practice in my second year. Not only did that course expose me to the lives and environments of different people across Southeast Asia, it also introduced me to Dr Carl and his unquenchable passion for the field.

Just a few months later, I found myself in Baan Tup Ta Wan in Phang Nga Province, Thailand, visiting the very seaside shrines and burial sites I had only seen in Dr Carl's lecture slides. I was captivated by the resilience and community-spiritiness of the village's Moklen people, which had braved tsunamis, evictions and encroachment by powerful hotel and aquaculture industries. Field Studies 2018 had begun! Not a single day- from the arrival of our 27-strong class in Phuket to the poignant finale at Chiang Rai- passed without challenge, excitement or adventure. Most importantly, that first experience influenced me to become a more collaborative and less competitive person. The strong friendships forged, both with one another as well as with Thai buddies, remain significant to me and my coursemates.



I returned to Field Studies in 2019 as a student teaching assistant. At first, I was hesitant and wanted to take an internship during the summer after my third year, thinking that I could wait till after graduation to be a student teaching assistant. Little did I expect FS to be suspended for the next three years!

Past and Present: Matthew Lu (FS2018 Alumni)

Despite a shorter duration overall, Field Studies 2019 was just as ambitious, spanning locations in Cambodia, Thailand and Laos and involving collaborations with both Cambodian and Thai universities. Despite being a lean team, we were reinforced by a revolving door of additional crew members. By the end of the Field Studies, I had learned to trust students and to make the best of the fluid, sometimes unpredictable nature of coordinating fieldwork.

When the pandemic came while I was graduating, I was selected as a teaching assistant under an employment assistance scheme. I could work with Dr Carl again—except this time from my desk at home! Field Studies made me confident to lead students and to enable them to make discoveries of their own. Though I was really grateful for that opportunity to teach Geography courses at NUS, I still longed for the unsubstitutable Field Studies experience to return to future batches of students.



Earlier this year, I was ecstatic when I found out that Field Studies was returning and that Claire, Qystina, Adib and Dr Gretchen had volunteered to join as crew members. Even better, we were going back to Baan Mae Yang Min, where I completed the final fieldwork of Field Studies 2018! I introduced myself to the new team excitedly and we began working together to bring the new Field Studies to reality.

Past and Present: Matthew Lu (FS2018 Alumni)

Having graduated and now working outside of NUS in the past two years, it wasn't easy being involved in Field Studies this year. I had to take days off to join the Field Studies Info sessions at NUS. As we were all thoroughly engaged with studies, work or internships, meetings were precious and took place mostly online. I couldn't even join the team for the pre-Field Studies workshops!

Despite being new to Field Studies and my limited involvement, Claire, Qystina and Adib were proactive, accommodating and innovative seniors who built and led the most amazing Field Studies team I could ever dream of.

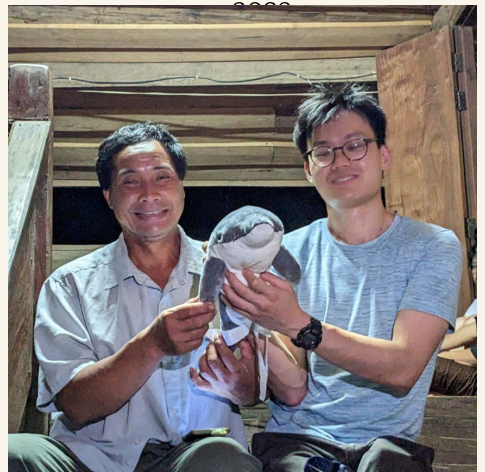


The short, five days that I had spent together with Field Studies 2023 at Baan Mae Yang Min and Phaya Kong Di was nothing short of magical. I saw many new developments in Mae Yang Min, including new homes, schools and places of worship. Young children that I'd met in the last Field Studies are now older, attending school or taking on some of their parents' work. It was delightful to see many old faces, including my homestay hosts, the family of the village chief, Por Luang, and the Field Studies support team of Pii Nopy, Aajarn Tim, Por Somsak, Por Singtoh and Por Kasem among many others.

Past and Present: Matthew Lu (FS2018 Alumni)

It was exhilarating to see students push new boundaries in their fieldwork, going beyond experiential learning to advocating for and serving the needs of the locals. One group helped facilitate activities in local schools and children's care organizations. Another group even produced public health education posters for the villages!

Besides the team, Dr Carl and the seniors from NUS, my special appreciation goes to the CRRU interns and students who gave their precious Week 1 to join Field Studies and buddies- that's a big sacrifice! You are all multi-talented and I really enjoyed hanging out with you. I'll brush up on my Thai and I hope to see you again soon



Peaceful Vibes

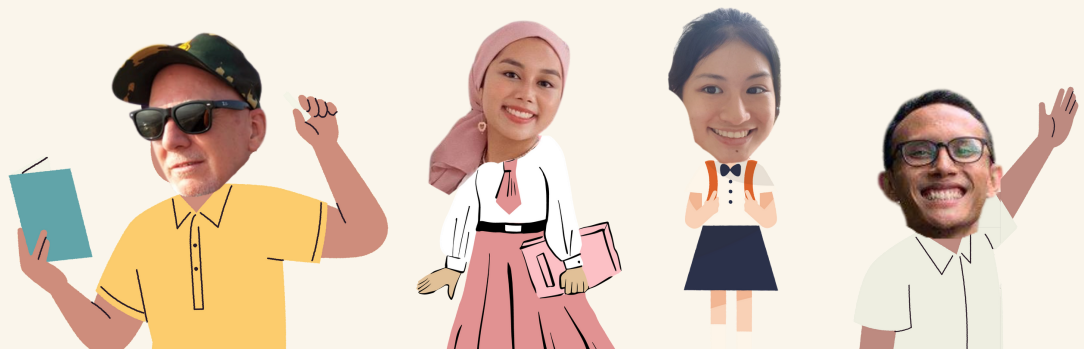
The excellent cooperation and friendly support provided by the host institution CRRU and the student buddies has made the field-based training and fieldwork period a happy, creative, and productive experience.



The logo of CRRU's LIGA (Language Institute Global Affairs) stands for 4 Cs: Commitment, Cooperation, Connectivity, and Contribution. The Field Studies program build upon the same ideals, and we would like to add a fifth C for the Communities in Chiang Rai, who have provided us with homestays, kindness, and love.

Peaceful vibes,

Dr Carl Grundy-Warr
Qystina Darwyshea Binte Herdie Budi
Claire Faustina Tong
Adib Amali Bin Rohaizat



References

- (1) Wayne Fife (2005) *Doing Fieldwork, Ethnographic Methods for Research in Developing Countries and Beyond*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, p.2,
- (2) Ibid.
- (3) Thongchai Winichakul (1994) *Siam Mapped. A History of the Geo-Body of a Nation*, Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books.
- (4) Ibid.
- (5) Andrew Walker (1999) *The Legend of the Golden Boat: Regulation, Trade and Traders in the Borderlands of Laos, Thailand, China and Burma*, Richmond: Curzon Press.
- (6) Jim Glassman (2010) *Bounding the Mekong: The Asian Development Bank, China, and Thailand*, University of Hawaii Press
- (7) Carl Grundy-Warr, Mak Sithirith, and Yong Ming Li (2015) 'Volumes, fluidity and flows: Rethinking the 'nature' of political geography', *Political Geography*, 45:93-95.
- (8) Shaun Lin and Carl Grundy-Warr (2012) 'One bridge, two towns and three countries: Anticipatory geopolitics in the Greater Mekong Subregion', *Geopolitics*, 17(4), 952-979.
- (9) Based on interviews in Lin and Grundy-Warr (2012).
- (10) Bertil Lintner and Hseng Nong Lintner (1991) *Cross-Border Drug Trade in the Golden Triangle (S.E.Asia)*, Durham: International Boundaries Research Unit
- (11) General Tuan Memorial and the Chinese Martyr's memorial at Mae Salong

Photographs

Joshua Tan Kai Shenn
Claire Faustina Tong
Qystina Darwyshea Binte Herdie Budi

Student Notebooks

Leong Si Min, Charmaine
Bong Chin Hong Vincent

