

FIELD STUDIES

2024 / 2567

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INTRODUCTION TO FIELD STUDIES

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.

While Field Studies was initiated as a Geography course, students from different academic backgrounds and disciplines have participated since its inception in 2001. The 2024 batch included students from Geography, Psychology, Life Sciences, PPE, Mechanical Engineering, Biomedical Engineering, Global Studies and Architecture.



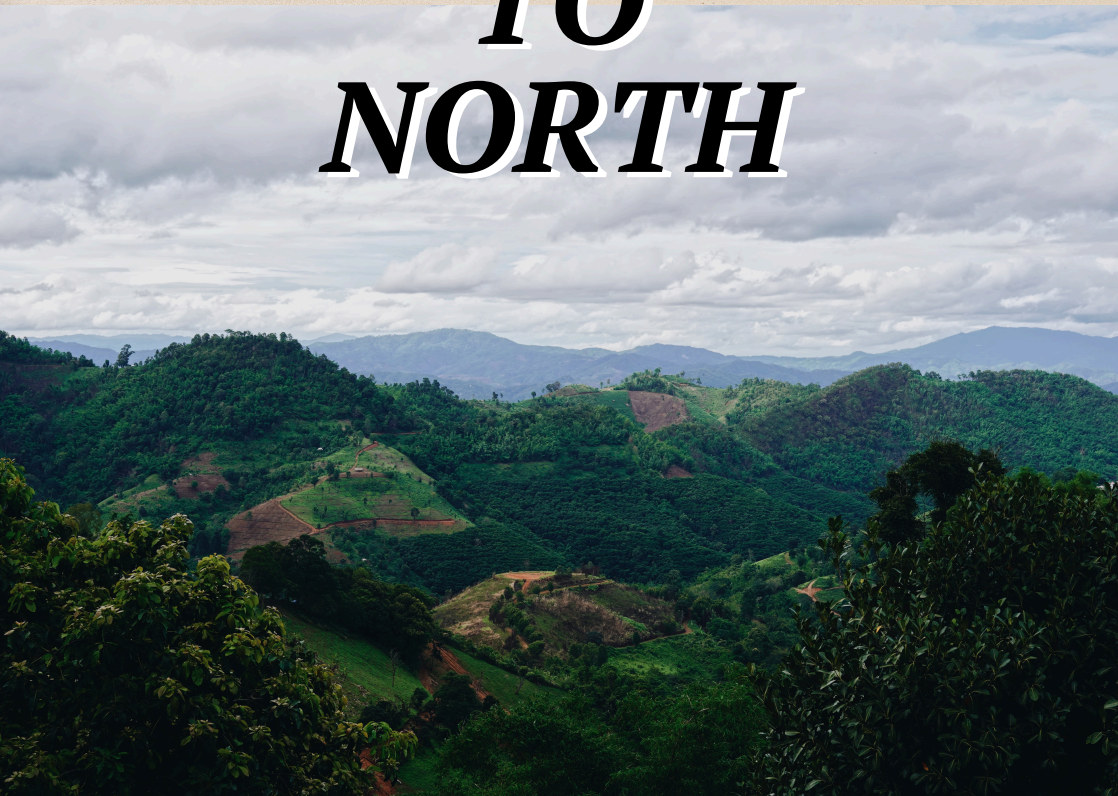


Field Studies provides opportunities for students to apply and deepen a variety of necessary soft and hard skills. These skills are often taken for granted, but must be practiced, applied, and deepened in the field. They include:

- 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
- working alongside 'buddies' from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds.



SOUTH TO NORTH





The Field Studies 2024 team used the mighty songthaews to go on a 5,000 kilometer road trip from the south to the north of Thailand, and then back again. Students went to fieldwork areas in Phang-Nga, Ranong, Chiang Mai, and the edge of Chiang Rai at the Mekong River – even spending a day in Laos. They kept field notebooks and did 3 group projects: The Andaman Times, The Ranong Reporter, and The Mountain Messenger.



HOMESTAYS

Students spent a good portion of Field Studies in homestays. Often these were not tourism cooperatives but simply community members who graciously opened up their spaces for students to live in while they did fieldwork – "homestays" in the truest sense of the word.

They are an integral part of experiential learning in Field Studies: as students sleep, cook, eat, and wash with their hosts, experiencing the rhythms of local life and the spontaneity of activities that might not have been possible had they only been daytime visitors, they can make meaningful connections with the people around them and gain a fuller understanding of the lives they live.



A sense of place develops as students immerse themselves in the orchestra of village life, all the while a sense of family develops between student and host: what can beat the experience of coming home to family waiting for you at the dinner table? Communicating with them in spite of language barriers makes it all the more worthwhile, for it creates shared memories in the limited time there. What is lost in translation is found in empathy.

As the homestay period ends, a feeling of sorrow, regret, and wistfulness overcomes the students who will miss their newfound family, emotions that are quickly matched when they reunite with other Field Studies batchmates only to realise that yes, they have indeed missed their newfound friends too.



PHANG-NGA

Phang Nga's Andaman Sea coastal zone has been a site for field studies and fieldwork ever since the Indian Ocean Tsunami event of 26 December 2004. In 2005, Dr Carl was involved in post tsunami coastal assessments in several areas in Krabi, Phuket, and Phang Nga Provonces with Jonathan Rigg, Lisa Law, and May Tan-Mullins (Rigg et al., 2008).

Dr Carl subsequently made friendly contacts with the Moklen communities of Thungwa and Tuptawan. The Moklen are people who were once living on the sea, but have settled on land for several generations. He later contributed and co-authored a piece about relief agency changes to the housing landscape along the Andaman

Coast of Phang Nga, and the problems the Moklen community of Tubtawan were facing in protecting their access to coastal and terrestrial resources against speculative and private capital in the years after the tsunami (Grundy-Warr & Rigg 2016).

Previously, we have taken students to Tubtawan and enjoyed home-stays and fieldwork there. In 2004, we organised student fieldwork in two contrasting Moklen communities of Tubtawan, and a new village for Field Studies, Baan Tap Pla. We also visited the Thai port town of Ban Nam Khem, which has a tsunami memorial and museum. This led to another student project focusing on people's memories of that event and how it impacted their lives.

Phang Nga Reflections: Adib

Incoming knowledge transforms and manifests itself in different ways to different people across time and space, at the very least by itself being a new node in the complex assemblage of humans and nonhumans.

"The sea does not change, but people change," said Yai Lap, an elder of the Tubtawan Moklen Cultural Village. I was momentarily stunned by this profound statement. How do the Moklen view change?

Following through the projects in Tubtawan gave me the most insights from the perspective of more-than-human geographies, in the way that the land, sea, weather, and people are all interconnected in more ways than our calculative minds would want to accept. Each of these elements possess unique characteristics that impact human lives – the land has depth but is fixed in place, the sea has volume that is infinite, the weather is subject to unfathomable factors, and

resources are alive and mobile.

Accordingly this has also led to a more-than-human lifestyle: where there is change, there is also balance. The Moklen people have adapted to changes and tried their best to strive for ecological balance and synergies.



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Waves of Change: Surviving the 2004 Boxing Day Tsunami

Elyana Ridwan, Liew Yun Yi Claire, Ganaapathy Balakumar, Qistina Athirah, Ng Zhao Feng Nicholas, Chawanrat Thaiyai (Aom)



Fig 1: Ban Nam Khem Tsunami Museum

"If the tsunami happens again, I would like [us to] have the survivor persons more than the dead bodies", says Phon, a survivor of the 2004 Boxing Day Tsunami who is now a guide in the Ban Nam Khem Tsunami Museum. Twenty years after the tsunami, memories of the tsunami still inhabit Phon's life. Yet, the manifestations of Phon's memories have not remained stagnant but rather taken dynamic and progressive forms (Espin, 2015), each telling a powerful story of how survivors have responded to the disaster.

As we sat down with Phon to hear her story, she vividly recounted the disaster. At fifteen years old, her ordinary morning turned into a desperate fight for survival.

Her father's urgent shouts led her outside to a colossal wave. In an attempt to escape, she climbed a mangrove tree, only to lose her grip and get engulfed by muddy water. Battered by debris, she spent seven hours in the waves before being rescued by fishermen and reunited with his family. The aftermath was grim – the dead lined the streets while the living were left with severe injuries and an overwhelming sense of loss.



Fig 2: Interview with Phon, Tsunami Survivor and Museum Guide

Following the incident, Phon's mental health was severely affected and she struggled to articulate her emotions regarding the disaster. With the assistance of a Catholic NGO, Phon underwent therapy for several years to alleviate her distress and fear of the coast. Phon's relationship with the beach reflects a fraught and complex attachment to place (Dickinson, 2020), where sites of her everyday life were transformed into sites of fear and trauma. Despite efforts to conquer her fears, Phon acknowledged that she has subconsciously blocked out some memories of her life

post-tsunami, disrupting the continuity of her personal history and identity (Knez et al., 2018).

That being said, Phon has found renewed purpose, exemplifying post-disaster resilience (Deeny & McFetridge, 2005). Phon's heart for tsunami preparedness led her to become a guide in the Ban Nam Khem Tsunami Museum when it began operations. With tears brimming in her eyes, Phon related her experience of connecting deeply with other survivors who visit the museum. Her experiences reveal the importance of the museum as a place where tsunami survivors can gather strength by confiding in and providing support for one another (Drury & Alfadhli, 2019).

Additionally, Phon expressed her worry for the limited knowledge that the younger generation possesses regarding tsunamis. This has drawn her to the educational aspect of her job as the



Fig 3: Picture with Phon

widespread communication of the disaster experience contributes significantly to disaster risk reduction (Kato, 2021). This sentiment is also reflected in other disaster museums (Gerster & Maly, 2022) and echoed by the Thai government when they decided to use the museum primarily to promote tsunami preparedness instead of solely focusing on the Boxing Day Tsunami (J. Goh, personal communication, May 23, 2024).

Phon's story reflects the fluidity of memory and how this affects the perception and significance of place, in turn shaping post-disaster life decisions (Pickles, 2016). For Phon, this crisis has opened up a renewed life purpose (Rigg et al., 2008) and an opportunity to pursue a better future, having larger scale impacts on her community as a whole.



Fig 4: Post-Tsunami Aerial Picture of Ban Nam Khem Coast



Fig 5: Boat washed onshore during the tsunami

Moklen Cultural Survival

Luqmanul Hakim, Muhd Amirul Hakim, Jerome Kwek, Muhd Haatim, Umar Hazim, Namwhan Nayo



Figure 1: Map of Pak Weep Beach, with old and new Moklen graveyards marked in yellow and orange respectively. Navy blue demarcates a Moklen shelling zone used for sustenance. The purple delineates a hotel establishment encroaching onto these Moklen lands, extending far back inland.

Living with the Moklen community in Tubtawan and speaking to their leaders, P'Ying, Ajaan Ke & Yap Lai, helped us uncover various complexities in their efforts to protect and uplift their identity.

Socio-Political Struggles

The Moklen face discrimination by the wider Thai community as they are labelled as "land-stealers" and "not of Thai origin". Additionally, they are stereotyped as being poor and unambitious because they are mired in a poverty cycle, with

adults mostly employed in low-wage jobs, like fishermen and menial hotel workers.

The Moklen struggle with precarious land ownership rights especially after the 2004 tsunami, when resort developers encroached on their phreaw (cemetery), eroding their cultural identity. Other forms of marginalisation include the lack of official recognition for their beliefs, ranking them below Buddhism and Islam. To prioritise state economic productivity, there are government restrictions on the crops they can grow and the fish they can catch. Global crises like Covid-19 have impacted them disproportionately, due to job losses from hotel closures, and their lower priority for vaccines, forcing them to rely on herbal treatments.

<u>Activism</u>

Considering the above issues, the Moklen have made great efforts to fight for the recognition and protection of their people. From 2005 to



Fig.2: Press release by the Thai government detailing the legal protection of Moklen areas in Phang-Nga since 2022, and the inclusion of the TCH as part of Phang-Nga's tourism efforts.

2010, P'Ying and Yai Lap travelled to Bangkok and staged a cultural sharing in front of the Thai Parliament Building, showcasing traditional Moklen food and cultural performances to the general Thai public in hopes of raising awareness. At the time, the Moklen were so hated that Yai Lap was once held at gunpoint by an opposing Thai. Even so, she persevered and relations gradually improved as evident in Fig 2.



Fig.3: Tubtawan Cultural Home, established 2005 post-tsunami. Ajaan Ke shares the Moklen lifestyle from here and the surrounding area via regularly-held Facebook Live sessions on his page here: www.facebook.com/keetaka99



Fig. 4: Moklen children practicing Rong Ngeng Dance at the Tubtawan Cultural Home

Tourism

The Moklen attempt to garner government support by positioning themselves as a culture of interest for tourists. The establishment of Tubtawan Cultural Home (TCH), aims to raise awareness of the Moklens amongst tourists and locals. By doing so, they hope that economic benefits from tourism would influence the state stance regarding Moklen cultural conservation.

Intergenerational bond

TCH is also a place to educate the next generation of Moklens about their heritage. The leaders conduct lessons to the children on Moklen music, culture and cuisine. These lessons extend beyond TCH as they actively participate in Moklen ceremonies and daily activities to learn their culture. Furthermore, an English school nearby improves the children's English proficiency, providing a vital tool to promote and conserve their culture. However, P'Ying is concerned about the school's teaching of Christian philosophy possibly hindering efforts for cultural conservation.



Fig. 5: Ngan Boon Duan Sip Festival Ceremony

Social Integration

Intermarriages with those outside the Moklen community have led to the inclusion of other beliefs such as Buddhism and Islam alongside Moklen animism. Practice of Buddhist burial rites and ceremonies such as the Ngan Boon Duan Sip showcase the ability of the Moklen to integrate into the wider Thai society.

Conclusion

The Moklen face multifaceted challenges in identity conservation. Despite their situation, their strategic efforts in promoting their culture, leveraging on government goals, and inculcating the Moklen identity in future generations offer hope for the survival of their culture and the integration of the Moklen into Thai society.

Unsettled Waters: The Moklen Struggle for Co-existence on a Changing Coastal Landscape

Hon Hou Ning Ryan, Rachel Teo, Sng En Teng Christabelle, William Rachmadi, Zulekha Sabbir Topiwalla, Peerada Wilai (Buatong)

The Moklen, indigenous to the Andaman Sea coast in southern Thailand, have maintained a profound connection with their coastal environment. For generations, they have depended on the coast for sustenance, livelihoods, and spiritual fulfilment (Zimmerman, n.d.) and many embrace the coast as an extension of the Moklen "soul".

The 2004 tsunami altered the coastline, triggering a series of misfortunes for the Moklen. Lost legal documents in the aftermath (Pinyorat, 2005) eroded their land ownership rights, leaving them vulnerable to land grabs by private developers. This vulnerability fuelled a surge in coastal development (Grundy-Warr & Rig, 2016), with shrimp farms and resorts replacing natural habitats. As such, the Moklen's traditional livelihoods bore the brunt of the devastation.

Over the past two decades, a significant tension has existed between the Moklens and Charoen Pokphand Group (CPG). According to a CPG employee's account, in addition to eroding coastlines, the dam systems established along the coast have discharged wastewater into the ocean. This practice has resulted in a decline in marine life population and disrupted the Moklen's vital resources, thus forcing them to seek alternative means of sustenance.

The Moklen's dependence on coastal resources renders them vulnerable to disruptions like



Figure 1. CPG Shrimp Farm's dam that has encroached into the Moklen's ancestral land. The dam has resulted in coastal erosion, as well as destruction of ecosystems due to the release of toxic wastewater.

those posed by CPG's operations. As illustrated by Moklen elder Yai Lap, Moklen's traditional practices are central to their identity. Impediments to these practices threaten to erode the very essence of their culture. This highlights the need to protect their culture vis-a-vis strong opposition from developers and government entities. This therefore necessitates the safeguarding of their culture, despite the formidable opposition from well-resourced developers and government entities. The power disparity between the Moklen and these entities creates a significant obstacle in their fight for coastal resources.

Beyond the realm of human conflict, the coast embodies a

dynamic character. Its non-human agency expressed in tides and seasonal activity influence the Moklen's relationship with the coastal landscape.

Dictated by the rhythm of tides, the Moklen people have developed a unique cycle of resource utilisation along the coast (Adger & Brown, 1993). During low tide, the receding waters expose the seabed, offering a window of opportunity for Moklen women to gather (shell)fish, squid, and crabs. Conversely, during high tides, Moklen women turn to refining previously collected tin ore and foraging wild herbs and vegetables. This intricate knowledge of tides is passed down intergenerationally.

Beyond the daily influence of tides, the Moklen people navigate the cyclical rhythms of seasons. As Yai Lap illustrates, the absence of squid outside of 'squid season' reflects the importance of seasonal



Figure 2. During the lean harvest seasons, Yai Lap spends less time in the intertidal zones looking for squid. Instead, she diverts her effort to looking for crabs and other shellfish, as well as foraging for forest goods.



Figure 3. Moklen children often follow elders into the mangrove river to catch fish. Despite their young age, these children possess a wealth of Indigenous knowledge learned from spending time with their elders.

abundance. During lean harvesting seasons, the Moklens demonstrate their resourcefulness by turning to other sources in the coastal forests. These seasonal variations that span months present an additional layer of challenges that builds upon the complexities of daily tidal interactions.

The Moklen people's relationship with their coastal environment transcends mere dependence – it's a dynamic interplay shaped by both natural processes and human interactions. While tides and seasons dictate the rhythm of their activities, the recent surge in development fuelled by power imbalances presents a significant challenge to their traditional livelihoods. However, the Moklen spirit remains undeterred. As younger generations take the helm, elders remain hopeful that Indigenous knowledge will continue to be passed down, thereby maintaining the Moklen's profound connection to the coast across generations.

Clams: From the (river) Channels to Cuisine

Ngo Jo Shann, Bay Ching Hwee, Lee Zi Xuan, Janessa Low Kai Hui, Fong Yue, Meebu Cherkong (Bu)

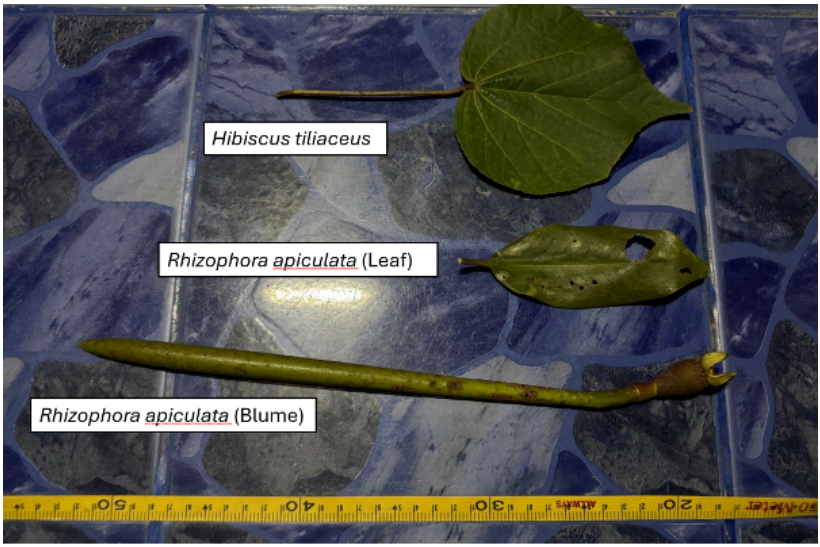

Figure 1: Sample collections from our expeditions

Situated in the Thai Mueang District, Rotary Community Ban Tab Pla is a thriving local Moklen community within the mangroves of Tunt Maphraw stream, which contains a flourishing biodiversity. Our initial expedition has allowed us to collect samples such as Rhizophora apiculata and Hibiscus tiliaceus (Figure 1).

Ban Tab Pla is a stellar example of how humans can coexist with nature in a sustainable manner, and we will examine this through observing the journey of clams which are found in the mangroves.



Figure 2: Genus Meretrix Clams soaked in water in preparation for dinner

Specific to the region is the Genus Meretrix clam, which villagers harvest for their meals (Figure 2). Clams play an important part in the ecosystems that exist within mangroves due to the role that they play; which is cleaning the water through filter feeding. Through the ingestion and expulsion of water, clams are able to feed on phytoplankton, microorganisms and detritus while also providing the benefit of reducing sediment loads and removing excess nutrients in the water. This improves water clarity, which allows more sunlight to penetrate the water and help growth of important seagrasses.

For the villagers, clams also play an important part in their lives through providing food as well as serving as a source of income for them. Our group managed to gain deeper insights into how the villagers harvest the clams in a sustainable manner, as well as a hands-on experience on harvesting these clams at the tidal bay located in the Tunt Maphraw stream.



Figure 3: Harvesters scrape the sand in a "sunflower" formation to dig for clams

During the low tide, metal spoons and coconut husks are used by clam harvesters to unearth the topmost layer of sand to harvest the clams that are found beneath them (Figure 3).

While this manner of harvesting is labour-intensive and may not have high yield, this proves to be more sustainable for the ecosystem as compared to mechanical dredging. This arduous method allows for a sustainable number of clams to be harvested and gives opportunities for clams to reproduce and grow within the mangroves.



Figure 4: Picture of the Mangroves along the Lam Pi River (Source: Author's camera)

Undoubtedly, mangroves are important to the environment as they protect both saltwater and freshwater ecosystems. The roots of mangroves serve as a buttress that supports the natural and human ecosystems that live around mangrove forests. As such, conserving these mangroves are vital, as the failure to protect them will have a large impact on the environment.

Through examining the journey of the clam, our group has come to realise that perhaps the conservation of mangroves does not necessarily need to manifest in the form of active actions taken, which was our initial impression when we thought about mangrove conservation in the area. However, through experiencing the life of the villagers, we have learnt that their role in mangrove conservation is through their lifestyle: one that is sustainable and has minimal impact to the environment.



Generosity Precedes Abundance — Gardening in the Ban Tab Pla Community

Lim Ying Xuan Alexandria, Seah Jie Hui, Tan Jing Jie Ryan, Teo Joy, Yashwini Nelavannan, Athitthaya Kanoknawakool (Four)

Baan Tab Pla (BTP) is a homely village in Southern Thailand surrounded by plantations. Although the land is mostly privately-owned, villagers are allowed to use the herbs growing there. Villagers are knowledgeable about the herbs found around, and their numerous purposes. Let us delve into our experiences of "community gardens" here!

Singapore's community gardens

In Singapore, community gardens are green spaces managed by volunteers in common areas. These plots are shared by residents with gardening interests, serving as a collaborative space. Therefore, as Singaporeans in BTP, we expected to see community gardens as a structured and predefined space among the village homes. Community gardens are intended to inculcate a sense of community by encouraging social interactions. It is also a strategy to improve Singapore's food security to meet our 30-by-30 goal which entails meeting 30% of our nutritional needs through local production by 2030. However, community gardens have currently been unsuccessful in improving our national vegetable production levels.

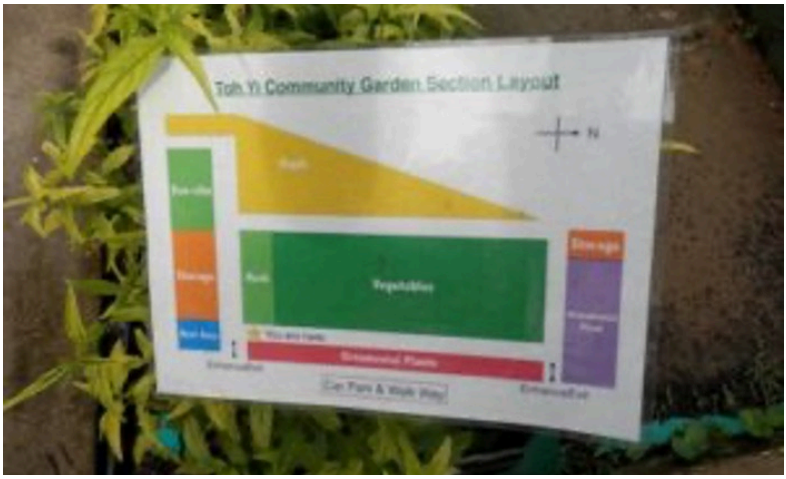

Figure 1: Community garden layout in Singapore with predefined areas for various crops

Unexpected findings of BTP's community gardens 😲

In BTP, the idea of "community gardens" is vastly different. Firstly, there are no predefined areas for community gardens, vis-à-vis Singapore. Edible herbs and medicinal plants are found by the roadside, in people's backyards, and even within surrounding plantations. Unlike Singapore with its constrained plots for community gardening, nature is thriving around us in BTP. Here, the idea of a "community garden" is expanded, encompassing all the vegetation around us.



Figure 2: Lemongrass, a common Thai cuisine ingredient, growing near the roadside. The villagers freely pick these plants when they need some for their dishes. This is testament to how commonplace growing herbs are around the village!

Secondly, these "gardens" serve a practical purpose in BTP. Community gardens in Singapore still have a long way to go before they become an adequate food source. Through our interviews, we realised that these village "gardens" are a substantial food source to these people. The village women forage for mushrooms and wild herbs daily in surrounding plantations to cook for their families. Villagers also sell their home-grown produce in local markets to visitors, and seasonal produce like durians to Phuket for tourists. These "gardens" provide both profit and sustenance to the village.





Top: Figure 3
Auntie Mee lives in Ban Tab Pla and owns one of the largest plots of lands with a diverse range of herbs and vegetables. These plants grow all around her house. She does not earn a lot from selling these plants, but still happily shares them with her fellow villagers.

Left: Figure 4
Chan Mak mushrooms that we foraged from the surrounding rubber plantations. These are seasonal delicacies that can be sold for 50 baht/kg. The villagers we interviewed told us they foraged for the mushrooms from 4am to 11am… wow!



Figure 5: Linn, a hybrid of ginger and potato used in cooking soups, found throughout the area. Villagers believe that linn can stimulate the appetite. These women are cleaning and preparing linn to sell in local markets.

Lastly, the idea of "sharing" differs between Singapore and BTP. Community gardens in Singapore involve the same plot of land shared by residents, but these are fenced off and restricted from everyone else.

However, in BTP, residents are free to take whichever herbs they are missing from their neighbours' plants after asking for permission. On a larger scale, while the village underwent lockdown during COVID-19, neighbouring villages shared their produce with them. Compared to the enclosed community gardens in Singapore, these "gardens" are truly a shared commons among the villagers, since they view each other as relatives and are willing to share their resources with everyone. As Auntie Mee told us, "the one who sacrifices is generous". Back home, we see our neighbours as mere acquaintances who we barely even greet! This kampung spirit that we aspire towards is thriving in BTP, as seen through how gardens are freely shared among them. This inspires us to be better neighbours in our Garden City.



Uncovering Dynamics of Physiography

FROM MANGROVE MANGALS TO COMMUNITY GARDENS AND RESOURCES TO GEOSPATIAL DATA

Choodha | GE3230A: FS2024



A surprising trend in recent research in physical geography is a growing body of work attempting to combine various types of 'critical' human geography with methods and techniques reliant on geospatial tools. Field studies facilitate the collection of local level information that is not available through secondary sources. It is very important as it helps to gather required information enabling the problems under investigation to be studied in depth as per the predefined objectives. It provides a 'real-world' opportunity for students to develop and extend their geographical thinking; it adds value to classroom experiences. Students in particular experienced practical exploration and examination of geographical phenomena and processes in their natural settings. It holds significant importance in regional planning by providing first-hand knowledge and data about specific regions.

The focus of Physical Geography project in Field Studies 2024 include:

- To explore different field sampling skills in natural environment such as Mangrove ecosystem, Community garden and Economically resourceful region
- To understand and apply the knowledge of environmental determinism and varied biodiversity of the study area
- Learn to use the field equipment and analysis the gathered data.
- To interact and identify the resources among indigenous community
- To map the remote indigenous communities using mapping software and ground surveys
- Learn to try to straddle the fence between human geography elements and GIS mapping by contributing to the local communities

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ประวัติศาสตร์





RANONG

Previously, we enjoyed a rich field study experience in Ranong in 2018. Ranong is a truly "green" province with a huge area of natural mangrove and a mountainous national park zone. Ranong is famous for its natural hot springs and abundant natural resources.

The maritime zone contains several islands. The sea space is divided by a maritime boundary separating Thailand from Myanmar. The Port of Ranong has an important immigration and customs point between the two countries. It is also a busy port for long distance and deep sea fishing fleets. We decided upon very distinctive project topics and home-stays for projects in 2024.

My Time in Koh Lao – Adib

"The locals have a different perception of time," Dr Carl reminded us time and again.

Time seemed to stop – we were almost instantly hit with dopamine withdrawal because electricity and data connection is weak, and the village itself is a 10-minutes walk from end to end – what can Singaporean students learn from this seemingly mundane village?

Time moved differently here – or perhaps it was a case of temporal inertia? By the third day everyone had accustomed to this life and time seemed to flow once again. Perhaps we started to appreciate what we had instead of missing what we did not? It was an exercise in slow living, but also in learning what it takes to sustain a village, particularly in a modern, interconnected world.

Time stops, time brings us forward, but it could never go back – on the last day I felt a lump in my throat, and I realised that these emotions and memories were and could only be forged through sustained interactions with our homestay hosts. Because in this seemingly mundane village, everyone was each other's everything, and more than the infrastructure or the economy, it was the social structure that sustained this community and had ripple effects on politics, economy, and culture.



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Ranong Resources and Identity

Fong Yue, Ng Zhao Feng Nicholas, Tan Jing Jie Ryan, Teo Joy, Teo Rachel, Umar Hazim, Chawanwat Thaiyai (Aom)

Exploring sustainability of resources

The resource-rich province of Ranong has three main sources of sustenance: river, land and sea. Cashews, tin, and shrimp paste are among other Ranong products distributed on a local, regional and even international scale. There is also a budding ecotourism sector utilising major natural features such as mangroves and hotsprings. During our stay, we investigated these resources and their availability and sustenance of small-scale producers in Ranong. Observations of resource production and interviews of locals regarding their concerns were carried out to get a better picture of the production network of these resources.

River, Land and Sea

River: Tin

The tin miners in the Bang Rin River separate the tin ore from river sediments using 'riang' – a wooden pan – from 7am to 2pm daily as seen in Figure 1.
The collected tin will be transported or sold to factories in Phuket and Bangkok for further processing.
"Income is rather unstable because the amount of tin harvested is subject to the weather conditions and luck... However, we are satisfied with this job because the good and bad days even out to give a decent monthly salary of around 15,000 baht." – Nimit Saengthong, 50s, Village Leader (translated from Thai)
At the time of observation, there are around five older people



Fig.1 Tin miners panning for tin in Bang Rin River. Most of these miners are elderly men and women, as it involves labour-intensive and time-consuming work for dispropoertionate material, making it undesirable for younger generations.

working in this mine. Younger generations presumably do not want to succeed in such trades as they have access to more profitable and less labour intensive jobs due to a better education system, according to village leader Nimit Saengthong, alias Pu-Yai-Daam.

Land: Cashews

Charan, a cashew plantation owner, shared that farmers harvest the cashews from February to May. After harvesting, farmers sell them to villagers for processing before sending them to factories locally and overseas. He also mentioned how other farmers are transitioning to other crops such as rubber and palm. Compared to cashews' once-a-year harvest, palm and rubber can be harvested every 15 days. Furthermore, cashew labour is difficult due to specific processing methods post-harvest (eg. peeling, preserving and roasting) before being exported, whereas palm and rubber can be exported raw. This makes oil palm and rubber a relatively more efficient crop for these cashew farmers.

Beside increased efficiency, local farming practices are potentially more sustainable than those of a more commercial nature. Charen mentioned that factories prioritise nut quality as they see cashews as the sole profitable product, while the locals prioritise leaf quality as they consume all parts of the tree including leaves, roots and bark.

Factories thus prune trees of their leaves to enable more nutrients to be transported to the cashew nuts, while any surplus from the cashew tree is sold by the locals during off-season for revenue. By acting as mediator between both parties, Pu-Yai-Daam has allowed the retention of local practices instead of allowing direct harvest by factories, which may be more sustainable as evident by the 20 to 50-year-old trees in the plantation.

Sea: Shrimp and Fish

Besides tin and cashews, resources from the sea are included in Ranong's production network. Primary and secondary products such as seafood and shrimp paste are procured and produced for distribution on both local and regional scales. Shrimp paste produced by locals on Ranong's offshore islands (eg. Koh Lao) are transported back to the mainland for distribution in local markets and is deemed a local speciality by our village leader. It undergoes several rounds of drying by salt and sun then fermentation with sugar before being deemed satisfactory for consumption and sale. A Moken fisherman mentioned that he is able to obtain around 20kg of shrimp a day, which is reduced to 10kg or less of shrimp paste when the processing is done.



Fig. 2 (Above) Fishing boats docked in Ranong Port; (Below) Fishing boats from the Muslim village on Koh Lao. The boats at the port are much bigger, and reportedly engage in illegal fishing in Myanmar waters nearby.

Interestingly, most fishing activities on the island can only garner approximately 10 fishes a day – sufficient for subsistence but not for sale. The Moken fisherman above may have connections to commercial fisheries on the mainland, but this has yet to be verified. This then raises issues of potentially unethical and unsustainable overfishing in illegal cross-border locations by such large corporations, putting the vulnerable lives and livelihoods of the local fishing community at risk.

Ecotourism in Phon-rang, Ranong

Visiting the Phon-rang Village Centre, our group encountered problems with current efforts in garnering tourist interest, such as inaccuracy in maps displayed and a lack of awareness amongst local and foreign tourists regarding the area. At the time of writing, the displayed map as per Figure 3 has a few issues as detailed in the caption.



Fig. 3 Current displayed map at Phon-rang Village Genter. The map is not orientated north, the geographical locations are inaccurate, and only Thai language is displayed.

Upon the Pu-Yai-Daam's request, we created a comprehensive map that covers all the tourist spots in the Phon-rang area to replace the current one. Using Google Earth Pro (Figure 4), QGIS software as well as Google My Maps, the various roads, rivers and attractions were mapped out. We then used Canva to add on other information such as location symbols, legends, place names, contact numbers,

pictures with captions and recommendations in both Thai and English (Figure 5). By raising awareness and knowledge of the area through this comprehensive map, we hope to encourage visits by local and foreign tourists and in the long term boost the tourism sector of the area. By including the cashew plantation and tin mining sites, the map highlights their vital role in the community's sustainability and economic development.



Fig. 4. GIS outline for our updated map on Google Earth Pro. The main road Phetkasem Sai Kao Rd through Phon-rang has been highlighted in dark red; Bang Rin River in the north and Phon-rang River in the south respectively in blue, as well as minor roads leading to attractions in orange.



Fig 5. A new map depicting accurate locations of tourist attractions and a clear legend for easy reference, as well as usage of both English and Thai to reach a wider audience. For easier orientation, a compass and relative locations off the map (Ranong Airport and Ranong Town) have also been included. A QR code will provide visitors additional info and images of these pictures highlighted. Some Ranong products have also been put in at the request of Pu-Yai-Daam.

In conclusion, Ranong's resources contribute greatly to the local economy and culture. However, the sustainability of these resources are threatened by changing economic landscapes and environmental issues. Traditional practices within Phon-rang often demonstrate sustainable practices that are vital to preserving local ecosystems and heritage in contrast to corporate practices. Beyond economic and environmental issues, lack of awareness and education also arise in the case of the local tourism sector. We hope to assist in these matters by creating a more informative map to raise awareness and It is thus essential for greater collaboration between various stakeholders, including the government, provincial authorities, and individuals on the ground to ensure the long-term viability of these resources.

Groove to the Mangrove: The Significance of and Threats to the Ranong Mangrove

Bay Ching Hwee, Hon Hou Ning Ryan, Janessa Low Kai Hui, Liew Yun Yi Claire, Luqmanul Hakim B Mohamed Ismail, Muhammad Amirul Hakim Bin Mohamad Helmy, Athitthaya Kanoknawakool (Four)

Home to an abundance of species and wildlife, the Ranong Biosphere Reserve is located in Mueang District, Ranong Province. Designated by UNESCO as a biosphere reserve in 1997 for protection, it features a distinctive landscape of mangrove forests and coastal areas. To better understand this rich ecosystem, we visited the biosphere reserve alongside the staff of the Mangrove Forest Research Centre who introduced us to both the natural and restored parts of the

parts of the reserve. The natural areas hold primary mangrove forests that are hundreds of years old, while the restoration sites, which once held shrimp and crab farms, had the mangroves replanted just six years back.



Figure 1. Photographs taken at the natural site and restoration site of the mangrove biosphere reserve.

Understanding the environmental benefits of these mangroves was a key reason for the government to restore these spaces. Not only are mangroves effective carbon sinks that sequester four times more carbon per hectare than terrestrial tropical forests at a rate of 1.15–1.39 tons hectare each year, they also serve as one of the primary reservoirs of blue carbon, or the carbon accumulated at coastal and marine ecosystems (Gevaña et al., 2018), These environmental roles of mangroves highlight their importance in regulating atmospheric greenhouse gases to mitigate climate change.

To witness this rich ecosystem first-hand, we took a boat ride beyond the tidal creeks into the

Of the 52 species of mangroves in the reserve, the most abundant are those belonging to the Rhizophoraceae genus including the Rhizophora apiculata and Rhizophora mucronata. Other species that we identified include the Avicennia alba, Sonneratia caseolaris, Ceriops tagal, Aegiceras corniculatum and Xylocarpus granatum.

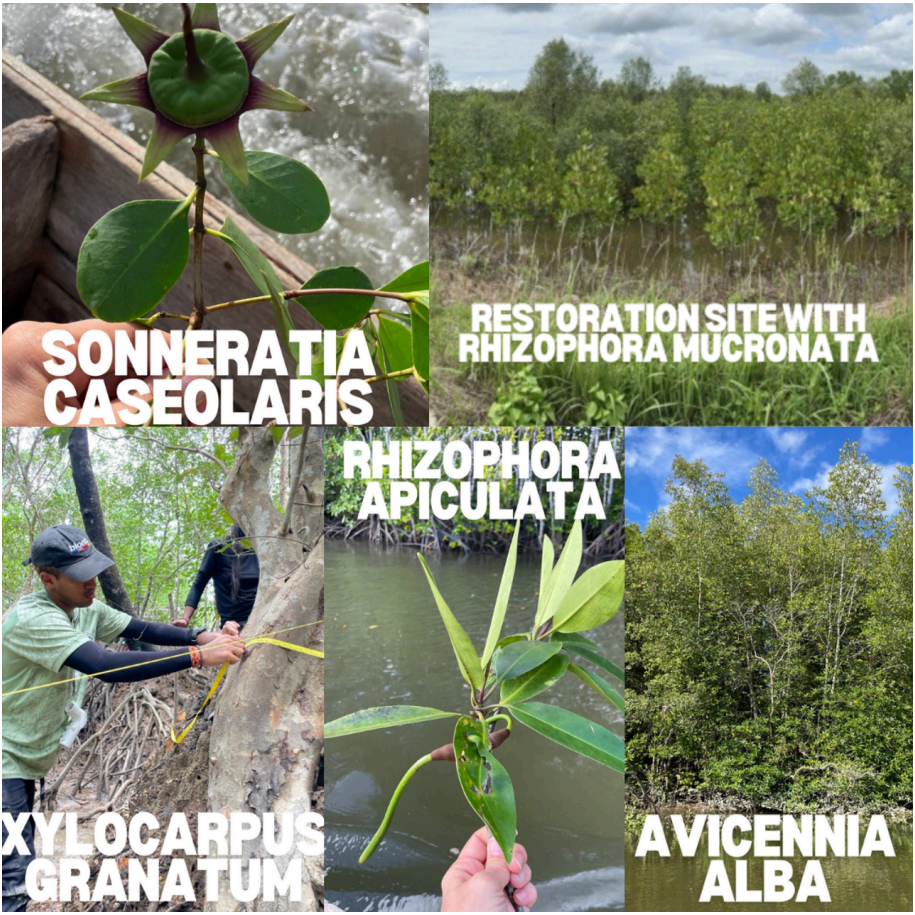

Figure 2. Collage of plant species found during the field study.

This variety of mangrove species provides a suitable habitat and nutrients for a wide range of wildlife including the Brahminy Kite, Collared Kingfisher, Giant Mud Crabs, Fiddler Crabs and Mudskippers. The interaction between the plant and the animal species create food webs and a balanced ecosystem.

This habitat provided by mangroves has extended impacts on the sustenance of individuals and communities. Many people living along the coast tap on the ecosystem services of the mangroves, catching species such as the longarm mullet, moses perch, white sea bass, mud crab, soft cuttlefish, and giant king crab (Ranong Biosphere Reserve, n.d.) to sustain their livelihoods. On the boat ride, our guide explained that the fishing activities of these communities are highly contingent on river behaviour such as tidal forces. Low tides, which occur twice a day, produce tidal bays during which clams can be caught. During the two high tides of the day, the open waters will then provide ideal conditions for fishing.



Figure 3. Coastal communities that take part in fishing activities.

Talking to the staff also revealed to us other significant ecosystem services provided by mangroves: to provide materials for housing, firewood and fishing gear, as well as to produce tea, soap, and shrimp paste that can be sold commercially to generate profit for the community.



Figure 4. Shrubs in the restoration site used for making products

In addition to this, the employees of the Ranong Biosphere Reserve believe that the fullest potential of the mangroves has yet to be realised. Speaking to them, we found that there are continuing efforts to improve the mangrove restoration area. Not only are there intentions to use the research centre to provide additional support for academies and institutions, they also hope to develop the site as a knowledge hub and

Despite the various environmental and socioeconomic benefits brought about by the mangroves both now and in the future, their existence and ability to continue thriving is subject to various threats. Currently, one of the biggest potential threats to the mangroves is the development of a US$36 billion land bridge that connects Ranong Port to Chumphon Port. Though the land bridge does not cut through the biosphere



Figure 5. The proposed plan for the land bridge.
Source: Thai PBS (Bunnag, 2024)

biosphere reserve, land reclamation adjacent to the protected area could result in sedimentation buildup, coral bleaching, destruction of underwater seaweed and blockage of animal breeding routes. This can lead to a reduction in fish, crab and shrimp populations and a cascading effect down the food chain, including the communities who depend heavily on this biodiversity for their livelihoods. Interviews with the locals of Ranong and the indigenous populations of Ko Lao island reveal that despite the benefits of the project to the economy, many of them disagree with the project as it would jeopardise their livelihoods and destroy the rich flora and fauna there. With more than a quarter of these mangroves having been lost over the last 50 years to wood harvesting, tin mining, and aquaculture (Macintosh et al., 2002), there is an even more pressing need to protect what remains to minimise disruption to the balanced ecosystem.

Having spent time studying the mangroves and speaking to those who work closely with the mangroves, what stood out most to us was how intertwined the ecosystem was to the communities that live alongside it. The tightly intertwined human-environment relationship in this area is much more observable compared to the Singapore environment that is familiar to us, and the opportunity to experience this first-hand has deepened our understanding of the significance of mangroves in the lives of individuals and communities beyond what we can understand remotely. Threats posed to these consequential ecosystems such as the land bridge or the over-exploitation of the mangroves for commercial uses also highlights the border-transcending tension between environmental protection and economic development, emphasising the importance of making justified land-use decisions especially in relation to changes that could deeply affect the area's ecology and, subsequently, humans.

Sustaining Ban Koh Lao, A Muslim Island Village

Elyana Ridwan, Qistina Athirah, Muhammad Haatim Bin Jaafar, Zulekha Sabbir Topiwalla, Namwhan Nayo

Koh Lao is a small island in the Andaman Sea off the Ranong coastline. Since 1952, the island has been inhabited by Muslims and Buddhists in Ban Koh Lao and a Moken community on the opposite side of the island. Consisting of 125 villagers and 34 houses along the coast in Ban Koh Lao, the villagers live a traditional fishing lifestyle, dependent on the sea for their



Fig. 1 Map of Koh Lao (source: Google Earth)

livelihood. With limited access to resources, they rely on a diesel generator and solar panels for electricity and rainwater to meet their water needs.

After the 2004 tsunami, most of the Buddhist villagers migrated to the mainland, making it a Muslim-majority village. The tsunami destroyed the village's infrastructure and impacted the marine ecosystem that the villagers rely on for sustenance, thereby disrupting their fishing activities. Due to the difficult conditions on the island, Ban Koh Lao has been the beneficiary of projects from companies and NGOs. Although non-essential, support from external organisations augments the self-sustenance of Koh Lao.

The following sections will elaborate on how the village sustains itself in various aspects, including livelihood, religion, and education.

Livelihood

The Muslim villagers in Ban Koh Lao sustain their livelihoods through daily activities that are shaped by their coastal environment.



Fig. 2 Process of making Shrimp Paste before drying & packaging

Historically, shrimping has been the primary occupation for generations, with villagers catching tiny shrimps (krills) as early as 4 a.m. To make shrimp paste, the krills are washed, salted, dried, pounded, and kept for ten days until they turn red, after which they are dried again, packaged, and sold to other provinces in Thailand. Shrimp paste remains an integral source of income and a hallmark of the village's identity.

However, the 2004 tsunami drastically altered their maritime activities which led to a decrease in krill populations, prompting villagers to diversify their sources of income by catching black crabs and shellfish. Additionally, the villagers engage in informal economic activities too within the village such as selling food and clothes.

To support the village's subsistence, the Organisation of Industrial, Spiritual, and Cultural Advancement (OISCA), a Japanese non-profit organisation, provided financial aid and education to Ban Koh Lao in 2021 (N–Ren Ranong Project, n.d.). OISCA gave 10,000 baht per household and established a village fund with 100,000 baht, from which

villagers can borrow money interest-free for their fishing equipment. Furthermore, OISCA promoted stewardship and waste management through education and incentives. By providing place-based education on waste management and facilitating recycling practices, the village became more environmentally conscious (Ito & Igano, 2020). Annually, the household with the most recyclables wins 300 baht, thus incentivising villagers' recycling efforts. Moreover, recyclables are sold to the mainland, generating supplemental income which enables them to meet their basic needs more effectively. Overall, OISCA's holistic approach protects the environment and empowers villagers to lead more sustainable and prosperous lives, enhancing the sustainability of the villagers' livelihood. The pursuit of alternative income sources and collaboration with NGOs demonstrates their resilience in adapting to and recovering from challenges (Gough et al., 2010).

Religion

Being a Muslim-majority village, Islam remains an integral part of the village's identity. The Ban Koh Lao Mosque was constructed and utilised by the villagers as a place to conduct their prayers.



Fig. 3 Ban Koh Lao Mosque

The mosque, however, is inadequate as a site for mass prayers and Islamic education. Larger congregational prayers that necessitate a minimum number of Muslims, like Friday prayers, cannot be conducted in the village and are instead held at a mosque on the mainland. Likewise, Islamic education is

only provided at a madrasah on the mainland.

Abdul Rasif, our interlocutor, made a funny quip teasing a large group of villagers who do not practise Islamic acts of worship regularly.

> "Only some [of the Muslim villagers], La Ilaha Illallah [1], while the rest, La La La La"
>
> – Abdul Rasif

Rasif's play on words suggests that while some villagers identify as Muslim, their lack of religious practice, possibly hindered by the inconvenience of having to travel to the mainland, indicates a gradual erosion of their Muslim identity.

Despite these challenges, the villagers still find ways to gather and celebrate their faith, such as during Eid al-Fitr, where they pool money and cook together at the mosque on the mainland with other Muslim communities. Additionally, one villager will be performing Hajj this year – said to be the first in their community! This occasion involves the entire community, who will gather to pray for his well-being, showcasing their unity. Such practices demonstrate the interconnectedness and shared identity that binds the different Muslim communities (Horton & Kraft, 2014).

Conversely, there are only two Buddhist households remaining in the village. Despite the religious differences, the Buddhist and Muslim villagers share similar lifestyles, fostering cohesion and harmony in the community. The shared values and principles in Islam and Buddhism, like compassion and respect, serve as the foundation for peaceful coexistence (Shah-Kazemi, 2010). This sense of belonging and acceptance is crucial for the sustenance of the minority Buddhist community in the predominantly Muslim village.

[1] a portion of the proclamation of faith for Muslims, meaning "there is no God but Allah".

Education

Informally established 50 years ago, Ban Koh Lao School serves a total of 50 nursery and primary school students from the Muslim and Moken village. Today, the school follows the national education syllabus, taught by six teachers from mainland Thailand.



Fig. 4 Ban Koh Lao School; construction of the building pictured is funded by Nu Skin

Before the tsunami, the school comprised two buildings: a cement building constructed by the government and a wooden building by the villagers. However, the tsunami destroyed the wooden building, leaving the school with only the cement structure. The village then received external aid from Nu Skin, a skincare company, which funded the refurbishment of the school in 2006.

The provision of education aligning with the national education system enhances its self-sustainability by ensuring that the villagers' right to mandatory primary education is fulfilled within the community (Vovk Korže, 2018). This allows families to stay together, maintaining cohesion and fostering a sense of identity, thereby enabling them to contribute meaningfully to their local economy and the village's preservation.

Conclusion

Ban Koh Lao has successfully sustained itself since 1952. Despite the impact of the tsunami on its infrastructure and fishing activities, the village has remained resilient, overcoming hardships with support from external organisations and the government. In its current state, their Muslim identity may be at risk of erosion. Nevertheless, Ban Koh Lao is well-positioned to sustain its economy and people.

Moken Education and Future Prospects: Navigating Tradition and Aspirations in a Changing World

Lee Zi Xuan, Sng En Teng Christabelle, William Rachmadi, Jerome Kwek Wing Kit, Peerada Wilai (Buatong)

The Moken are a semi-nomadic population of approximately 3,000 that inhabit the coastal islands of Southern Thailand and the Mergui Archipelago (Boutry and Ivanoff, 2024). Their way of life is characterised by perpetual mobility and has been instrumental in fostering their resistance to assimilation into dominant societies. This resistance constitutes a core part of their nomadic identity. Sanglir (2018) elaborates that a key part of this nomadic identity also entails the prioritisation of traditional knowledge systems. The Moken view formal education with a degree of apprehension, perceiving it as a potential tool for social engineering that could erode their dynamic cultural identity.

This report investigates the state of education within the Moken community of Koh Lao Island. Our initial observations upon arrival reveal a potential gap in the educational opportunities. Notably, a significant portion of villagers appeared to lack fluency in Thai. This report will delve deeper into these findings to explore the current educational landscape within the village, as well as its impact on the lives of the Moken people.

Methodology

Our group had undergone a 4-day homestay in the Moken village within Koh Lao Island. From there, we conducted our ethnographic research through interviews with the village chief,

P'Nao, conversations with some of the villagers, as well as participant observation.

Education in the Moken Village

Moken children aged six and below attend a pre-school located within the village. The school was set up by a non-profit organisation, HDF Mercy Centre (Figure 1) and also doubles up as a childcare facility.



Figure 1: Interior of the local elementary school run by HDF Mercy

Older children attend Ban Koh Lao School, a primary school located in the Muslim village on another side of the island. Transportation to and from the school is facilitated daily by boat from the Moken village (Figure 2).



Figure 2: Moken children boarding a boat that transports them to and from Ban Ko Lao School

Ban Koh Lao School is a public school that adheres to the formal curriculum established by the Thai Ministry of Education. Moken children enrolled at this school participate in language and science instruction alongside their peers. Additionally, the students are also able to enjoy other facilities such as the Sepak Takraw court (Figure 3).



Figure 3 (prev. page): Children playing at Ban Ko Lao School's Sepak Takraw court

Based on interviews with P'Nao and our observations, concerns have arisen about the quality of education that the village children receive at each phase of education.

For the preschool facility, P'Nao laments about the lack of formal curriculum. Our observations during the school visits corroborated this matter at hand. The instructional materials available, including textbooks with heavy emphasis on repetition (Figure 4), suggest a pedagogical approach that prioritises rote memorisation over fostering active learning and simulating skills development in young children.

As for Ban Koh Lao School, despite their adherence to a formal curriculum, a significant portion of Moken children face limitations in accessing it. This stems primarily from two factors: statelessness, which restricts the

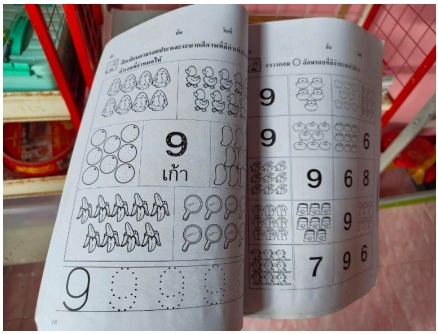

Figure 4: Basic arithmetic book focusing on copying shapes of numbers.

enrolment for some children (as they were not born in public hospitals and hence fail to meet one of the criteria for obtaining citizenship); and the non-mandatory nature of primary school attendance, as evidenced by our observations of children remaining in the village during school hours.

Beyond primary school, P'Nao's insights suggest a lack of continuation of education once the children have graduated from primary school. The physical distance between the location of the nearest secondary school on the mainland presents a significant logistical challenge. Boat

transportation, their usual mode of transport, thereby becomes impractical due to the increased distance and associated costs. Additionally, economic realities often necessitate a shift toward assisting the community's primary source of income, the fishing industry. This prioritises immediate income generation over further education at this critical juncture.

These shortcomings in the educational system have demonstrably impacted the socio-economic well-being of the Moken people. This is evidenced by the prevalence of poverty within the community. Our observations revealed that all households lacked access to running electricity and rely on rainwater collection for water consumption and daily needs.

While external organisations offer some support, it is evident that education, or the lack thereof, contributes to the cycle of poverty. Education can serve as a crucial tool for breaking this cycle. By equipping villagers with knowledge and skills beyond traditional fishing, it could open doors to diverse career paths and improved livelihoods. However, the Moken's historical resistance to education, rooted in their desire for autonomy and wariness of external influences presents a significant barrier (Boutry & Ivanoff, 2024).

P'Nao also further emphasises the lack of ambition among some villagers, who appear content with their traditional way of life. Casual conversation with a few of the children revealed little to no concerns about the quality of education received and their aspirations seem focussed on following the traditional path of becoming fishermen. This suggests a degree of self-internalisation whereby fishing is perceived to be the only viable career path.

Further Thoughts

While the current situation presents challenges, the

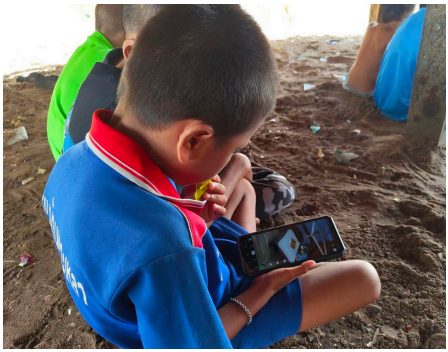

Figure 1: Interior of the local elementary school run by HDF Mercy

presence of technology within the Moken village offers a potential avenue for future development. Observations made during our walkabouts revealed that most children possess mobile phones and internet access. While these technologies currently serve primarily as entertainment platforms, as exemplified by the popularity of TikTok among children (Figure 1), the potential for them to serve as additional informational resources warrants investigation. Despite the physical isolation of the Moken village from the mainland, and broader world, platforms like TikTok can transcend these barriers and offer children a wider global perspective.

Exposure to diverse content through such platforms could potentially stimulate ambition and a desire to explore opportunities beyond the confines of Koh Lao Island. However, it is important to acknowledge that careful consideration is required to determine the long-term impact of such exposure to the Moken's traditional way of life and educational aspirations. While we were limited by our short stay on Ko Lao Island, we hope to be able to understand if technology can be effectively harnessed to support positive development within the community, while simultaneously mitigating any potential erosion or dilution of cultural identity and educational aspirations.

Planting Roots in New Soil: Isan Migrants in Naiwong

Ganaapathy Balakumar, Lim Ying Xuan Alexandria, Ngo Jo Shann, Seah Jie Hui, Yashwini Nelavannan, Meebu Cherkong (Bu)



Figure 1: The Field Studies team with our homestay hosts! Mae Tong Da (a migrant from the northeast Isan region) and her husband Pho Mehti (a South Thailand native) met while working as plantation labourers. Now, they have their own plantations around their house and up in the mountains. Their family blends both Isan and Southern Thailand cultures in their daily lives.

The Isan people of Northeast Thailand have long been cultivating rice in the challenging lands of Nakhon Ratchasima and its surrounding provinces. The agricultural and economic difficulties of rice farming in the region (Kaewwongyaiab et al., 2021), alongside better prospects outside the Isan region led many Isan residents to venture beyond their homeland. Among them was Mae Tong Da, who, in 1985, embarked on a journey to Naiwong, a village in Ranong Province. Drawn by the promise of better agricultural potential and income, Mae's migration story is emblematic of the internal migration of the Isan people to Southern Thailand.

The promise of better agricultural opportunities served as an economic motivation to lay down roots and build a community. Mae recounted that many Isan people in her village experienced economic stagnation, due to limited agricultural opportunities. Their traditional rice farming lifestyle did not provide them enough money to make substantial improvements to their standard of living (Pratiwi & Suzuki, 2017). Hence, the Isan residents lived precariously, facing insufficient economic prospects within their region. These circumstances impelled the Isan residents to seek better opportunities elsewhere.

For Mae and many others, Naiwong represented an opportunity to do something other than rice farming. Unlike the predominantly rice-based agriculture in Isan, the physical conditions of Naiwong supported a variety of high-value crops. Ranong has a tropical monsoon climate (Khedari et al., 2002) that provides sufficient rain to water-intensive cash crops (like durian, coffee) grown here. Naiwong's well-drained, loamy soil (FAO, 1976) also suits the growing conditions of such crops. Mae mentioned how in Isan, people could only grow rice since their poorly-drained soil limits the cultivation of other crops. Hence, many Isan people moved to Ranong for opportunities to work on plantations as labourers, hoping to one day own one.

Initially, Mae and other Isan migrants focused on coffee cultivation. However, coffee farming was too labour-intensive to sustain. Eventually, many farmers (including Mae) transitioned to other hardier crops like durian and mangosteen to reduce the need for labour. Mae mentioned that these other crops could be harvested at different months (durians and mangosteens in June, coffee in December). The



Figure 2: Mae's first plot of land was used to grow coffee. Coffee production was promoted in the 1970s and 80s by King Bhumibol Adulyadej (Weng, 2018), leading to the creation of coffee plantations in Ranong province. The abundance of jobs there (as labourers) spurred Isan migrants to move too.



Figure 3: Mae now mainly grows durians and mangosteens, the king and queen of fruits. She says that her fruits sell for higher prices than those grown in other regions. Her mangosteens sell for 200 baht/kg, compared to 40 baht/kg if they were grown somewhere else, showing a demand for premium fruits from Naiwong.



Figure 4: Upon arrival, Mae and fellow Isan migrants were welcomed into established Isan communities, where their shared cultural background eased the transition. These networks provided a sense of belonging and cultural continuity, enabling them to adapt and thrive in Naiwong.

Facilitating the initial migration to Naiwong was the strong social networks within the Isan community. Many Isan residents were influenced by the success stories of family members and friends who had already relocated to Naiwong. For instance, Mae's sister first migrated to Naiwong and established herself as a coffee farmer. Inspired by her sister's success, Mae decided to migrate and work as a plantation labourer here. Through word-of-mouth, people gained valuable insights into the economic opportunities and quality of life improvements that migrants experienced in Naiwong. This informal network of communication therefore served as the primary source of information for their migratory decisions, instead of through official government channels. This unexpected method of channelling information helped make the idea of relocating to Naiwong more attractive for many residents back in Isan.

Initially, Isan people were tolerated as they were useful in helping to fulfil labour-intensive agricultural jobs that locals were unwilling to do, reflecting their lowly position in Naiwong's community. P'Ann, a Southern Thai shop owner, mentioned how people thought of the Isan as "dirty". However, over time their diligence enabled them to rise the ranks, proving themselves to be valued farmers and landowners. Mae's progression from a labourer to owning around 30 rai (~12 acres) of land exemplifies this. The absence of roads and farming equipment in the area made it difficult to care for her crops as it was time-consuming and physically demanding to bring up gardening tools and supplies constantly. However, she persevered and kept working hard to earn money, which she then used to buy her own land. Now, her neighbours praise her work ethic and see her as a pillar of the community. This diligence of the Isan people, exemplified by people like Mae, helped them to amass wealth and gain respect from the community, allowing them to integrate into Naiwong.

Gradually, as the Isan community in Naiwong became more accepted and established, their cultural practices flourished. Isan cuisine like Nam Plaa Raa (fermented fish sauce) became more accepted, and their cultural practices became hybridised with Southern Thailand's. Mae frequently partakes in traditional Isan ceremonies like Bun Khun Lan in the villages of Naiwong, commemorating their religious beliefs. To cater to the increased Isan population, Zhao Ahwat, a monk from Welu Wan Aran shared that the temple has chosen to conduct Buddhist rituals in a predominantly Isan fashion, with certain Southern Thai influences. With the prevalence and familiarity of an established Isan culture, Isan people were encouraged to continue migrating to Naiwong.

The Isan migration not only reshaped the agricultural

landscape of Naiwong, but also significantly transformed the social fabric of their communities. Over the years, Naiwong transitioned from forest to coffee plantations and now, to durian and mangosteen ones. This was accompanied by a change in demographics to around 80% of residents originating from Isan. As the Isan migrants brought their cultural traditions over, the hybridisation of both Isan and Southern cultures created something uniquely Naiwong.

Her story highlights the possibilities of integrating new migrants into one's society and creating a community which ultimately benefited both the Isan migrants and native Southern Thais. As conflict brews in different areas of Thailand between people from different regions, Naiwong reminds us that peaceful coexistence is possible even amongst communities that were once a thousand kilometres apart.



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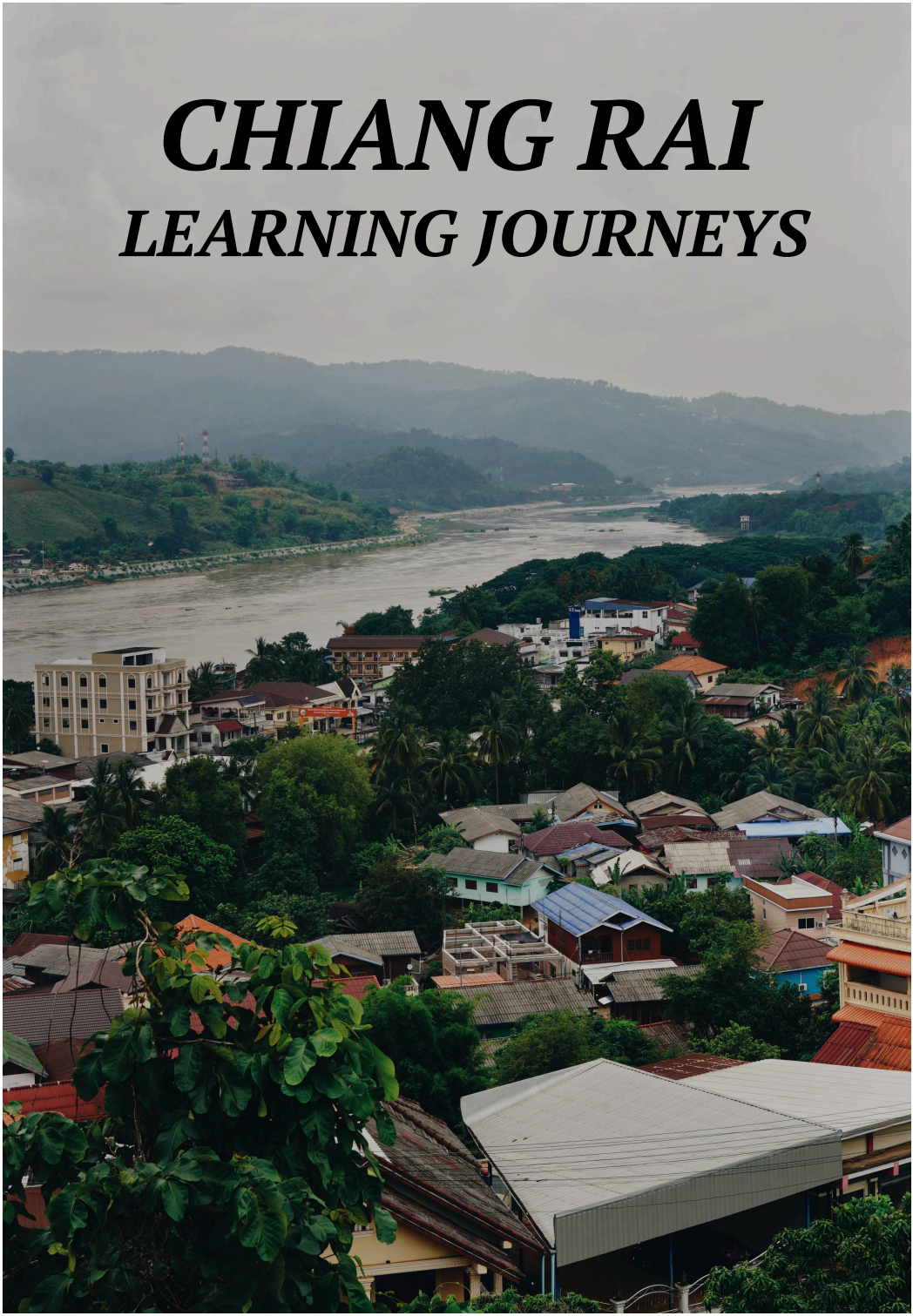
RC PORCELAIN

CHIANG RAI
LEARNING JOURNEYS



The majestic Mekong River flows through several countries... Or should we say that several countries flow through it?

The decision to utilise the River as a political boundary has given rise to hydropolitics and contributed to wider geopolitical and geoeconomic imaginaries within and across multiple countries.

In this section, students explored issues related to environmental activism and cross-border conflicts through site visits, guest lectures, and interviews with prominent figures like environmental activist Niwat Roykaew and journalist/ film-maker Tom Fawthrop.









THE MEKONG SCHOOL: INSTITUTE OF LOCAL KNOWLEDGE



THE MEKONG

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

Students learned about the historic upstream-downstream and cross-river trading networks that existed between non-bounded kingdoms and chiefdoms.

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.



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". 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 of the GMS. In particular, students learned about 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.



Hydropower projects are part of a regional energy grid that prioritises energy flowing to regional capitals and powers industrial centres. These mega-developments are having cumulative implications upon upstream-downstream flows, ecosystems, and upon the hydrological flood pulse of the Mekong, causing less predictable flows in different parts of the Mekong Basin. Students were thus provided with a necessary historical, economic and geopolitical overview before and during their learning journey to Chiang Khong, Chiang Rai province, Thailand, and to Huay Xai, Bokeo province of Laos PDR.

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.

The students also had the opportunity to take a boat ride along the Mekong River with renowned documentary filmmaker and journalist, Tom Fawthrop. Together with Professor Carl, the two shared about the many changes they had personally witnessed over the years.

HUAY XAI, LAOS



FORT CARNOT



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 only be 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 Huay Xai. The fort represents one of the frontiers of French Indochina, and its location is symbolic of the geopolitical significance of the Mekong River.





CHIANG SAEN

Students stopped at Chiang Saen as they travelled to Mae Salong, visiting ancient sites such as Wat Chedi Luang, and then going up the river to stand at the Thai corner of the infamous Golden Triangle.

Across the river, in Laos, is a Special Economic Zone containing a casino complex and several high-rise buildings, somewhat at odds with the peaceful, rural vibes in this area of the Mekong.





Wat Chedi Luang





Wat Chedi Luang is a Buddhist temple that sits in the bustling heart of Chiang Saen, Thailand. Upon first impression – the temple grounds are quiet, peaceful and cool. Multi-coloured flags adorn the lush, towering trees – some of which are hundreds of years old. Some of these trees are considered sacred and are believed to offer spiritual protection to both the temple and visitors alike.



Ban Mae Yang Min

The hidden gem of northern Thailand: Ban Mae Yang Min, a charming Karen village nestled in the verdant hills of Chiang Rai province. Here, time seems to fly, allowing visitors to immerse themselves in the rich tapestry of Karen culture and natural beauty. Life in Ban Mae Yang Min revolves around nature. In the early morning, you can join the villagers as they embark on their daily routines, working on the paddies and vegetable gardens that carpet the surrounding hillsides.





As you walk along the winding paths that weave through the village, you are greeted by friendly smiles and warm welcoming people saying ‘Sawadika’ traditional greeting in Thai. The wooden stilt houses and intricate carvings stand as a testament to the villagers’ craftsmanship and resilience.



Hospitality runs deep in Karen culture and every visitor is treated like family: you are always invited for feasts and presented with food made with love. This village offers a gateway to the wilderness through hiking and trekking in lush jungles and streams, guided by knowledgeable and friendly villagers who know the land like the back of their hand.

The village head ‘Por Luang’ is an incredibly nice and humble man, who provided a range of facilities and homestays for NUS students. This also signifies the kindness of the people in this Karen village.



DOI MAE SALONG

Nested in the northern mountains of Chiang Rai is Doi Mae Salong (美斯乐). Behind its scenic views and cool weather are colourful, diverse histories related to China, Taiwan, Myanmar, and the wider political network.

In their final group project, students traced the geopolitics, societal roots, and economic transitions on this region, and immersed themselves in the everyday cultures and lifestyles of other mountain communities like the Karen and Akha.







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. 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.



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.







Kuo Min Tang Museum

Students were given mini-lectures by Ja Ta, a former KMT soldier. Ja Ta travelled with the group in the north and 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.



Students also had the opportunity to visit visited a former military camp of Khun Sa at Thoed 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.

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.





Cr: Opus.ac



Ban Mae Ter

In between formal field trips and their field notebooks, students were also able to explore the Chinese mountain town of Mae Salong, visit tea 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, and all our students were greeted with bananas and fresh coffee from his mountain farm. Asa knows and supplies coffee to Lee Ayu, founder of Akha Ama Coffee in Chiang Mai. They discussed Akha Ama's community engagement and sustainable coffeee social entrepreneurship.



Ethnic wear

Akha men and women each have their own unique traditional attire.

For women, the style of ethnic wear varies depending on their marital status.







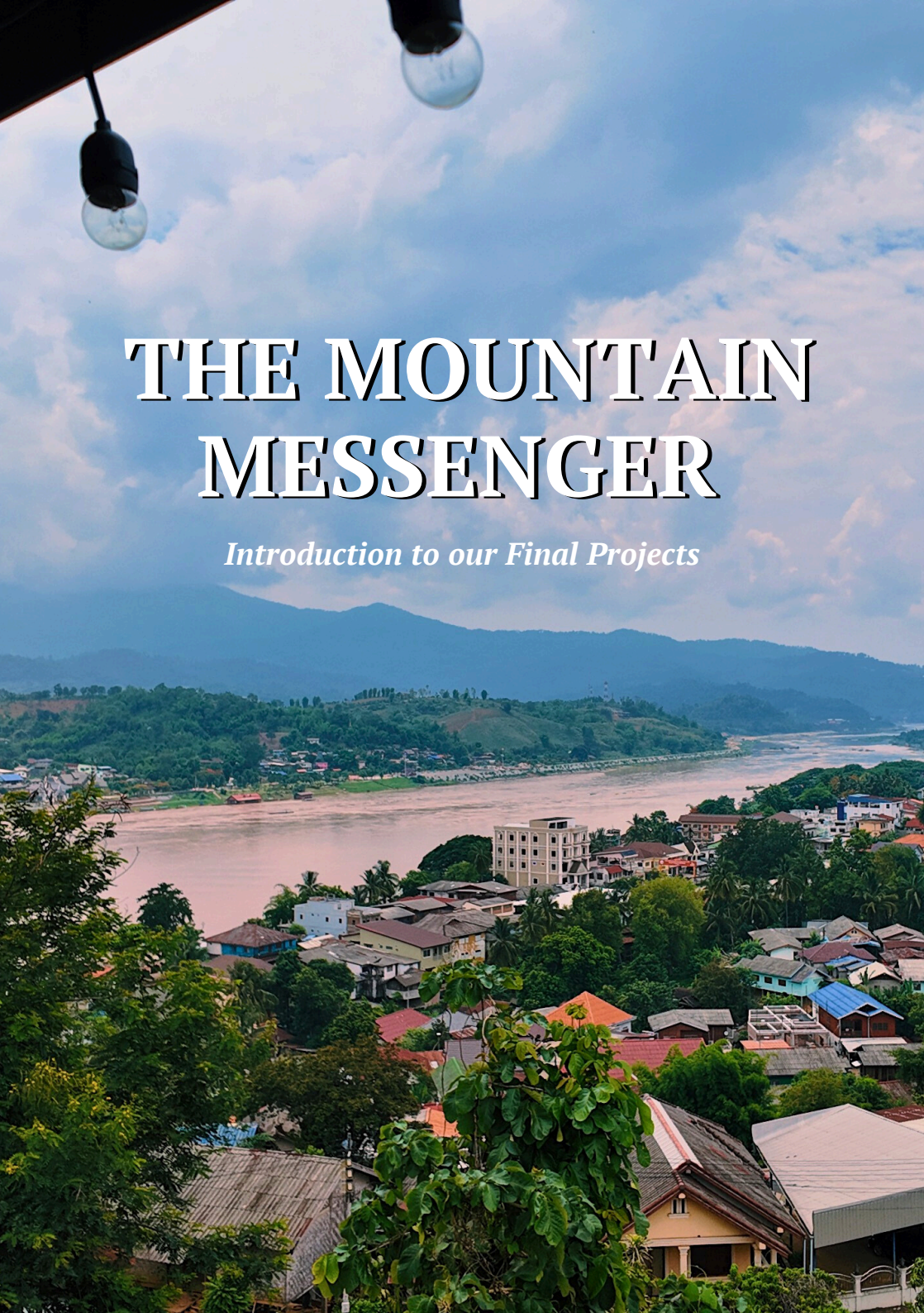


Akha Ama Coffee: A Chiang Mai field trip

The previous week, in Chiang Mai, we visited Lee Ayu at the Akha Ama Living Factory. Lee was a Thai buddy from CRRU in one of the first editions of Field Studies, and credits the programme for helping him to expand his horizons and to dare to dream.

Lee is Akha, a minority ethnic group in the mountainous regions of northern Thailand. He founded Akha Ama Coffee as a social enterprise to empower his fellow Akha, enabling much greater local control over, and returns from, the coffee value chain which originates in their villages, as well as instilling greater self-respect of and pride in their Akha identities.

Lee gave students a detailed account of his story, and shared advice for aspiring young social entrepreneurs.



THE MOUNTAIN MESSENGER

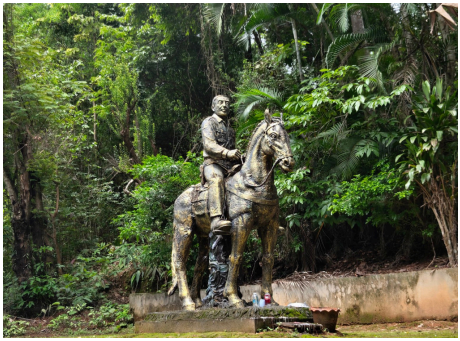
Introduction to our Final Projects

Mae Salong Borderlands

Ganaapathy Balakumar, Janessa Low Kai Hui, Jerome Kwek Wing Kit, Teo Joy, William Rachmadi, Athitthaya Kanoknawakool (Four)



In 1949, the communist People's Liberation Army defeated the nationalist Kuomintang party. A faction fled to Burma, engaging in military conflicts with government and local communist forces. After a decade of turmoil, half were extradited to Taiwan, with the remainder migrating to Thailand. This highlights regional fluidity in crossing borders.



While borders legally demarcate state sovereignty, Shan-born warlord Khun Sa wielded military and economic power – through private militias and the drug trade – to control Ban Hin Taek, a Thai village, de facto. As seen from this monument, he is revered by locals for spurring socioeconomic development in the village.

Mae Salong Yunnanese Society and Kuomintang (KMT) Heritage

Bay Ching Hwee, Fong Yue, Ryan Hon, Lim Ying Xuan Alexandria, Yashwini Nelavannan, Chawanrat Thaiyai (Aom)



The Martyr's Memorial Hall tells the story of the forgotten part of Kuomintang (KMT) and honours the fallen soldiers who fought in Northern Thailand against the communists. Besides preserving the heritage of this place, the museum draws on the history as a unique selling point for tourism in Mae Salong.

Honouring General Duan, his tomb recognises his contributions to Mae Salong and KMT as the leader of the fifth regiment and village founder. It educates visitors, who are mostly Asian Chinese tourists and local students, about his role in building the village and promotes historical preservation among the younger generation.



Mae Salong Resources: From Opium to Oolong

Lee Zi Xuan, Ngo Joshann, Qistina Athirah, Elyana Ridwan, Muhammad Haatim Bin Jaafar, Namwhan Nayo



Tea leaves are harvested by minority workers, employed by Han Chinese tea farm owners who are also tea brewing masters. This division of labour enables the Hans to be the successful 'bourgeoisie', signalling a power imbalance.

A-em Merlae, a village elder, points to the hills of Mae Salong that were once filled with opium, pre-1980s. Colloquially called '福寿', opium was known as a panacea for all illnesses. Villagers would harvest opium by extracting and processing the poppy seeds through a series of cooking and fermentation.



Akha in Mae Salong: Negotiating Modernity

Luqmanul Hakim Bin Mohamed Ismail, Muhammad Amirul Hakim Bin Mohamad Helmy, Zulekha Sabbir Topiwalla, Teo Rachel, Umar Hazim Bin Mohamed Wahid, Meebu Cherkong (Bu)



The Akha have been adaptable and resourceful in achieving better socioeconomic status. They plant cash crops like coffee and tea. They also pursue Thai and Chinese education to secure better employment and higher education abroad.



However, this modernisation has cost them parts of their ethnic identity. Akha youth slowly lose interest in traditional Akha knowledge and traditional Akha religion is not transferred from the elders.

Our project explores how the Akha shifts their identity over time to remain intact during their modernisation process, particularly through preserving language and traditional clothing.

Mapping the Karen Village

Liew Yun Yi Claire, Ng Zhao Feng Nicholas, Sng En Teng Christabelle , Tan Jing Jie Ryan, Peerada Wilai (Buatong)



In a village inhabited by the Karen, Po Luang's dog, Simon, leads us through a forest path leading up to the hills. These pathways are cleared down to the mineral soil layer by Karen and Lahu villagers and are part of a network of fire lines that are vital to safeguarding communities from forest fires.



The Mae Yang Min's path is interrupted by a unique structure that controls the flow of water: a barrage made out of bamboo and sandbags. These barrages were constructed by the villagers 20 years ago and remain the backbone of downstream irrigation.



REFLECTIONS

Learning by Doing

HEAR FROM THE TEAM



L-R: Meebu Cherkong, Namwhan Nayo, Dr. Carl Grundy-Warr, Dr. Natthaphon Santhi, Chawanrat Thaiyai, Athitthaya Kanoknawakool, Peereda Wilai

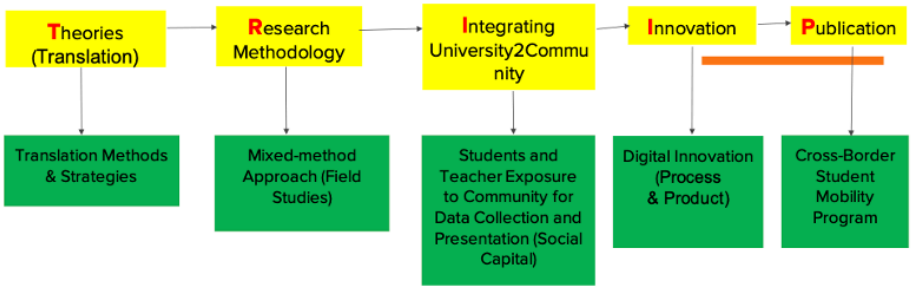
Reflective Contribution by CRRU for NUS Field Studies 2024
Dr. Natthaphon Santhi

Chiang Rai Rajabhat University (CRRU), this year, joined the 2024 NUS Field Studies Program by selecting five interns to embark on this program together with NUS Field Studies students. The framework endorsing the preparation of the five interns for their academic and professional development is the TRIIP instructional model used in the Creative Translation Course in which the five interns enrolled in the academic year 2/2023, with myself as the course lecturer.

TRIIP Model Summary



ENP2202 Creative Translation



I conceptualized the TRIIP model from an experience in teaching Creative Translation Course for undergraduate students at CRRU for many years. The TRIIP model is an acronym for Translation Theories, Research Methodology, Integrating Community, Innovation, and Publication. The TRIIP instructional model deployment constitutes the following steps:

1. Translation Theories are introduced to students to familiarize translation theories for an ability to efficiently translate Source Language (SL) to Target Language (TL) in which SL refers to Thai Language and TL is English. The students are also required to handle translation theories to distinguish creative translation from basic translation.
2. Research Methodology is introduced to nurture students with classroom-based research competence by means of using translation theories in Step 1 to analyse their own translation works. The students must present their research results in class.

3. Integrating Community embarks students for the translation fieldwork at the selected village within proximity of Chiang Rai area for collecting translation materials.
4. Innovation introduces students to use digital platforms for digital innovation literacy such as Canva (canva.com) for producing poster presentations of their translation analysis results.
5. Publication refers to students handing over their digital and printed poster presentations to the village for use at their disposal such as publicity and educational content for students, villagers, and visitors to learn and appreciate about community capital.

I believe that this TRIIP model offers several implications that empower students to become successful interns in the 2024 NUS Field Studies course, especially for their academic and professional mindset. First, students are equipped with well-informed theory of translation methods and strategies. Second, they have hands-on experience in the translation fieldwork during the course period. Third, they know how to work collaboratively with their peers and villagers through the fieldwork approach. Fourth, they have the develop gratitude for the similarities and differences of their own culture and those of the field study sites. Finally, they are equipped with state-of-the-art digital platforms such as Canva.com to elevate their digital literacy for real-life endeavors. This instructional model and strategies can thus scaffold CRRU students to earn successful plug-in with the 2024 NUS Field Studies and set the foundation for future collaboration of NUS Field Studies and CRRU.

Dr. Natthaphon Santhi
(Course Lecturer 2024)
Chiang Rai Rajabhat University



Four

Athitthaya Kanoknawakool

I chose this picture because it reminded me of the journey from South to North of Thailand. We used the songtheaw to go everywhere. Perhaps it might have given us some discomfort on the long journeys but it also gave us good views and good memories. I have gained many new friends, experience and confidence when speaking in English. Therefore, I want to thank Dr. Carl for giving me this opportunity, and to myself for having the courage to leave my comfort zone.

I will always remember the places we visited and the kind people who were with me. Thank you everyone for the good memories together. We have done great!



Aom

Chawanrat Thaiyai

I am very grateful to have joined this NUS X CRRU field trip with students from Singapore. I learnt about new places, histories and knowledge that I have never known or experienced before from Phang Nga, Ranong, Chiang Mai and Chiang Rai provinces. While living in the various villages, everyone was united and helped each other even though we speak different languages. I am very happy to be on this long journey with everyone and I hope to meet them again next time.





Bu

Meebu Cherkong

I learnt many new things, improved my mindset and had so much fun through this field course.

When I heard about this project, I was so excited to join because I wanted to improve my English in terms of speaking, listening, analysing, and communication, but I most looked forward to making good friendships.

Firstly, everyone is so nice, so kind and so smart too. They patiently explained words that I did not understand, and everyone's smiles were so beautiful.

Secondly, I learnt many new things such as the culture of Southern Thailand in Phang Nga and Ranong. I gained knowledge about Moklen life in Ban Tab Pla and I lived with the Isan people in Naiwong. They work hard and never give up on their life. Everything I learned and see contributed to a growth mindset and made me want to improve myself to help them have a better quality of life in the future.

I'm always thankful for this opportunity that gave me a wonderful experience and even more wonderful friends.



Namwhan

Namwhan Nayo

I have been on a project trip with students from National University of Singapore for a month, and I feel sad to leave them. However, just as there is a time to meet, there is also a time to part, and that is normal.

During this trip, I have been incredibly happy and grateful for the opportunity to meet everyone involved. Despite coming from different countries, regions, languages, and backgrounds, we still had the chance to meet and connect with each other. We always took care of each other like we were all part of a big family. We shared hard times and good times, feeling sad, happy, tired, and bored together, but we made it through to today, and everyone did their part. This is not just a coincidence; it is destiny.

I am hopeful to see you all again in the future, and I hope everyone feels the same way as I do. This trip has not only given me wonderful experiences but also the gift of new friendships that I will cherish forever.

Buatong

Peereda Wilai



It has been almost a month since I joined FS. I have been to many provinces in Thailand that I have never been to before. I learned new things and also met many people from different languages and cultures. I got to practise speaking English more. Starting from Phang Nga, to Ranong, Phetchaburi, Chiang Mai, and now ending in Chiang Rai. Moreover, I made new friends from Singapore. We exchanged knowledge, language and culture, and spent a month together feeling very close. We have done new things together and I don't want to think about the day we will be separated as I will feel very lonely. However, I am happy to be a part of this trip. Everywhere I went, I was impressed, and made many memories with friends. I will probably never forget these stories. We saw beautiful views together, ate together, did activities together, and cared for each other. It was a great time in my life. Thank you to everyone in FS for taking care of me so well. If there is a chance, I hope we will meet again.



Choodha

Teaching Assistant

Adventures in Geography: A Comical Tale of Field Studies TA



Buckle up for a rollercoaster ride through my adventures as a Teaching Assistant (TA) in a Geography Field Studies course. Little did I know that my journey from the classroom to the field would be filled with laughter, unexpected encounters, and a fair share of bloopers.

I was prepared to explore a Mangrove swamps to mapping resources armed with sediment samplers, water quality tools and laptops. Some days I sailed along the tidal stream, some days on sea, rain, river, mountains etc.. I'm trying to maintain a serious demeanor, channeling my inner David Attenborough. But who am I kidding? The salty breeze is wreaking havoc on my meticulously styled hair, and I'm pretty sure I look more like a disheveled seagull than a seasoned geographer.

Despite the hilarious mishaps and unexpected surprises, one thing becomes clear, laughter truly is the best fieldwork companion. As we wrap up the semester with a mix of

exhaustion and nostalgia, I realize that it's the quirky moments and shared laughter that make field studies unforgettable.

So here's to the wild adventures, the unexpected encounters, and the countless memories that remind us why we fell in love with geography in the first place. And who knows? Maybe next time, I'll bring a spare umbrella and a sense of humor as my trusty fieldwork essentials.





Adib

Teaching Assistant

FS24 is my fourth field course – from being a student in Kenya, to a student assistant in FS23, to a full-fledged teaching assistant in FI23 and FS24. Accordingly, my highlights ranged from making nostalgic memories and forging meaningful relationships, to realising the complexity of fieldwork pedagogy and embodying acts of love and sacrifice for others.

FS23 was about realising and adapting to the organisational and social fluidity and complexity of field courses. It is this assemblage of knowledge, environments, and relationships forged over an extended period of time that make FS such a precious and wonderful experience.

FS24 made me reflect a lot on my role and methods as a teaching assistant, trying to find the right balance in many aspects of teaching: encouraging spatial and academic exploration whilst handling its accompanying safety and logistical issues, providing information versus training their resourcefulness and independence, giving firm but gentle advice, trading authority and discipline for rapport and trust... Because perhaps the essence of pedagogy is ultimately the social relations between two beings learning from each other, and the acts of sacrifice that come along with it.

"To be honest, being a TA for Field Studies is a labour of love more than a materially rewarding task. It has big responsibilities, including student welfare, safety, and dealing with loads of nitty-gritty problems that arise. It is not something you receive a lot of praise for at the end of the day."
-Dr Carl

Nevertheless, I am grateful for the numerous strings of fate that coalesced and led to my decision to join field courses, again, and again, and again.



Nic

Student Assistant

I distinctly remember wandering around my homestay village on a lazy afternoon a year ago. Back then, I wondered when the next time would be that I could be as carefree and content with such a slow pace of life. Who would have thought that I would be back on Field Studies this year as a student assistant, doing it all again.

The past one month of FS has been amazing. The awe-inspiring Andaman Sea and the warm hospitality of the communities in Southern Thailand will forever be etched in my memories (alongside the hysterics and insect bites of my Baan Ta Plaa). The experiences in the South were all new to me, and I often found myself learning with the



students I was supposed to assist. Luckily, being forced to adapt to unfamiliar topics and landscapes is all in the spirit of FS, and we persevered.

The North was fun, familiar, and made me grateful for the chance to experience it all again. I will forever cherish the memories of the times exploring Chiang Mai with my fellow SAs and the rest of the FS team. Being back a second time provided me the chance to explore other aspects of the city I did not manage to experience last year.

As a student assistant, finding a balance between being overly involved with the projects and giving the students the intellectual freedom to explore their topics of interest proved challenging at times. All I hope is that the research knowledge I shared from last year's FS and my own projects were useful to them.

Lastly, my biggest takeaway from FS remains the same. Life comes at you fast, so try to take it slow and enjoy the little moments. I hope the warm ocean breezes, songthaew karaokes, and late-night talks remain special memories for years to come.



Sze Xuan

Student Assistant

From listening to the legends of Putao Sampan (Figure 1) to walking along the fire lines in Mae Yang Min (Figure 2), the constant struggle was translation, and understanding the nuances in the narratives shared. Thankfully, with the help of the Thai interns, perfecting our knowledge of the Thai language could be secondary. What became of importance, instead, was listening and making space for my pre-conceived notions to be disrupted. The process revealed to me the recursive nature of listening, probing, and



Figure 1: The 3 way translation from (1) the spirit medium who spoke in the Moklen dialect, to (2) a translator who translated from Moklen to Thai, to (3) Buatong, a Thai student intern, who translated Thai to English.



Figure 2: Walking along the fire line with Por Luang, our homestay host and village chied, at Baan Mae Yang Min. Again, Buatong was the Thai intern attached to our group!

adapting my expectations throughout interviews and field trips. In hindsight, miscommunications and repeated clarifications also added a humorous touch to our conversations, making the inside jokes shared aplenty.

I really enjoyed the nature and culture I got to immerse myself in in the process – my favourite place being Nai Wong, the mountains of Ranong. If you had asked me what I liked about the mountains before, as a human geographer, I probably would not be able to give a more satisfactory answer than the nature, the quiet, and the space for introspection. However, the homestay at Nai Wong gave me deeper insight into the migrant community in the mountains. In the four days I spent in the home of Meh Tong Na, of the many activities we did, I enjoyed cooking Isan and Southern Thai style food (Figure 3), visiting the family's mangosteen, durian, and coffee farm, and thrilling rides at the back of the pick-up truck. Beyond the mountains' untouched, primal beauty,



Figure 3: Making Isan style som tam (papaya salad) with Meh Tong Na. Compared with the southern style som tam, Isan style som tam used plaa raa (fermented fish sauce) and added fermented crabs.

together with the group I assisted, I got to uncover the migration journey of the Isan people. I was confounded by the co-existence of the southern Thai and Isan people that took place despite their cultural differences. Their co-existence is evident from the diversity of their spoken languages – villagers would speak to each other in their native tongue and could still understand one another. I draw from the Nai Wong community their respect for difference, in a bid to understand the other and, simultaneously, retain a fraction of their own cultural practices.

Of the many lessons I have learnt through homestays and assisting group projects, my deepest regret would be in the nuances lost in translation in all the conversations and interviews I have sat through. With this, I take with me the importance of speaking in the language of those who I am attempting to research and understand – whether literally or metaphorically.



Shenn

Student Assistant

I was honoured and excited when Dr Carl asked me to continue my photo and video work from FS23 as a helper on FS24. I believe that the great number of images people take everyday is evidence for the importance they place on visually documenting their lives: the places they visit, the people they meet, the things they see. I think it's important, too.

I also believe that striving for excellence in this, and helping others to do it, are both worthwhile endeavours. It was a happy few weeks doing my best to capture the moments students stepped onto a beach for the first time, coddled cats in their arms, said goodbye to their homestay hosts, and more. The following photographs are some of my favourites from that time – I hope I can communicate what I was thinking when I shot them, how I feel about them now, and perhaps spark something new in the way you see photography as part of your life experience.





The above and previous image were shot at the stadium field next to the community centre in Ranong. The red/orange dirt track popped out at me amidst the green and sky blue of the rest of the scene, as well as a charmingly rustic element of the old concrete sports facility. The field also hosted multiple spontaneous football games, one just between our students but two others with Ranong locals, children and adults. It was a beautiful picture to me, both literally and symbolically: the dusk lighting and the hilly backdrop, as well as the power of sport to forge connections across age and nationality without the need for fluent conversation.



This image of Ke's daughter was taken after one of the groups had come back from observing squid fishing in an intertidal zone at the beach. She had followed them there and back, and as the students went to relax on the beach, so did she. I watched her drag a chair down to the beachfront, and quickly put aside my puzzlement to appreciate her innocent, childish play and enjoyment of the beach.

I dearly hope to be back in Thailand again to shoot – to find more moments and stories, and to capture them to the best of my ability.



Natalie

Student Assistant

I was walking to the Geography Honours room in my last semester of university when I received an email from Dr Carl, inviting me to join FS24 as a student & media assistant. Having undertaken two other field investigations prior to this trip, I knew just how invaluable such experiences could be. The rest is history.

Indeed, the past few weeks have indeed proved to be everything, and more. From conducting interviews in Mandarin with the Akha community to honing my film-making skills under the guidance of seasoned professionals like Tom Fawthrop, I have undoubtedly been pushed beyond my limits and have grown in ways I never thought I would've.

This being my first rodeo as a student assistant too, I undoubtedly felt slightly nervous – would I be able to do a good job? What is FS even like? These fears soon eased upon meeting everyone in Chiang Mai. Thank you for being such a welcoming bunch!

I hope the photos and videos I've captured are ones that you'd be able to look back fondly on. Just like Shenn, I tried to capture the smaller, often ordinary moments of the everyday; an often fleeting moment in time.

Here are two of my favourite ones:



This was one of my first shots in the entire FS – the moment everyone came out of their Songtheaws at The Dome Hotel. Relief was written all over your faces, and the excitement of Chiang Mai was palpable! The raw emotion in this photo shines through, and at that point of time, I could only imagine how it must've been like speeding through much of Thailand in a songtheaw!



This next photo was taken in Mae Salong, at Fun Fun inn. The drivers had just returned, and Pii Phon had cooked up a delicious spread. I love how close knit they all are, having worked together for many runs of FS together. Without them, FS would not be possible, and I am filled with gratitude for all that they've done for us :)



MOMENTS, MEMORIES, AND LEARNING BY DOING

Dr. Carl Grundy-Warr

> From the Earth Lab to the Andaman Sea, to the Mighty Mekong and Mountains of Mae Salong. We travel between the Eternities.

In our AI Age it seems that remotely generated information, algorithms, and social media are dominating lives and influencing our understanding of the world in ways that were unimaginable even a decade ago. Our urban-centred, global lives mean that students are exposed at speed to so many different forces and online sources of information. In spite of all of this, all of us still know the world very superficially, and we rely a lot on mediated sources of information.



Field Studies is a course which emphasises the values of combining what students learn from a variety of sources with grounded fieldwork and getting to know particular locations and places through immersion, teamwork, and enquiry-driven learning. In short, we become fully engaged in learning by doing.

All the contributions to this booklet are the result of an intensive learning journey involving multiple fieldtrips and team-based projects from the Andaman Sea coastal region to the mountainous border areas of the Golden Triangle. Looking back on this field journey brings back many personal moments of joy, pain, revelation, and deep reflection about the field study pedagogy. There have been many personal moments within FS24 which have touched my heart. Usually, these are times in village communities, when



students who normally interact within their own Generation age group become friends with villagers across generations, and for a while become "members" of their homestay families. The friendships forged during Field Studies are one of its most precious aspects, and go well beyond "the grade" and assessed project work.

I think for me the most vital friendships have been across different field study courses from 2001 to the present. During FS 24 I met with people in the Moklen village of Tubtawan, where I first did some research back in 2005 after the Indian Ocean Tsunami. Gae and Ying and their family have since become close friends.



In northern Thailand, we were joined by "JaTa", whose village, Mae Aw, was a site of some fieldwork in the late 1990s, and became a place where field studies students stayed in 2001 to learn about the geopolitics and cross-border movements that have shaped border landscapes. The village was renamed Baan Rak Thai, and for several years this was a fantastic mountain and borderland space for fieldwork and learning by doing. He has become my friendly "bodyguard" over the years, and just having him join us in Mae Salong enriches our understanding about KMT geopolitics and history, from Yunnan, through the Shan States, to different sites in northern Thailand.



Field Studies has forged deep and lasting bonds of friendship and mutual respect.

When we were conducting fieldtrips along, across, and on the Mekong River, I was joined by Tom Fawthrop, a veteran journalist and film-maker. His personal insights and deep knowledge about the Mekong helped raise controversies and issues that added to a more critical perspective of the entanglements of development and environment in the Mekong Basin, from "the tail" in China to the "mouth" in the Mekong Delta of Vietnam.



We had a very engaging meeting with Niwat Roykaew, “Kru Tee”, at the Mekong School he established. I first met Kru Tee in the 1990s, a few years before the Field Studies program began, and long before the establishment of the Mekong School in Chiang Khong. Educating young people about the history, geography, and indigenous knowledge about the Mekong is part of Kru Tee’s mission in life.

I was introduced initially to Kru Tee by a Thai friend and filmmaker, Sam Sittipong Kalayanee, known as “P’ Sam” who ran an organisation called Images Asia. Much of the inspiration for wishing to introduce young people to field sites in the Mekong region came from my close association with Sam and watching Images Asia documentaries in his home and office in Chiang Mai. Sam made several films, including



"Living on the Line" about forced displacement and refugees from Myanmar. I had the privilege to join Sam on a couple of filming missions to Thailand's borderlands with Shan and Karenni States of Myanmar (Burma), which helped provide deeper critical insights about cross-border relations, people, and places in mainland Southeast Asia. In FS 2024, part of our learning journey concerned the complex history and geography of the borderlands and spaces that are part of the Golden Triangle.



After the Field Studies 2024, I returned to the Karen village of Ban Mae Yang Min, where I met with another friend, the village chief (Por Luang), to hand over a village an agricultural land plot map produced by one student group. Por Luang expressed how such mapping exercises may help his community in practical ways as they previously had no such map. Just days after students had returned to Singapore, the conversation turned to the possibility of returning to the village to complete the task! In this manner, Field Studies never really ends.



Memories and moments combine and reinforce my personal motivation and passion regarding field-based learning. Students taking the course often start it by saying, “four weeks in the field is too long”, but end it saying, “it is not long enough.” As this booklet seeks to show, there are many experiential moments, and students do get to connect what they learn in class in different fieldwork settings, but additionally, they get to know things through teamwork, individual learning, and working within homestays and with peers from the host country. They take away many intangibles beyond-the-course, such as new friendships, unique experiences beyond their project work, and developing the confidence to go beyond former comfort zones. The beauty of field studies is that besides deeper learning by doing through project work there is a lot of experiential learning beyond projects and grades.

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Field Studies are shaped by everyone involved in the course. A BIG THANK YOU to all the students who embarked on FS24. You have taken on the challenge in a cooperative and friendly manner. Each of you have made immense contributions to our collective learning journey together!

Peaceful vibes

Dr Carl



Peaceful vibes,
Dr. Carl Grundy-Warr

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