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Major: Psychology

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### Thailand Hmong Studies Immersion

Dates of Experience:

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Support from UW- Eau Claire:

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Blugold Study Abroad Grant \$1,000

International Education Study Abroad (IESA) \$500

We took a three hour walk on a dirt path that consisted of mountains and valleys. All I heard was birds chirping, and all I felt was the sweat dripping on my face from the scorching sun. Yet, somehow I have never felt so relaxed and at peace. This was the daily path taken by the villagers to get from their home to the garden. This was the way of life for many Hmong villagers who live up in the mountains of Thailand, the land my parents grew up in. As someone who grew up in a first world country, I found it hard to understand why my parents always expressed such nostalgia for their homeland. It was only when I experienced life in Thailand, did I finally come to understand.

A couple of days before my departure for Thailand, I was so nervous I began to question and doubt if I could really survive being so far away from home. However, I don't think I have ever made such good a decision in my life as to go study abroad. It is one thing to hear the stories from my parents, and another thing to actually experience it myself. During my stay in Thailand, not only did I learn about the place, people, and cultures there, but more about myself. Although I was completely on the other side of the world, I felt at home. Not home as in the place I've slept and ate my whole life, but home as in a place where I felt a sense of belonging.

### ***Global Learning Element A***

One of the first thing that struck me as I took my first step outside the airport in Bangkok, Thailand was the smell, sewage like. At first I thought it was probably because the airport might be near a landfill. However, I quickly learned that no matter where it is in Bangkok, the smell lingered, sometimes not as strong as other times. Sometimes the delicious smell of the street food dominated the atmosphere. But taking a stroll down the streets of Bangkok provided obvious reasons for the unpleasant smell. There were lots of garbage laying around the streets of Thailand. The rivers had garbage floating left to right. One of the water canals we walked passed was partially covered with all trash.

I found this to be very interesting because of how different it was compared to the United States. In Thailand, residents and businesses have the choice to purchase a bin that they pay monthly to have a garbage collector come take out trash. Before placed in bins, all trash must be bagged in plastic in order for the garbage truck to take it in. To ensure all the garbage in their bins are plastic bagged, most bin owners do not place their bins for public use. For the many who choose not to purchase a bin, they plastic bag their trash and throw it on the streets, at least they bagged it in plastic. It seems there is not as great of an emphasis for all residents having to pay for proper garbage disposal in Thailand.

### ***Global Learning Element B***

In the United States, the importance of a higher education is highly emphasized. Globally, people are competing for highest education and always seeking for more knowledge. The more you know, the better off you are. In Thailand, I see this is also the way of thinking for Hmong people. Even though encouraging their daughter or son to go to college results in one less hand to help out in the gardens, Hmong parents still insist for their children to go get an education. This global push for a high education has affected the lives of many Hmong Thai, especially in marriages and the family.

While speaking to one of the Hmong Thai student, she told me that all females still do marry young in Thailand. However, this is different for those who choose to get a higher education. Just like the United States, women who go to college do not usually marry until 24-25 years of age. In addition, you start to see many of the traditional gender roles breaking down within families. Another Hmong Thai student stated that she lives with her older brother and his wife, however, they do not expect her to cook understanding her busy life as a college student.

These are good examples of how global forces have influenced changes in Hmong Thai marriages and families.

### ***Global Learning Element C***

Although we did not encounter any Hmong people in Bangkok, in the smaller city of Chiang Mai, we encountered quite a few. We met these Hmong people at markets so most of them were vendors or relatives of the vendors. It was surprising when I saw what products most of these Hmong vendors sold. It was hard finding hand sewn Hmong products or as we call in Hmong, paj ntaub. Instead, they sold modern jogger pants, popular in the United States, where just the pocket had a Hmong design. I asked the vendors why they didn't sell many Hmong products and they replied that because most of their customers are tourists, they only sell things they know will attract tourists. In addition, when doing business, they don't have the time to actually hand sew so most Hmong patterns are done by machines.

It was surprising to me how much of an impact tourism had on the Hmong community in Thailand. In a country where there isn't much room for economic advancements, especially as a minority, it is easy to be influenced by outsiders. They do not sew paj ntaub as much anymore and almost all Hmong patterns are sewn by machine with cheaper fabric and thread to produce bulk amounts for selling. Although this method may be more profitable, I feel like the meaning of our Hmong patterns is lost. The time, effort, commitment, and creativity needed to sew a paj ntaub was what made the final product special. Tourism has such a big impact on the Hmong community that some Hmong villages are made into tourist sites for business. I wonder what the people of the village think about their homes being seen by the public as leisure.

Today, I think it is safe to say that the Hmong culture and language is slowly fading. To study the Hmong culture and language is hard because in the past, almost everything was learned

orally and was dependent on memorization. I believe our traditions still stand today because of the presence of the older generation who came from Thailand. Thailand is much more traditional compared to the United States. Because of this, I made the assumption that going to visit the Hmong in Thailand will answer any questions I have regarding language or culture. I made the assumption that going to Thailand will cure my worry about the Hmong culture fading, because surely everyone still practices all our traditions right?

In Chiang Mai, we got the wonderful opportunity to talk to some Hmong students from the Chiang Mai University. The only language that we could communicate in was Hmong. We struggled a little, but what shocked me was how much more the Chiang Mai students struggled. I soon learned that in order to succeed as a Hmong student in a Thai school, it is necessary to assimilate. One of the biggest evidence of this is how they have to change their Hmong name into a Thai name when registering for school. A Hmong name can lead to harassment at school and discrimination in the work force. Therefore, these students have assimilated to being Thai more than we have to being “white.” They tell us they can’t speak Hmong well and they do not know much about the Hmong practices either.

This is where it really hits me that Hmong people, especially around my age, are all on the same boat regardless of which country we’re from. As a minority group, we face the pressure of assimilation to make our present lives easier even if that means forgetting our culture. We’re stuck in between following traditional beliefs passed down from our ancestors or updating to more modern beliefs. It is sad going to Thailand hoping for answers, but turns out you actually have more answers than those in Thailand. However, this motivates me to continue my search for more information about my culture and find a way to educate others as a way to keep our culture alive.

My study abroad experience left a lasting impact on me. Not only did I learn how capable I was of living in a whole new environment, but I never realized how much I loved to learn about other cultures. This experience has definitely shifted some of my perceptions and goals. I've come to realize that many Hmong people, especially around my age group, are all on the same boat. We are facing an identity crisis and many outside influences that could possibly result in the loss of our Hmong culture.

I hope that I will be able to return to Thailand one day and teach English to students. In addition, I hope that during my stay in Thailand I can find or create a school to volunteer to teach the Hmong language and culture to our fellow Hmong Thai people. In order to make this happen, I must first continue my education in learning more about the culture. While I'm still here in the United States, I must promote the learning of Hmong language to my fellow Hmong American peers. This could be through presentations, campus events, or as simple as hangouts within my group of friends. The Hmong culture is a beautiful one, and it would be a shame to see it vanish.

## “International Conference at Chiang Mai University”



This is a group picture of us with some of the Chiang Mai University students. Over the three weeks, we have built a strong bond with these students. It was very educational getting to hear their stories and having them hear our stories of life as Hmong students from different countries.

## “Life in Maesamai”



A few of us are helping the young man to the right garden. I enjoyed the hands on experience of what the Hmong villagers of Maesamai do on a daily basis. This was the life of how my parents and ancestors once lived.