

Xao Yang
Biology Major
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Thailand Hmong Immersion Critical Reflection

During Winterim of 2016 I had the opportunity to go on the immersion to Thailand to learn about Hmong and Thai culture and customs. We initially went to the city of Bangkok where we learned to use the Sky train, a popular means of transportation that locals and tourists use to travel around the city. We then traveled to the northern province of Chiang Mai. Our guesthouse in Chiang Mai was in a secluded area near night market called the Night Bazar. Our group frequently went there for food, entertainment, and shopping. On our first days in Chiang Mai, we were split up into smaller groups for a scavenger hunt. We were given a map of the city and a list of all the places that we had to go take a picture of. The activity required us to use our communication and navigation skills to find the places located all over the city. The activity was beneficial because we learned how to find our own transportation, communicate with the locals, and learned to work as team. We attended the Chiang Mai University International Conference where they discussed about contemporary issues within the Hmong community. Topics they covered included: setting up an official date for the Hmong New Year, a set bride price, and changes to funeral practices. At the conference, I was able to learn about the different perspectives of the Hmong representatives from different countries that were there. I was also able to learn more about Hmong cultural practices and new Hmong vocabulary.

We learned Thai politics, history, and the government from a guest speaker named Paul Chambers. He explained to us how the Thai government constantly changes and what the form of government currently is at the time. In Chiang Mai we were able to travel to a few Hmong villages in the mountains and experience the Hmong life in the

rural areas. We went to multiple villages but unfortunately many of them were more of tourist attractions. We were also able to do a homestay in a Hmong village called Bonmaesamai. At the homestay we learned about the way of life of the local Thai Hmong people in the village and how they have adopted newer more innovative ways of farming, that do less harm to the environment. Towards the end of our immersion we were fortunate enough to go to a couple Thailand Hmong New Year celebrations.

My experience abroad has definitely advanced my knowledge of the world's environments. In one of our projects we looked at the water quality in Thailand. In many areas of Thailand, clean water is not readily available. Everywhere we went in Thailand we drank from purified bottled water. It was also not common for there to be a charge to use public restrooms for the usage of the water. We were able to interview Chiang Mai University students about our topics. My group discussed about pollution and the water quality in Thailand. One of the students told us that water up the mountains can be safe drink but as it flows downstream, the water goes through farmland and pesticides contaminate the water, making it unsafe to drink. The students also talked about a polluted body of water called the Ping River that flowed through Chiang Mai city. They explained to us that the things that contribute to the pollution include celebrations that happen in the city, and local restaurants that dump their dish water and other wastes into the river. Though we saw some forms of pollution in Chiang Mai, we found out from the students that the Thai government has policies, regulations, and projects to help protect the environment.

Before our homestay in the village of Bonmaesamai we were learned about the Royal Project. The Royal Project is a development put into place by the king of Thailand

to teach the local farmers new and innovative techniques of farming for free. These ways used up less land, less pesticides, and refrained from the old “slash and burn” technique, which in the past, did a lot of harm to the environment. After the farmers learn these new methods, they are able to take them back and integrate them to their own farmlands. When their crop is ready to be harvested, the farmers are able to sell their produce back to the Royal Project. The project benefits not only the farmers, but it also benefits the environment and the Thai Economy. During the homestay we went on a nature walk into the jungles of the village. The path went onto the hills and valleys where the vegetable fields were located. The beautiful mountains and valleys provided us with truly remarkable views. When we got to the gardens we were able to see that the fields had been implemented with the new farming techniques. Khun Win, our tour guide also informed us that ever since the project was implemented in that village, they have seen many indicators of good jungle health. These indicators included the presence of wildlife species such as deer, leeches, and black panthers.

My experience has impacted my knowledge and understanding of the power of Thai institutions when we went to Chiang Mai University. At the university we got to know a few of the Thai Hmong students. I had noticed that many of them were very fluent in Thai, but they were not as fluent in Hmong. It reminded me of myself and other Hmong Americans because we speak English and Hmong in America, while they speak Thai and Hmong in Thailand. I was fascinated because our middle ground language, in which we were able to communicate to each other, was in Hmong. Before going to Thailand I had the perception that the Hmong individuals in Thailand were more immersed in the Hmong culture and that the language was more preserved in Asia than it

is in America. To my surprise, the college students are just as acculturated to the Thai culture, as we are to American culture. Even though their celebrations may still retain more of the culture and values, it occurred to me that acculturation is occurring worldwide with Hmong people from Thailand, the US, along with other parts of the world.

At the University we went to a lecture by Dr. Prasit Leepreecha. He informed us about how the Hmong in Thailand have assimilated themselves into the Thai society. He explained that jobs and institutions in Thailand only accept those who have official Thai names and in order for them to become successful in the Thai society they were required to have a Thai name. Along with that, employers have the power to discriminate against those who do not physically fit their job descriptions. I thought it was interesting because Dr. Prasit mentioned that he considers himself as a Thai Hmong, unlike how we consider ourselves Hmong American. This experience helped me understand then influence the Thai education system has on the Thai Hmong citizens in Thailand. It also lead me to reflect upon how the American education system affects me as a Hmong American citizen.

The majority of the students in our group that went on the Thailand immersion trip are Hmong American. Our physical appearance was similar to many of the locals but we were still all easily identified as tourists. Our lack of Thai language, the differences in our behavior, and the way we dressed allowed the locals distinguish us as tourists. America and other countries have a big influence the amount of tourism that is in Thailand. I was culture shocked with the amount of diversity and all the tourists in the city of Bangkok. I was also surprised at how influenced Thailand was by the western

world because we saw many advertisements with American celebrities along with many advertisements for skin whitening products. Christmas in America was over by the time we went to Thailand but on our first morning in Bangkok we passed an area where they had Christmas decorations and music playing. These events during my experience made me reflect on how the Thai local businesses cater to tourists. It also allowed me to envision the amount of influence America and other countries have on Thailand.

One of the Hmong New Year celebrations that we went to was located in the city of Nong Hoi Mai. The celebration was comprised of twelve Chiang Mai Province villages that came together to celebrate the welcoming of the New Year. From my experience I learned how the Hmong from Thailand are the same, yet different, compared to the Hmong from Laos, which my parents are from. In the process of packing for Thailand, my mother had packed for me Hmong White clothes for the New Year celebration in Thailand. On the day of the celebration, I was surprised to see that I was the only one wearing the Hmong White style clothing. All the local Hmong people wore Hmong Thai clothing, which resembles more of a Hmong Green style. Our group had the opportunity to go ball toss during the New Year. The girl that I was next to complemented me on my outfit. She told me that the style of clothing I was wearing was Hmong white Lao style clothing. Only then did I realize why no one else had the same clothing design as me.

The Hmong New Year celebration challenged my initial perception of the Hmong people in Thailand. I initially thought that there would be Hmong from Thailand wearing the same style clothing as me and that there would be both dialects equally residing in Thailand. The subtle differences between the two dialects include different clothing styles

along with different accents. Even though there are both dialects present in Thailand, the majority of the Hmong that I communicated with turned out to be Hmong green. It seems to me there are a majority of Hmong green located in Thailand, while there are more Hmong white located in Laos. There are also Hmong White located in Thailand too, but the Hmong Green are more prevalent. From this event I was able to get a better understanding of the dynamics between the two dialects. It was interesting to see how different yet similar the two dialects of Hmong people are and which one was more prevalent in Thailand.

Going abroad has allowed me to become more open minded to other parts of the world. It also has made become more comfortable to explore outside of the US. With this experience I have gained lifelong friendships with the individuals from our group and with the friends that I made in Thailand. The stories and descriptions of Thailand and Laos from my parents have become an experience of my own. A goal of mine is to go back in the future with my parents and go visit my relatives in Thailand and Laos. Along with that I would like to go explore Hmong villages untouched by tourism. Coming back from this immersion I have learned a great deal about Thailand. I have learned my own Hmong language, culture, heritage, and ultimately more about myself as an individual. My journey to Thailand has helped me develop a better understanding of my own identity and what it means to be Hmong.



We visited a Hmong Village called Doi Pui, on the mountains in the Northern Province of Chiang Mai, Thailand. This is a picture of our group together in a mock traditional Hmong house. Even though this particular village is mainly a tourist attraction, there are still few Hmong families in Thailand and Laos that live in these traditional settings. However, many villages are modernizing. This was meaningful to my experience abroad because this village allowed me to envision how my parents and grandparents used to live in the past.



This view is taken on the road leading into the Hmong New Year celebration of twelve Chiang Mai Province villages. In the distance you can see the breathtaking valleys and mountains that continue further than the eyes can see. If you look closely you will notice the hundreds of Hmong Thai locals in celebration on the mountain and in the village of Nong Hoi Mai. We had the wonderful opportunity to go to this festival. This was a significant experience to me because we got to see how traditional Hmong celebrations are like in the rural mountains of Thailand.