

Southeast Asia Studies Newsletter

Fall 2008



Prof. Welsh at a monastery in Burma

CLASS OF 2009 STUDY TRIPS

For the past three years, SEA Studies students have taken country-based study trips before starting their internships in Southeast Asia. The Class of 2009 began their trip in Bangkok. The students then separated into two teams, one headed to Burma and the other to Laos, to examine up-close the many pressing development issues facing the two nations.

Burma

On the evening of May 25, the ten SEA Studies students of “Team Burma” flew into Yangon airport and were met by Prof. Bridget Welsh. We were excited by the opportunity to study such a closed country with an area expert, but were apprehensive about what would be possible given the devastation of Cyclone Nargis.

The disaster and the response were major themes of our trip as we held meetings in Yangon, went into the affected Delta region to make a donation, flew north to Pagan (an ancient capital with over 3,000 stupas), drove northeast to Mandalay, visited the Shan State (largely populated by ethnic minorities), and returned to Yangon. During our travels we met fascinating people, including resilient villagers affected by the cyclone,

dedicated NGO leaders, candid U.S. governmental representatives, sex workers, a theater troupe, and wonderful SAIS alumni.

Prior to our departure, world media coverage of the cyclone disaster focused on the junta’s blockage and confiscation of aid. Our NGO and field contacts gave us a nuanced picture of the situation, emphasizing the significant relief accomplishments that local volunteer and international organizations had been able to achieve by working together. While there were real concerns about the government’s initial response, the aid community’s cooperation pointed to substantial gain in addressing the cyclone’s devastation.

We saw the damage wrought by the cyclone up front as we drove into

INSIDE THIS ISSUE

- ◆ Class of 2009 Study Trips
 - Myanmar (Burma)
 - Lao PDR (Laos)

At the end of May, students of the Class of 2009 attended their week-long pre-internship study trips to Burma and Laos.

- ◆ Summer Internships

The Class of 2009 completed internships across Southeast Asia, working in the public, private, and nongovernmental sectors.

- ◆ Alumni Highlights

Where are Edi Sian (Class of 2004) and Chone Sophonpanich (Class of 1997) now?

- ◆ Message from the Director

Upcoming activities of the Southeast Asia Studies program.

the Delta region, sitting atop goods and sacks of rice we purchased to donate to a local monastery that was serving as a distribution center.

During the trip we also heard official and frank opinions on U.S. foreign policy toward Burma, and learned about development issues such as healthcare and tourism. We were impressed with the political consciousness we found among the Burmese we met; we talked with students about democracy and with monks about the relationship between Buddhism and politics in the wake of the Saffron Revolution.

Wherever we went in Burma we enjoyed delicious food and breathtaking views in what is probably the most photogenic country in Southeast Asia.

Laos

Attaining approval to travel to Laos on a study tour was perhaps the most difficult part of the trip: Security concerns revolved around the sensitivity of discussing just about anything a SAIS student would want to discuss, and whether people would agree to meet with us at all was uncertain. Nevertheless, after careful ground laying, five SEA Studies students led by Prof. Frederick Z. Brown were able to visit the “Land of a Million Elephants” to examine the current state of Laos’s development. Meetings with government mass organizations, international NGOs, commune leaders, and students provided a snapshot of issues facing Laos today.

On-the-ground discussions were fascinating for the perspectives provided, and for the divergence in opinions. For example, while some have seen a growing independence of the legislature in the increasing outspokenness of members of parliament, others have seen a debate that is pre-scripted for the benefit of foreign observers. Moreover, in one meeting it was noted that the much-lauded trouble-free national elections were simply “choosing from different brands of vanilla ice cream.”

However, most meetings were not as forthright. There can be no talk of an “open democratic society,” “human rights,” or “religious freedom.” One meeting was held on the hotel porch in the evening to allow for frank discussion, and the NGO’s country director would not stay above an hour. International organizations are monitored through a deliberately complex bureaucratic process that, as one NGO noted, is “excruciating yet necessary if one



Prof. Brown with children at a World Vision–built school near Luang Prabang

does not want to be ‘invited to leave.’”

What all could agree on, however, is that Laos is distressingly low on the international community’s priority list. Once vital to regional stability, since the end of the Vietnam and Cold wars and with the impressive economic growth of other Asian countries, most of the world has forgotten Laos. As China rises, however, the country has been showing a renewed interest in Laos, which has in turn caught the attention of other regional actors, both private and government. We learned that while Laos has been overlooked for decades, it has begun a slow trek toward global inclusion, and that although Laos will open up economically, a political opening will remain elusive.

Summer Internships

Students of the Southeast Asia program Class of 2009 made the most of their summer internship opportunities to take on new and

interesting work; generous support from the Freeman Foundation allowed us to select internships in non-traditional fields. Brian Jungwi-

wattanaporn worked along the Thai-Burmese border designing education programs for the Burmese migrant community. “Living and working



Students interned across the region, including in Indonesia (left, Acehese children performing a traditional welcoming ceremony); in the Philippines (middle, entrance to an underground river in Palawan); and in Cambodia (right, political party agents contesting a vote count during the National Election of July 2008).

in a border community provided a unique opportunity to understand the needs of, and challenges facing, the Burmese and Karen refugee populations. It was an incredible experience." Olivia Pham put her international economics coursework to use in Singapore where she interned with JPMorgan, researching topics such as inflation and export trends of emerging Asian markets. Pinsuda

Alexander worked in Aceh, where she was responsible for evaluating the impact of community participation in post-tsunami reconstruction efforts. "I had been studying the Indonesian language and researching community development programs while at SAIS, and so was able to jump right into my work in Aceh." In Vientiane, Cambria Hamburg interned with the U.S. Embassy, where she did everything from

monitoring livelihood development programs to filling sandbags to help stem historic flood levels of the Mekong. "I greatly appreciate how this internship gave me the opportunity to go beyond simply asking questions about what life as a Foreign Service Officer is like, to actually trying it out myself." For more information about the SEA summer studies program, please contact sea-sais@jhu.edu.

Alumni Highlights

Edi Sian ~ Class of 2004, Manila
"SAIS taught me to look at the big picture"

Edi has been busy promoting the book he helped to author, entitled *Profiles Encourage*. It spotlights the good work done by low-key Filipinos for their communities. He has been part of the Movement for Good Governance, which aims to provide an alternative to patron-client politics in the Philippines.

As if that was not enough, in his day job he is setting up a social enterprise targeting the healthcare needs of the "base of the pyramid" in the Philippines, and looking into the feasibility of micro-clinics throughout the archipelago. He recently picked up badminton, which he played around the corner from the Rome building while at SAIS.

Chone Sophonpanich ~ Class of 1997, Bangkok
"SAIS taught me to be curious, and to be positive"

Chone recently moved into life insurance after having worked eight years in international business with Green Spot, a local, family-owned soymilk company. With Green Spot he was in charge of developing marketing strategies, mainly for markets in Malaysia, Ghana, and Nigeria.

Chone will continue using his sales and marketing skills in his new position at Bangkok Life Assurance, which is also a family-owned company. He has a six-year-old daughter and a one-year-old son whose t-shirt reads, "Mum's New Man." Concerning his time at SAIS, Chone says: "SAIS provided an understanding of the cultural, religious, ethnic, political, and economic underpinning of a group of countries. It also taught me to be curious and to be positive when faced with unfamiliar ways of life."



SAIS Siam alumni club with the Class of 2009 in Bangkok

CYCLONE NARGIS RELIEF EFFORTS

SEA Studies students and professors responded to the devastation of Cyclone Nargis by raising funds to donate directly to those affected.

Through the generous outpouring of support from the SAIS community we raised over \$14,500, including \$925 from SAIS Siam, an alumni group in Bangkok; \$2,000 in supplies went immediately to a local monastery in Hawt Kmu township. The remaining funds are being put toward rebuilding a middle school in Ma Lot, Bogalay, which is now being constructed. The middle school is the only one in the area and will serve 10 villages and an estimated 768 children. We are still \$3000 short of our goal to build the school, but are extremely grateful for the support of SEA alumni who have made this important project possible.

If you would like to help us continue to support the schools, checks may be written payable to SGA-SAIS and sent to the address below. If you would like to receive updates on the school, please include your e-mail address as well. Information on school can be found at: www.sais-jhu.edu/cyclone.

Shelley Su, Southeast Asia Studies Program
Johns Hopkins School of Advanced Int'l Studies
Rome Building, Room 623
1619 Massachusetts Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20036, USA

Message from the Director

We are off to a great start in SEA Studies this fall, with 13 new MAs and four MIPPs joining our 17 returning second-year students. We also have three MAs who are concentrating in other areas but who are actively engaged with the program.

Our popular SEA Wednesday lunches are back in session. The fall schedule features talks by the Singaporean and Australian ambassadors to Washington, John Ericksson (World Bank), Evelyn Goh (Oxford), and Nguyen Lien-Hang (Yale).

On the academic front, James Castle, president of CastleAsia, is co-teaching "Business and Politics in Indonesia," a new course that includes a 10-day practicum in Jakarta. Jim's 40 years in the Jakarta business world will help him explain Indonesia's economic success over the de-

CADES despite the challenging political and investment environment.

Prof. Bridget Welsh is teaching "Contentious Politics of Southeast Asia," and her edited collection *Legacy of Engagement* was published by ISEAS in September. Our new adjunct professor Bronson Percival is teaching a course on China and SEA. Prof. Bill Wise is again offering "Covert Action and Foreign Policy in Asia" and I am teaching the "Policy Process in Asia."

We also offer a variety of outside speakers, the Asian Crisis Simulation, and the Thai Club. With all this activity, SAIS is truly the place to be for Southeast Asia Studies!

Karl D. Jackson

Director, Asian Studies

Director, Southeast Asia Studies

C.V. Starr Distinguished Professor of SEA Studies

FALL 2008 LUNCH SERIES

Oct 8 "Indonesia: Global Crisis, Domestic Economy, and the 2008 Elections," James Castle, CastleAsia

Oct 15 "Great Powers and Southeast Asian Security Strategies," Evelyn Goh, University of Oxford

Oct 22 "Current Situation in Thailand," John Ericksson, World Bank

Oct 29 "Thailand: Update from Bangkok," Catharin Dalpino, Georgetown University

Nov 5 "Australia's Relations with SEA," Hon. Dennis Richardson, Ambassador of Australia

Nov 12 "Evolving History of War Politics in Vietnam," Nguyen Lien-Hang, Yale University

The Johns Hopkins University
School of Advanced International Studies
Rome Building, Room 623
1619 Massachusetts Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20036

Mailing Address