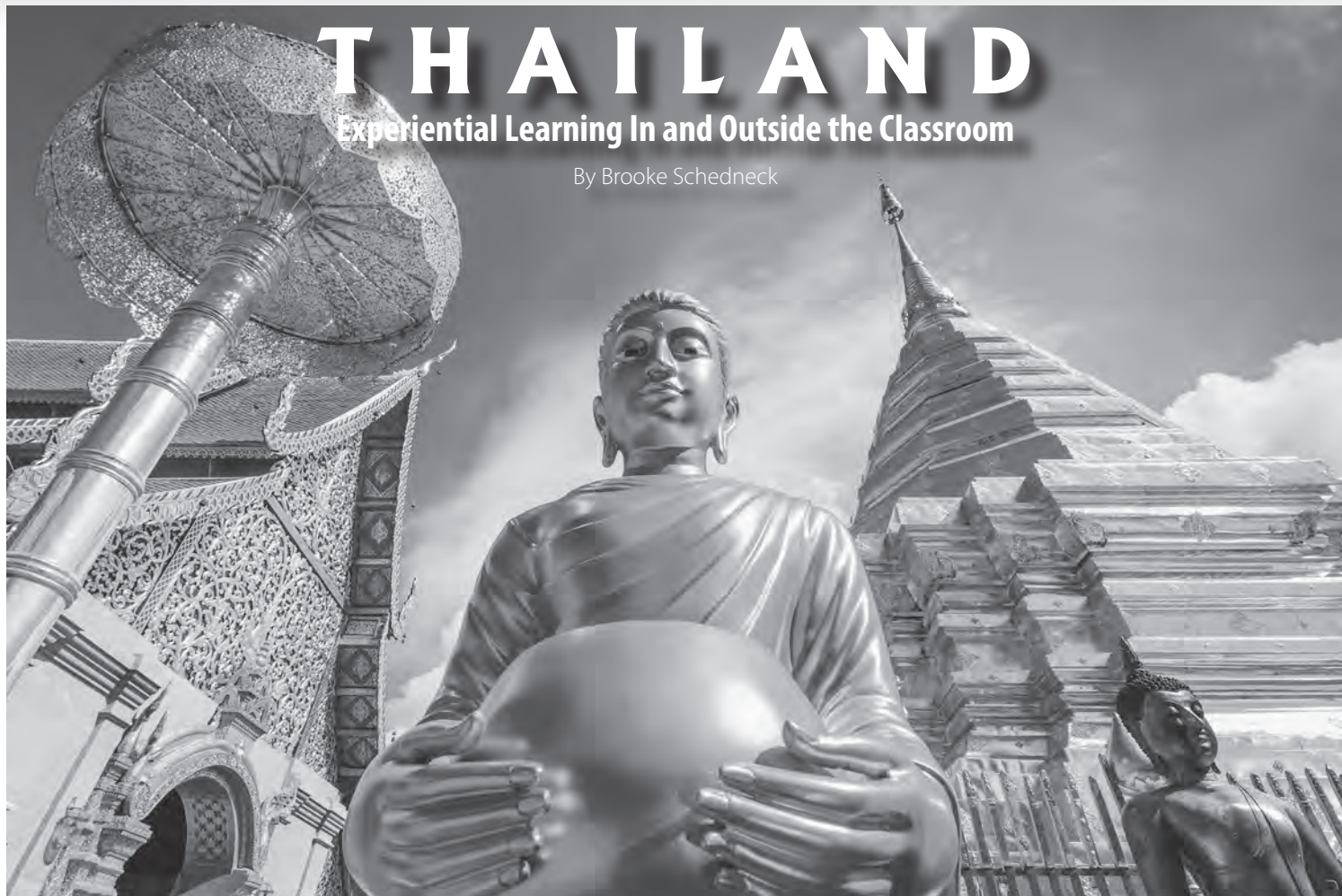


# THAILAND

## Experiential Learning In and Outside the Classroom

By Brooke Schedneck



Wat Prathat Doi Suthep Temple. Source: © Take Photo/Shutterstock photo.

**H**ow can students make meaning out of their experiences abroad? How can they connect their learning inside and outside the classroom? These are difficult questions for faculty teaching in a study abroad context where students learn not only from their professors. They have the opportunity to learn from religious leaders, museums, and temples, as well as to think about issues and current debates in societies other than their own as they exist in reality, not just in textbooks. As much as excursions enhance learning in study abroad contexts, the classroom is equally valuable, in my experience. This is the space where students can share their reflections, learn from classmates' interpretations of their experiences, and compare places visited. When on an excursion, I ask students to focus on the space, observe all the details, and listen intently. But the classroom is where we can understand the deeper implications that relate to the topics and issues of value to the people and cultures we are studying. A major motivating factor for students studying abroad is to travel and appreciate different cultures, but it is up to the faculty to guide them in understanding, analyzing, and communicating their experiences. This occurs through both site visits and discussions in the classroom.

Experiential learning is an important part of any study abroad experience. Teaching in Chiangmai, Thailand, there are so many sites with potential for understanding the religion and culture of the region that it

is difficult to choose which will best fit student interest and motivate learning. Another difficulty is how to incorporate the site visit into the class—is it best to have a discussion, a reflection, a presentation, or a paper? And thirdly, which sites are best for students to visit on their own, and which are best led by the professor?

As part of my position in a semester-long study abroad program located in the Institute of Southeast Asian Affairs, Chiangmai University, that hosts students from American, Cambodian, Filipino, Taiwanese, and Vietnamese universities, I regularly use site visits and experiential learning assignments as part of my class. These students are mostly between the ages of eighteen and twenty-three, and some of the American and Asian students come from Buddhist families. However, hardly any of them are familiar with the culture and religion of Thailand. Because of our location, I am able to incorporate different types of experiential learning. In each of my classes, I balance in-class site visits, weekend excursions to more distant sites, and individual or group visits to sites outside of class. In order to evaluate and process these sites of experiential learning, I use a variety of activities and assignments such as discussions in class, written reflections, and papers that create an argument based on multiple visits to a single site.

For classes on Buddhism, I lead students on trips to Buddhist temples in the beginning of the semester to help familiarize them with the basic



Chiangmai City is located in northern Thailand in Chiangmai Province. The city is home to over 300 Buddhist temples. Source: *Wikimedia Commons*, with additions by Willa Davis.



Chiangmai Sunday market walking street in the city center. Source: © 501room/Shutterstock photo.



Kruba Sriwichai statue. Source: © Thirathat/Shutterstock photo.

features. Apart from this, the aim is to facilitate discussion of a reading or topic that corresponds with this location. For instance, when we are discussing the Indianization of Southeast Asia, I choose to visit Wat Srisuphan, a temple that has features such as Hindu god statues. If we are discussing generosity and merit making among lay Buddhists, we visit a temple such as Wat Prathat Haripunchai or Wat Prathat Doi Suthep, where we can observe offerings to monks. These study abroad students are completely blown away by the difference of these spaces from what they have seen at home. Even the Asian students often have not formally learned or observed the details or activities in a temple. The intricacy of the design, meaning in each of the temple structures, and generosity of lay Buddhists impress and spark the curiosity of the students. “Why are there so many Buddha statues?”; “Why do laypeople offer so much to monks when they could be giving to the poor?”; and “What is the meaning of bowing three times?” are typical questions that allow the class to think about the values of Buddhism and the logic of its practices.

When we are learning about the monastic life, we visit the MahaChulalongkorn Rakavidyalaya Buddhist University, located at Wat Suan Dok, and have a conversation with the monks who study there. The students

consistently and almost always are completely surprised by the monks. “I thought monks couldn’t talk” and “The monks were so friendly” are common responses from students. In these sites, I first let the students practice participant observation and interviewing alone or in groups with a specific objective that relates to the reading and topic. After students have identified aspects of Indianization, talked to merit makers about their motivations, and asked Buddhist monks to explain rebirth and *kamma*, the class will compare their experiences, and discuss how these practices and ideas they have observed and heard relate to their understanding of Buddhism.

However, I also encourage students to visit these and other sites on their own during the semester. As young college students, I want them to explore, and sometimes they need a push to do so. On one evaluation a student wrote, “I loved that this class forced us to go into Chiangmai for class discussions and to write our papers.” For these assignments, I ask students to go to a religious site where a guided

tour from me is not necessary, such as a morning alms round at Chiangmai Gate Market, the popular wish-granting Kruba Sriwichai statue on the road to Suthep Mountain, or a temple of their choice and observe closely. Before discussing material culture in Thai Buddhism, I ask students to locate a shop that sells Buddhist devotional items, and return to class with details and opinions about what they saw. When students are trying to grasp the relationship between animist spirit cults and Buddhism, I ask

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Hell Park, Wat Mae Gerd Nauy. Source: All photos on this page are courtesy of the author.



Offerings at Wat Doi Suthep.

them to identify locations of spirit shrines and bring pictures to show in class. When debating tourism to ethnic minority communities outside of Chiangmai City, students visit travel agents and ask about their tours to see these communities. This is used for our in-class discussion on the development of ethnic minorities in Thailand. All these visits not only give students a direction and purpose in their time outside of class to explore the



Talking with monks, Wat Suan Dok, Thailand.



Students visit Wat Prathat Haripunchai in Lamphun, Thailand.

city, they also offer a basis for dialogue in the classroom while processing their experiences and issues in Thai society today.

Our classes have opportunities to take longer excursions on the weekends to distant sites outside of Chiangmai City and to Bangkok during faculty-led educational excursion breaks from the semester. These trips allow students to observe ways of culture and religion in diverse locations. Visits to temples with female monks, such as Suttajit Dhamma Center, forest temples such as Wat Aranyawiwake, and temples with theme parks representing Buddhist hells like the one at Wat Mae Gerd Nauy, are all about forty minutes outside the city and worth the trip for the uniqueness they provide in contrast to urban religious spaces. An overnight meditation retreat in the Meditation Training Center, managed by monk meditation teachers from Wat Suan Dok, enables the students to not only observe, but also embody Buddhist practice.

These trips also allow the class to be at the forefront of current debates within Thai society. In fall 2014, the two most covered topics in Thai



Suttajit Bhikkhuni Center. Source: Photo courtesy of the author.

Buddhism by the media were the ordination of women as full monastics and the alleged financial scandals of the biggest temple in Thailand, Wat Dhammakaya. Before our trip, we had debated the pros and cons of female ordination and understood the implications of the charges against Wat Dhammakaya. However, after an overnight stay at Wat Songdhammakalyani, a temple of female monks led by Dhammananda Bhikkhuni, and a full-day visit to Wat Dhammakaya, the students' opinions about these two issues were much more vivid and complex. Because of this, we devoted a whole class period to processing and understanding the experiences, what it meant to them in their attempt to comprehend Thai Buddhism, and what these debates mean for Thai people.

Besides classroom discussions, I use experiential learning as graded assignments in the forms of reflections, presentations, and papers. These assignments allow students to not just observe, but form perspectives and opinions about our visits, and how they connect with our readings and classroom activities. Short written reflections help spark discussion and empower students to articulate their comparisons between the people and places we have visited and their home countries. For semester-long fieldwork assignments, students are required to visit a site multiple times. Using ethnographic methods of participant observation and interviewing, they write a paper characterizing Buddhism in Thailand. We discuss and practice these methods throughout the semester, and the culminating assignment reflects these new skills of experiential learning. Another assignment asks groups of students to make a presentation about a single temple, telling the class of its unique features and the ways it corresponds with the typical characteristics we have learned in class. These assignments

that incorporate experiential learning give students a way to process and retain their new knowledge from site visits, in combination with our class readings.

The goal of my courses on religion and culture in Southeast Asia is to demonstrate an understanding of the worldviews, challenges, and triumphs of the people we are studying. This includes, for most of my religion classes, putting oneself in the place of a Thai Buddhist. Students demonstrate their ability to do so through using the terms and ideas of Buddhists when making arguments and discussing issues of importance to Buddhists today, such as the currently contested ordination of women or how meditation contributes to the goals of Buddhism. In order to demonstrate this, students need to temporarily take on alternative viewpoints. Being able to observe Buddhist sites and hear from a range of Buddhist practitioners adds a dimension to this undertaking that makes this a meaningful goal, which also works for classes on Thai culture. Through being able to interact with spaces of cultural representation, students can critically assess and understand deeply what is at stake and what matters to large populations of a society that is different from their own. ■

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