

By Dean Wong

After constantly hearing about “how lucky I am to be a Singaporean” from my ASEAN schoolmates and feeling like a frog in a well, I jumped at the chance when I saw the OdySEA 2012 application email. Six weeks of classes for two modules that were still packed with a semester’s worth of workload did not stop me; it was surprising for NUS to introduce a module on *Human Trafficking (PS3880E)*, a topic our media appears to tone down, and to revive a long lost sociology module, *Peoples and Cultures of Southeast Asia (SC2207)*. These reasons were why I knew I had to get in and check it out.

The first lecture took place in a most unusual location—the Multimedia Hub Studio at the Education Resource Centre (ERC) in University Town. Dr Charles Carroll, the SC2207 lecturer, opened his lesson with a very passionate introduction to the least likely subject I would associate a sociology module with—cinematography—to prepare us for the highlight assignment: Filming a documentary in Thailand. Yes, Thailand was the prized destination I was looking forward to with my classmates after attending a jam-packed three-week’s worth of lectures by Dr Carroll and Dr Kevin McGahan, the lecturer of PS2280E.

Talks by guest speakers were one of the aspects I enjoyed about this programme. Dr Charles invited Dr Patricia Cheesman to share her anthropological research on textiles in the Thai-Laotian region which has spanned thirty years. Dr Kevin had local NGOs, the Humanitarian Organisation for Migration Economics (HOME) and Project X, a research project on international or regional comparative law on sex work, give us a better idea of the local human trafficking situation at the grassroots level. I never imagined how much we can learn about people from unassuming everyday objects like textiles, and neither was I aware about how closely relevant the issue of human trafficking was to Singapore.



Soon, we were in Thailand, embarking on our documentary making and field note collection to make sense of how the *Trafficking In Persons Report* relate to the various organisations, from the U.S. Embassy and United Nations Inter-Agency Project on Human Trafficking (UNIAP) to [Empower](#) and the Chiang Mai

Region 5 Police in Thailand. One of the most memorable moments was the side trip to Mae Sot, a border region between Thailand and Burma, where I witnessed how easy it was for anyone to get across the Moei River, the westernmost point. The river is only about ten meters wide at its narrowest, with no obvious border patrol and the Burmese routinely cross it and make transactions with the Thais over the barbed

wires, usually trading in cigarettes and alcohol.



Filming began two hours after arrival in Bangkok. The first stop was at the Wat Mahathat temple where we got to interview Bikkhus Prateep, a monk at the temple, who invited us to witness their beautiful morning chanting session. The Thai Buddhist temples had a more welcoming aura than I would have expected from their Singapore counterparts. Next, my stamp-enthusiast teammate, Jeremy, had us visit Bangkok's wonderful stamp museum where I got the chance to briefly feast upon the history of Thailand through prints made over the decades. Most memorably, we chanced upon Mr Nakon, the founder of the Tad Lat Nut Stamp market 10 years ago who is in his 70s. Not only did he share his passion for stamps, he also gave us an insight to the changes in Thailand over the years. Speak of serendipity.



These modules were the most exciting and enriching pair I had ever taken in my three years of study. Yet, I still felt that it was not enough as there was still much more to learn. If you ever wish to experience an exciting summer and get out of the well, just give OdySEA a go!