

After 28 years, curtains fall on a unique exchange program in Northeast Thailand

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At the end of June this year, the Council on International Educational Exchange (CIEE) closed its doors. The force majeure of COVID-19 ended an exchange program that, for almost three decades, provided American university students with a unique glimpse into Isaan.

David Streckfuss, an American, was the director of CIEE Khon Kaen. He explained to me that the program began in 1992 in collaboration with Khon Kaen University. In the first couple of years, the focus was mainly on teaching Thai to American students. But in 1994, when Streckfuss became the director, he began the long process of reshaping the program according to his vision.

People to people learning

Streckfuss set about trying to find sites and situations that would be suitable for the American students. He asked for the advice of educator and academic Sulak Swarak, who introduced him to Decha Premrueadelert and Bamrung Boonpanya. These two prominent NGO workers in Isaan had a hand working with Streckfuss in designing a course format that was coined as “people-to-people learning.”

From 1995 onward, the CIEE Khon Kaen program worked closely with the NGO Coordinating Committee on Rural Development (NGO-CORD), receiving their first group of students in June 1995.

“The first group of 15 students stayed in Thailand for about two months. We took them to learn about the problems caused by the dams at Pak Moon and Rasi Salai. We took them to learn about slums from the Four Regions Slum Network, with me as a translator,” Streckfuss recalls.

“In 1999, the Assembly of the Poor mobilized in protest against the Pak Mun dam, so we took the students there to eat and sleep amongst the villagers protesting the dam. Another group of students went to stay with the villagers who were for the dam. They interviewed the villagers they stayed with so that they could write a community history, which was published as a series in both Thai and English, and later proved to be of great importance to the villagers.”



Students and CIEE staff at a potash mine in Non Sombun, Udon Thani in 2010. Photo by CIEE

Streckfuss ventured to say that in this program, the students really are at the center and CIEE was just the facilitator. The program's job was to stimulate the students to dig into their understanding of human rights and what it means to have humanity.

The various activists and NGOs in Isaan networked, to initiate the first Isaan Human Rights Festival in 2006. Villagers from areas experiencing violations of human rights were invited to speak about what was going on, and to exchange ideas on possible solutions. This became a yearly event until the military coup of May 2014, which made the organization of human rights events a lot more difficult.

"At that time, the military issued a direct order stopping the event from going ahead. Then it occurred to us that the military is also a community worth studying, so we took the students to stay at military base Siharatdechochai and military base Sri Patcharin in Khon Kaen. They spent one night in each army base and asked the soldiers why they carried out coups," Streckfuss recalls.

"The military is also a community worth studying, so we took the students to stay at the military bases Siharatdechochai and Sri Patcharin in Khon Kaen. They spent one night in each army base and asked the soldiers why they carried out the coup," David Streckfuss, former director of CIEE Khon Kaen.

Studying human rights

Apart from getting to know the issues facing the inhabitants of rural Isaan, CIEE students also had the opportunity to learn about issues in other parts of Thailand. The program sometimes also took students to speak to the Karen people in the North, or sex workers in Bangkok.

“One of the most outstanding pieces of coursework which CIEE Khon Kaen is immensely proud of, is the reports on human rights and culture in which the students compared the human rights situation in Thailand to those of other countries, using the UN framework as a reference. It was started in 2008 and a set of nine reports were eventually published in both Thai and English. Later on, some of the villagers the students had studied used this report to argue their case in court, such as in the case of the gold mine in Loei, for example,” Streckfuss says, beaming with pride.

The students from America also fundraised to build a small library in a village they visited for their fieldwork, as well as for a museum to document the villagers’ struggle against the abuses of the gold mine project in Loei province.

“It may seem strange that these farang students from America became some of the drivers for change in Isaan society. After the 2014 coup, Khon Kaen University stopped supporting politically sensitive activities. They wanted the students from America to go and learn about silk weaving, traditional Isaan pottery, or sustainable tourism, more than human rights. The field visits also got harder,” Streckfuss recalls of the obstacles faced after the 2014 military coup.

CIEE Khon Kaen had served as a bridge linking generations of American university students to the issues faced by Thai society. A group of CIEE alumni even went as far as to set up an organization called the “Educational Network for Global and Grassroots Exchange (ENGAGE) to help those adversely affected by development issues in the United States, such communities affected by a mining project in the state of Kentucky.

CIEE is no more, but the suffering continues

Even though CIEE Khon Kaen has closed its doors and student study in Thailand became impossible due COVID-19, its former staff still bear hope that they will one day reunite. Now scattered across Thailand in their various pursuits, they still hope that they can return to the field with students from America.

John Mark Belardo, former head of fieldwork facilitation and interpreter, is one of them. He is confident that this model of learning will make a return when the time is right. The past 15 years of field visits in the company of students have helped him to understand the suffering faced by people.

John Mark’s first experience of fieldwork was when he took students to the Pak Mun dam in Ubon Ratchathani province. It was the first time that he really came to understand the gnarly side of politics at the citizen level.



John Mark (red-white shirt) taking American students on site to study the waste management issues in Ban Khan Bon Noi of Khon Kaen province in 2009.

Learning from the communities

"The first time I went to the Pak Mun dam, I was stunned, quite frankly. When I spoke to the community leaders such as Sompong [Viengchan], her knowledge and perspectives belied her fourth grade education," John Mark recalls. "I went there as a simple interpreter, but I came out of that place as someone irreversibly interested in political and social issues."

There were more than 40 CIEE study center globally. Each center ran their own educational programs in their own ways. Khon Kaen was home to the only CIEE office in Thailand. The students arrived from America twice a year, at around the beginning of August and again in January. They chiefly came to deepen their study in the field of public health and journalism, among other things.

Every student spent time living with a host family in the community in order to learn about how Isaan life is lived by many of its inhabitants. There, they got to know the problems and issues being faced by these communities. These week-long visits occurred at least five times per semester.



"After the coup, all the communities went silent. There was less activism because the villagers' freedom of expression was muzzled by the government, and there was at the same time less interest in social issues from students," says John Mark Belardo, former head of fieldwork facilitation at CIEE Khon Kaen.

"After the coup, all the communities went silent. There was less activism because the villagers' freedom of expression was muzzled by the government, and there was at the same time less interest in social issues from students," says John Mark on the problems that occurred after the 2014 military coup.

Despite these problems, John Mark remains adamant that such field visits to survey the issues being faced by the communities were instrumental in shaping the consciences of the young people on the course.



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Learning through the Thai language

Vanessa Moll attended the CIEE program as a student of Georgetown University, Washington DC, and is now a teacher at Khon Kaen University's Language Institute.

"I barely knew anything about Thailand before coming. All I knew was where its location [were] on the map. When I joined the CIEE program in 2005, I got to study the slums by the railroad and the landfill at Kham Bon, Khon Kaen, among other places. It really opened my eyes to the importance of civil society," Vanessa says of her direct experiences of the issues facing communities in fluent Thai.

Coming to the CIEE study program in Khon Kaen changed her life forever. After graduating from Georgetown, Vanessa returned to Thailand in 2007, where she remains to this day.

"Studying with CIEE really got me to understand communities, and that genuine education cannot stay within the classroom," Vanessa explains. "I was sad to hear that CIEE closed down. It's a loss to education. There should be more education like this."



Vanessa Moll, a CIEE Khon Kaen alumnus, who is now a teacher at Khon Kaen University's Language Institute.

The issue is the classroom

The "people-to-people" learning model turned community visits into the classroom for students. It also led to lasting personal ties between the students and the people in the communities.

Ranong Kongsang, 59, better known in her community as "Mae Rot," is a member of the We Love Our Home group which spearheaded the fight against the gold mine project in Na Nong Bong, Wang Saphung district of Loei province. Between her and the students, there are many shared experiences and memories, and that she was considered by them to be a teacher. To her, the students were like her own nieces and nephews.

"In 2009, the fight with the gold mine was very intense. At that time, I'd never even met any farangs before. I was just happy that they thought to come and visit us. The students split up among the host families, and there was an exchange. We taught them about our fight, our way of life, and the students became a part of our community," Ranong says of the feeling between the community and the American students.

Ranong says she was always impressed with the CIEE students who came to Na Nong Bong, and most notably the class of 2009 who helped to create the human rights report which became part of the community's written history. They also created a website for the community to sell their woven products as far and wide as the United States. The weaving center and meeting hall in the village was built thanks to the efforts of these students.

"When the people in the village heard that the CIEE students are coming back to visit, we really looked forward to their arrival. We loved them like our own children. We were very grateful that they took us into their hearts when they studied about us. Their actions speak for them. They helped us with our struggle even though they came from the other side of the world. We will never forget that," Ranong says.

Ranong received a prize as a woman human rights advocate of 2016 for her role in protecting the rights of her community.



Ranong Kongsang, a member of the We Love Our Home group which resisted the gold mine in Wang Saphung, Loei.



An aerial photo of the gold mine in Na Nong Bong taken in 2016. Photo by Fortify Rights

The struggle by the We Love our Home group is a story of David and Goliath, of a small community's refusal to allow wealthy private interests to ride roughshod over their lives and the natural environment. When the locals found out about chemical run-off from the mine into their fields, they acted not just to save themselves from poisoning, but to save their natural environment and the

other communities that surrounded them from being affected, too.

Their success in closing the gold mine might also be partly due to the American students at CIEE who helped to shoulder the burden of activism.

“I was shocked to find out that CIEE was closed down in Thailand,” says Ranong with some sadness. “If the students were to return, they would be more than welcome here.”

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